

**Rose Family Chronicles 2: Footman**  
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## Prologue

*Seven months before Tyler Purcell arrives in Rosenton...*

Chris balanced the tray with two hands as he turned to nudge the door open wider with his hip. The room was shrouded in shadow, quiet enough to hear one occupant's ragged breathing and the soft sigh of the leather upholstery of the other's chair as she shifted to see who'd entered.

"Lady Paxton," Chris greeted, taking the tray to a table by her side.

She let her book settle on her lap. "I didn't request this." The tray was obviously for her and not for the man in the bed, who'd been drugged to sleep the night.

"No. But you must eat."

She glanced to where her father slept. Her glorious chestnut, mahogany, taupe, and walnut hair was drawn into a harsh roll at her neck, the style as unimaginative and severe as the plain, square-necked dress she wore. The faded blue did nothing for her pale coloring, and no attempt with cosmetics had been made to disguise the misery that marred her lovely features. It hurt Chris to see Lady Gretchen like this, hurt almost as much as seeing his lord wasting away in a sick bed.

"He wore himself out." Her voice was listless as Chris set out a meal of stew, bread, and a good, hearty wine. He and Mrs. Jones agreed that the lady had not been eating properly of late. "All the preseason planning."

Was she making excuses for his ears or for her own? Undoubtedly her own. Lord Rose had good days and bad. Certainly, in the past week, he'd seemed better. He'd managed to get out of bed and down to the parlor to meet with various representatives from town. Chris suspected that Lady Gretchen had made most of the decisions regarding the upcoming preseason, but the earl had been present and had signed his

name, which was more than they had expected he'd be capable of after a rough few weeks. The doctors had said it was only a matter of time, but they couldn't say if that time could be measured in days, weeks, or months. They were, however, sure that it could not be measured in years.

"Yes, my lady."

"Yes, my lady." She smiled. It was a wan thing, but it was a smile, and it warmed him to see. "You think I was wrong to have him at the meeting."

*No, but you do.* "You know best."

She sighed, wiping a slim hand over her eyes. "Not here, Chris." Her voice was so small, so fragile. "Don't cater to my station now. Tell me what you think."

Chris had grown up with the lady and her brothers. Although he had been raised to be her servant, he counted her and her older brother his dearest friends and would, in private, occasionally allow them to draw him into confidences that were less than proper. Now was one of those times. With barely a glance toward his unconscious lord, he knelt at her feet and drew her cool hands into his. He met her brilliant emerald gaze, sad to see the haunted shadows within it. "I think you did what must be done." He squeezed her fingers. "The directors needed to see Lord Rose, and he *was* capable." Perhaps less so than they had hoped, but he hadn't succumbed to pain and weariness until after company had left Rose Hall. "He wanted to do this."

She shut her eyes, unable to restrain the single tear that tracked her cheek. "He likely won't see any of the productions."

He reached up to swipe away the tear with a gloved thumb. "No. But he was able to contribute. The directors will speak of him out of his sick bed."

She nodded, clutching his fingers. Lady Gretchen so very rarely allowed anyone to see her weaknesses. She was her mother's daughter in that and always strove to be the strong one of the family. It was she who had given up her post with the queen to tend her father during his illness and see to the family estate. Lord Johnnie had taken over all his father's duties in the capital, and their twin brothers were with him, attending

university. Only she was here to watch their father waste away day by day. "Yes." Her voice hitched over a sob she tried to swallow. "It needed to be done."

He wanted to hug her but knew she would break if he did, and he didn't feel that she wanted to sob. Rather, he stood, relinquished her hand, and then took the book from her lap. "You must eat, my lady."

She sighed, taking the opening he gave her to complain. "I'm not hungry."

"No. But Cook would be heartbroken if you didn't sample her lamb stew." He lifted bowl and spoon toward her. "She's tried something new." In truth, it could be the same recipe. But he would play this game to get sustenance past her lips.

She eyed him warily, perhaps guessing that he fibbed. But she took the bowl. "Very well."

He placed her book by the tray, then circled her to adjust the drapes on the window behind her. They were not in the earl's chambers. The stairs were too much for the earl these days, and he was far too proud to be carried. Thus, they had set up a bedchamber for him in a parlor on the ground floor. The wide sofa on which Lady Gretchen now sat had served as her own bed many nights as well.

By the time Chris had busied himself at each window and returned to her, she'd finished most of the stew and was nibbling the fresh bread. Her wineglass was empty. Suppressing a smile, he set the bowl and glass back on the tray. "Would you like me to sit with him tonight?"

She hesitated. "I hate to impose."

He let himself sigh. "My lady, it is hardly an imposition." He didn't add that seeing to the earl's needs was his duty and his right. She wasn't hedging because she thought he'd object. No, her hesitation was a daughter's fear that if she left her father's side, she'd never see him alive again. Truthfully, it was a similar fear he suffered each time he left his lord's side. The man was a second father to him as well. "Please." He gently took hold of her arm to urge her to stand.

She got to her feet, still looking at her father. "I'll stay while you take the tray back."

He nudged her toward the door. "I'll ring for James."

"Is he still awake?"

Chuckling softly, he turned her away from the bed. "Yes."

"What time is it?" She glanced at the mantel clock as they passed it. "It's not even nine. I didn't realize..."

He opened the door.

In a rustle of skirts, Ellen, the lady's maid, stood from her seat in a chair across the hall. "My lady."

"What are you doing here? I told you to go to bed."

"And I told you I'd wait for you."

Chris didn't smile at the maid's uppity tone, but he approved, knowing that Ellen cared deeply for her mistress.

"You're disobedient," Lady Gretchen sniped.

"And you're tired." Ellen took her lady's elbow. Briefly she met Chris's gaze and nodded. "You can tell me how awful I am while I get you ready for bed."

Chris stood in the doorway to watch them go. The somber sight was superimposed with memories from days past. He'd run in these halls, the older boy chasing after the youngers. Back then, Lady Gretchen had been just as rambunctious as her brothers, skinning knees and climbing trees, showing only occasional signs of the quietly powerful woman she'd become. Lord Johnnie, of course, had been a terror from birth, only a deep caring streak keeping his teasing from becoming horrible. The twins had been inseparable but always easy to distinguish from each other, one a constant chatterbox and the other a quiet dreamer. Chris had watched them all grow and had grown with them under the watchful eyes of Lord Rose and his own father, who had been butler before him. He'd grown close to Lord Johnnie, close enough that the heir to

the Rose household had taken him as valet on the months of his grand tour of the continent. Chris had returned to Rose Hall to take his place as head of the household staff when his father retired. He'd endured with the family the grief of Lady Rose's passing. He'd seen the early onset of Lord Rose's illness, back when the earl would let none speak of it. And now...

He turned back to the darkened room, closed the door before crossing to the side of the bed. The earl, his lord since birth, lay so quiet among pillows and quilts. The drug that kept the pain at bay and allowed him to sleep had left his handsome face slack, his pale lips parted. The strong, vibrant man who had given so much of his strength and personality to his children was only a pale shadow of what he'd once been.

With a sigh, Chris retrieved a chair and the book he'd left on a shelf near the fireplace. He settled at his lord's side and put aside thoughts of times gone by.

## Chapter One

Darien saw the young man immediately when he entered the passenger car with the two women. Average height, sunny blond, with eyes the same dramatic shape as those of the older lady—likely his mother—beside him. His build was slim under his light summer jacket, the style and fabric of which marked him as middle class. He had an open, round face, softly expressive. Quite attractive, even under the frown of consternation and weariness. From his seat in the middle of the car, Darien watched the man, his mother, and a young woman who must be his sister, as she looked enough like the other two, make their way down the center aisle. The mother clutched a cane and her daughter's arm, with the son trailing behind, arms and shoulders laden with two cases, three satchels, and a lady's handbag.

"Here." Darien jumped to his feet to catch the bag that slid off the man's shoulder. When the women startled and looked back at him, he held it up in plain sight, not wishing them to think him one of the pickpockets unfortunately rampant in the lower-class passenger cars. He smiled, big and devoid of guile, and received a smile from the young man in return. There were only three other passengers in the car, and none of those men even looked up, much less bothered to help. "May I be of assistance?"

Pale blue eyes assessed him, but before the son could respond, the elder lady spoke. "Thank you, young man." She sighed as she clutched the back of one of the wooden benches. She looked tired, her lined face pinched with what could be pain, but her voice was strong and steady. Those eyes closed as she sank onto the bench, her daughter leaning close to ease her way. "That would be appreciated."

"Mother..." the son said, worry creasing his brow.

She placed a hand on his arm to quiet him. "Patrick, we've still the other bags." Her smooth voice held a faint but familiar lilt of the northlands. "Let's not begrudge the gods' benevolence." Now that she was seated, her pained expression eased, and her gaze was clear when she pinned it on Darien. "If you would help my son with the rest of our luggage? We've paid a driver to watch them outside, but..."

"Certainly." He agreed readily, setting the handbag on the mounted table that sat between the mother's bench and another facing it. "I would be happy to help." Turning to the son, he made eye contact as he reached for one of the satchels that burdened the closest arm.

Clearly Patrick wasn't certain of him, but just as clearly he realized he could use the help. He shrugged off the satchels and let Darien assist him in storing them in the overhead bin. He was a bit taller than Darien, so it was easier for Darien to steady the remainder while Patrick put them in place. "I'll be right back," he assured his sister, who was helping their mother to slide toward the window.

Darien followed him down the aisle, then out the passenger car, admiring the snug fit of knee breeches over laced calf boots. The wooden platform of the small country station was small enough that there were no porters, and the conductors were busy enough not to have time to help a family with their luggage. Instead, an open carriage sat nearby, its horse looking as bored as its driver. Patrick waited for Darien to step beside him, then extended his hand in belated greeting as they walked. "Thank you. I'm Patrick Warton."

Darien took the hand. Good, strong grip. Smooth skin. No calluses like on his own hands. Not a laborer. "Darien Holt. And you're quite welcome. Is your mother ill?"

Patrick blinked at the forward question. "She... No. She's just tired." He sighed. "It's been a long journey."

The driver saw them as they approached, and turned toward the boot to remove three large cases.

"Have you come all the way from Alban?"

Patrick stopped beside the carriage, his hand inside his jacket, presumably to fetch a wallet to pay the driver. "Alban?"

Darien grinned. "Your mother's accent."

Patrick blinked, then smiled. "Of course. It's more pronounced when she's tired." The smile faded as he withdrew a billfold.

"Has she been gone long from the homeland?"

"Are you a Banc?" Patrick's attention was split between their discussion and paying the driver. The driver could not have cared less, taking his money, then turning back to his carriage.

"Aye." Chuckling, Darien hefted two of the cases. "But I haven't seen the Bannish hills in many a moon."

Patrick laughed, a delightful sound to fill the humid summer air. "Aye, yes" – he put on his own lilt – "ya must be from the homeland." Still smiling, he reached for one of the cases Darien held. "Please, let me."

"No, no." Darien dropped the inflection that wasn't natural for him, gesturing toward the train. "I've got it. We're low on time." Indeed, the conductor was frowning their way.

"You've lost your accent," Patrick noted as they crossed the platform.

"I confess, I wasn't born to it. My parents were from Hargrow, but I was raised in Doncaster."

"Ah." Their conversation paused as they navigated the narrow steps and walkway between cars. "Mother," Patrick said once they were inside and abreast of the table and benches, "we've found a countryman."

The elder lady's eyes lit up. As the men stowed the cases overhead, she took Darien in, clearly noting his straight blond hair and dark eyes. The eyes kept her attention, and he wasn't surprised. Dark brown and slightly elongated, they weren't the famed blue or green more typical of the Bannish.

He smiled, holding the last case as Patrick arranged the others. "Don't let the eyes fool ya, madam." The train's whistle trilled. "I'm told me mum's mum was Daufan, and she passed them to us all."

She laughed, delighted. Beside her, the sister smiled – happier, Darien thought, for the lovely, open sound from her mother than any information about him. "Wonderful." The mother held out her hand to him. "Won't you join us...?"

He took her hand, bent to touch her knuckles to his brow. "Darien, mum." He dropped the accent with her hand. "But I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Nonsense." She gestured at the empty bench across from her. "We'd be delighted."

Darien looked from the sister to the brother. Both studied him. His clothes were simple but clean. Russet trousers tucked in thick workman's boots, and a faded laced shirt in red under a light jacket to match the trousers. His skin was ruddy from the wind and cold, thanks to two months' work in a trainyard in the west, and his hair was longer than fashionable, purely from necessity and the lack of opportunity for a good cut recently. He looked every bit the laborer except for his face, which he'd shaved before leaving the boarding house in Frampton. While the passage of the day had grown stubble along his lips and jaw, he knew he looked younger than his one and twenty years.

The two exchanged glances; then Patrick smiled. "Please." He too motioned at the empty bench. "Join us."

Darien waited for a slight nod from the sister before nodding in return. "I would be happy to. Just let me get my bag."

By the time Darien returned from his former seat, Patrick had slid into the bench to take the window. Darien tossed his bag overhead, then took a seat beside him.

The sister glanced toward whence he'd come. "Weren't you worried?" she asked, obviously meaning his bag.

“What? Them?” With a nod, he indicated the men many rows behind him. “Not at all. They wouldn’t be interested in anything I had.” Smiling, he held his hand toward her, palm up. “I’m sorry. We’ve not been introduced.”

A lovely flush of pink colored cheeks with the same soft curve as her brother’s.

“My apologies.” Patrick extended a hand to gesture cordially at his sister. “Darien, this is my sister, Julia.”

She placed her fingers on his palm, and he lifted while bending his head slightly; then she slid her hand away. “A pleasure to meet you, Julia.”

“Darien.”

“Tell us, Darien, this Daufan grandmere of yours, is she the reason you’ve lost your native tongue?”

He chuckled, sitting back, aware that his thigh brushed Patrick’s. A casual, unintentional gesture. Or so it seemed. “No, ma’am. My father began his business in Doncaster before I was born. Alas, I’ve only visited the homeland.”

She sighed wistfully.

“But you, I notice, speak like a Brite as well.”

Her smile was warm. “Yes. I am—I *was*—an actress, with most of my trade in Doncaster. I’ve trained away my accent.”

“An actress.” That explained it. “Might I have seen you onstage?”

The next hour or so was spent in delightful conversation. Darien had, in fact, seen Mrs. Warton onstage, but many years ago when he’d been too young to remember more than the spectacle of the musical. It was also before her wheat-colored hair had turned mostly silver, before her knees had forced her to walk with a cane. It turned out he’d also seen Patrick onstage, as the young man was also an actor, but he’d only been one of many in a large cast, with no speaking lines.

“But it will be different in Rosenton,” said Patrick with shining conviction. He nodded, brushing back his hair in a habitual, endearing gesture. Darien found himself

anticipating when those smooth fingers would run through equally soft hair. Not that Patrick was effeminate or juvenile. He simply looked...soft.

“Are you going for the preseason?” Darien asked.

As a Doncaster native, he’d heard of the Rosenton theater productions that preceded the political season in Doncaster. Large shows would open in Rosenton before moving to the capital to entertain the aristocracy and gentry who populated the town for the season. New or experimental shows would test in the smaller theaters, hoping to gain interest from a house in Doncaster. He’d never had more than an average interest in the arts growing up. He’d loved the spectacle when he was a child, but his parents had not been interested beyond the chance to see and be seen. As a young man, he’d gone with more of an eye for who was in the audience than what occurred onstage.

“Yes,” said Patrick with entrancing zeal, clearly far more enthusiastic and interested than Darien had ever been.

His mother reached across the table to pat his hand. “My Patrick will be a star.” Her eyes were full of maternal pride. “We must simply put him in front of a director who sees his potential.”

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Want to know what happens next?

<http://www.loose-id.com/rose-family-chronicles-2-footman.html>