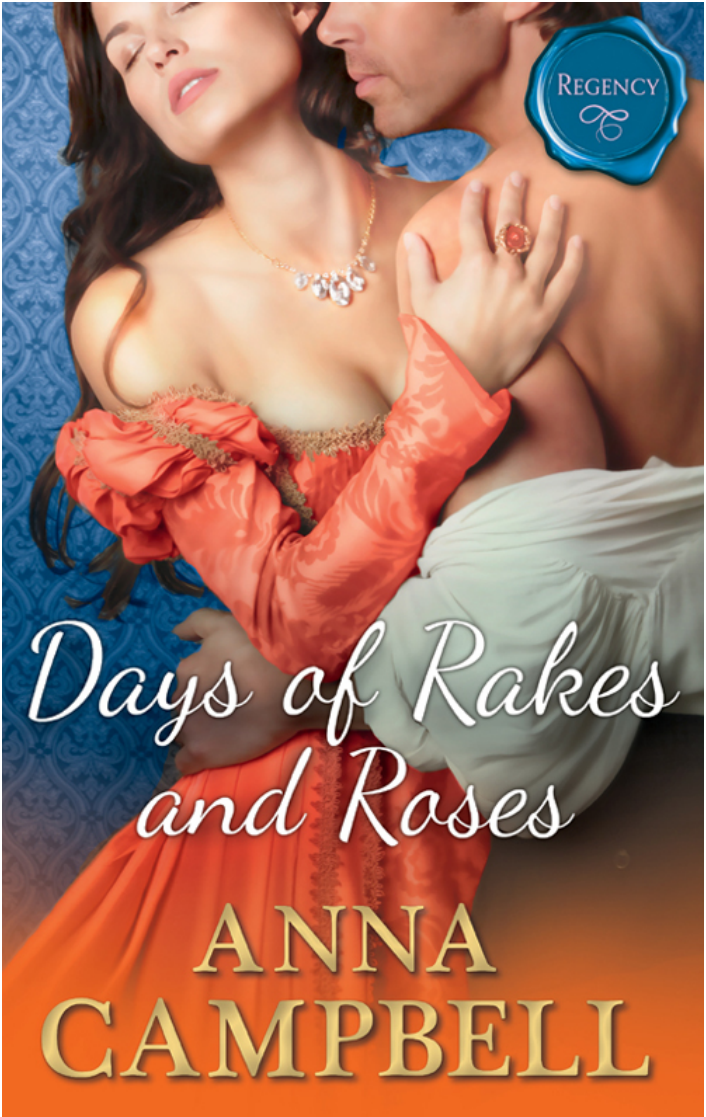
Regency
Days of Rakes and Roses
ANNA CAMPBELL

Anna Campbell
Days Of Rakes And Roses

Аннотация

Lady Lydia Rothermere had one single, shocking, youthful moment of passion. But now she's preparing for a safe marriage that will please society. Until her past – adventurer Simon Metcalf – arrives and heats her blood to a reckless fervour again…THE SONS OF SINSEVEN NIGHTS IN A ROGUE'S BEDA RAKE'S MIDNIGHT KISSWHAT A DUKE DARESA SCOUNDREL BY MOONLIGHTDAYS OF RAKES AND ROSES (Novella)

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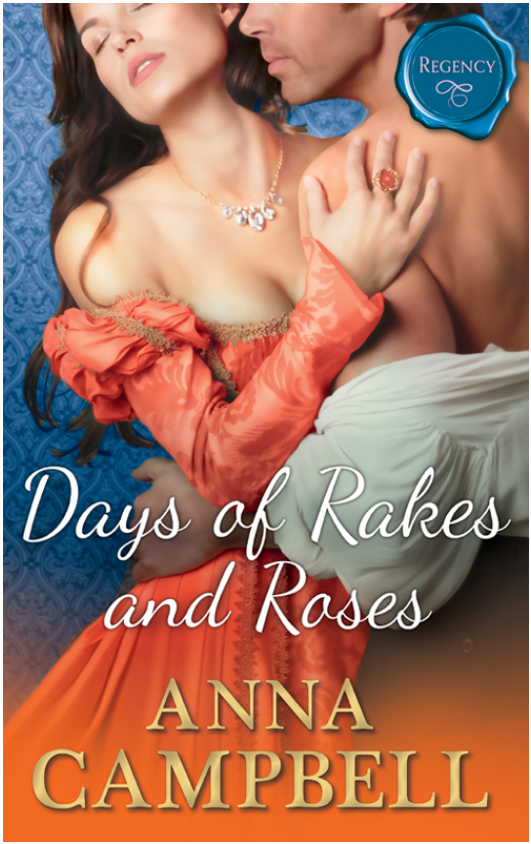
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Praise

‘Known for her sexy, smart, and often scandalous romances, Campbell doesn’t disappoint … Her intelligent characters and their sensual cat-and-mouse games add to the mystery and poignant emotions …’

– RT Book Reviews

‘An entrancing, evocative romance.’

– JoyfullyReviewed.com

‘Campbell immediately hooks readers, then deftly reels them in with a spellbinding love story fuelled by an addictive mixture of sharp wit, lush sensuality, and a wealth of well-delineated characters.’

– *Booklist*

‘No one does lovely, dark romance or lovely, dark heroes like Anna Campbell. I love her books,’

– *Sarah MacLean, New York Times bestselling author*

‘With its superbly nuanced characters, impeccably crafted historical setting, and graceful writing shot through with scintillating wit, Campbell’s latest lusciously sensual, flawlessly written historical Regency … will have romance readers sighing happily with satisfaction.’

– *Booklist* on *What a Duke Dares*

ANNA CAMPBELL was the sort of kid who spent her childhood with her nose buried between the pages of a book.

She decided when she was a child that she wanted to be a writer. When she's not writing passionate, intense stories featuring gorgeous Regency heroes and the women who are their destiny, Anna loves to travel, especially in the United Kingdom, and listen to all kinds of music. She has settled near the sea on the east coast of Australia, where she's losing her battle with an overgrown subtropical garden.

Anna loves to hear from her readers. You can contact her through her website at www.annacampbell.info.

Days of Rakes and Roses
Anna Campbell

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Prologue

Fentonwyck, Derbyshire
July 1816

"I've waited my whole life to kiss you."

Good heavens!

Lady Lydia Rothermere hardly credited what she heard Simon Metcalf say, nor the urgency in his manner while he said it. When he grabbed her hand, the heat of his touch sizzled right to her toes, left her feeling jumpy and needy.

As he lured her a step closer to the hay barn, her voice emerged high and breathy with excitement. "You're utterly mad."

"Not mad, merely desperate. You've avoided me all summer." He gave her the dazzling smile that always made her yearning heart tumble against her ribs. "Now I've got you to myself, I intend to take full advantage."

"A-advantage?" Nervously she glanced around the empty stable yard, but nobody was present to observe Sir Reginald Metcalf's second son making inappropriate advances to the Duke of Sedgemoor's daughter. His Grace was away in London and not due back until tonight. In his absence, the estate slumbered. The noon sunlight beat down on the cobbles with almost Mediterranean intensity.

Her senses reeled. Could this really be happening to her? Could Simon be staring at her as if she made the sun rise every

day?

She'd been in love with Simon Metcalf since she was little when, as an impossibly grown-up eight-year-old, he'd comforted her after she skinned her knee on the drive. He'd been a handsome boy, tall and strong, with golden hair and laughing blue eyes. He'd matured into a strikingly handsome man, something she was miserably reminded of whenever she saw her uninspiring features reflected in a looking glass.

Hopeless pining had transformed into humiliating torment this last year until she'd turned seventeen and her fantasies had taken a disturbing direction. She'd spent her life praying for the boy from the neighboring estate to talk to her and smile at her and ask her to dance. Now her dreams, waking and sleeping, had become blatantly physical. Dreams of Simon touching and kissing her. Dreams that left her restless and unhappy and deeply ashamed. As a result, whenever she'd seen Simon this summer, she'd mumbled and blushed and generally behaved like a ninny. How she regretted that their easy friendship had deteriorated into awkward self-consciousness.

But now when she studied his vivid features, she read an intensity that trapped the breath in her throat. Even in her innocence, she knew that he meant to kiss her. A thrill shivered through her.

"Come with me," he said with another daredevil smile, drawing her into the shadowy hay barn. Out of the sun, she should feel cooler, but her blood pumped so furiously, she felt likely to

melt into a puddle of longing.

Just past the entrance, Lydia stumbled to a halt and blinked up at Simon in shy astonishment. Her grip tightened on the red rose he'd presented to her when he'd persuaded her to abandon her work in the stillroom. A thorn pricked her thumb, but she hardly noticed the sting amongst all the turbulent sensations assailing her.

Her fear momentarily outweighing Simon's powerful attraction, she made another unconvincing attempt to pull free. If her father learned she'd been alone with Simon, there would be the devil to pay. Horror of scandal had been drummed into her from the cradle. "You know we can't."

He laughed softly, his teeth white against his tanned face. "Of course we can."

With a blatantly bold gesture, as if he set great events in train, he reached behind her to shut the door. She jumped when the latch clanged down, enclosing them in a world fragrant with last summer's grass. Persistent sunbeams pierced the cracks in the joinery, lighting the strangely intimate twilight and tracing Simon in gold.

Her heart racing so frantically that he surely must hear it, Lydia let him lead her toward the rear of the barn. She was overwhelmingly aware of their joined hands. The slight roughness of his palms. The firm grip of his long fingers. The soft friction of skin on skin. Excitement trilled through her like a melody.

“Papa would have a fit if he saw us.” Scandal had shadowed the Rothermere family for years. To counter the notoriety, her father had always insisted on perfect behaviour from Lydia and her older brother Camden.

“Papa’s not here,” Simon whispered, stopping and turning to face her.

He lifted her trembling hand and pressed it flat against his chest. Beneath her palm, his heart hammered as hard as hers did. Bedazzled, she stared up at him, conscious of his height and the radiating heat of his body and how close he stood.

“What do you want, Simon?” she summoned courage to ask, staring into eyes that burned like sapphire flame. The prospect of Simon kissing her slammed down, and settled with unfamiliar weight at the base of her belly.

His eyelids fell as he studied her lips. As if he took in her scent, his nostrils flared. She’d known him all her life, but the sexual charge that buzzed between them now was unfamiliar. Both frightening and alluring.

“I want you,” he murmured.

Her startled exhalation emerged as a squeak. “You do?”

“More than the hope of heaven,” he said raggedly, meeting her gaze. In his eyes, she read an ardor that she’d never imagined she’d arouse in any man, let alone her beloved Simon.

“Oh.” Her stomach churned with unbearable anticipation. Constructing a complete sentence demanded too much of her flustered mind.

“Now be quiet and kiss me, Lydia.” The laughter that was so much a part of the man she loved bubbled beneath his low command.

“But—”

He caught her face between his palms and pressed his mouth to hers. She’d imagined this moment so often, never thinking it would happen outside her fantasies. She quivered as unfamiliar sensations shimmered through her. The satiny brush of his lips created delicious warmth. He tasted like salty honey. His musky scent, tinged with horses and leather, made her head spin.

She hovered on the verge of succumbing to the pleasure when he raised his head. His blue eyes were so dark, they looked black. “Any more buts?”

“Please … don’t stop.” She sighed, sagging against him and letting the rose drop to the dusty floor.

She caught a flash of what might have been triumph in his face. “Never, love.”

A daring she didn’t know she possessed made her curl her hands over his powerful shoulders. It was difficult to believe that he gave her permission to touch him. More, that he *wanted* her to touch him. He’d always seemed so impossibly out of reach. Not just because of the four-year gap in their ages, but because he was beautiful and brilliant and all the girls wanted him. Whereas she was quiet and serious and liked to play the observer.

Yet astonishingly, it seemed that he was within reach, after all. So within reach that his body pressed close to hers, awakening

all sorts of delicious, unprecedented reactions.

When he bent his head, his kiss was all purpose. His tongue teased the seam of her lips, coaxing her toward something which she instinctively knew related to those forbidden feelings that kept her awake every night.

A muffled sound of enjoyment escaped her and he took advantage of her parted lips to spear his tongue inside her mouth. The act was bizarre, discomfiting. Then even as the urge to withdraw pricked at her, strangeness melted into wonder.

Hesitantly she moved her tongue against his. Simon groaned with wordless satisfaction. And for the first time, she truly believed that he wanted her as she wanted him.

Startled joy swelled in her heart, swamping caution. Confidence flooded her, and with it a burning curiosity to discover where these caresses might lead. Lydia closed her eyes and sank into darkness sparking with bliss like twinkling stars in a midnight sky.

Her inchoate longings flared into a blaze of delight. Her hands curved around his neck, bringing that marvellous, skillful mouth closer. His taste invaded her senses. The scent of his skin, familiar and yet not, made her giddy as if she'd imbibed too much claret.

His hard, strong hands—hands that she'd seen catch cricket balls and untangle fishing lines and calm a hundred fractious horses—trailed up her ribs to cup her breasts. The distant reaches of her mind rang with warning, but all promptings of self-

preservation faded under pleasure.

She clung to him, running her hands up and down his long back. She loved his lean power, the hard lines of muscle and bone, so different from her own soft curves. Her nipples tightened into aching points as his caresses ventured nearer to her breasts. Heat pooled between her legs. Blindly she rubbed against him. She was innocent, but not so innocent that she misunderstood the hardness pressing her belly.

She moaned a protest as he drew slightly away. “Lydia, we need to stop. You’re everything I want, but on my honor, I didn’t mean to go this far.”

He sounded breathless and shaken, not at all like the brash university buck who had so daunted her this summer. She’d counted every day he’d been at Oxford. Then when he’d finally returned, she’d hardly mustered courage to say hello.

All her life, she’d been afraid; of displeasing her father, of tarring the family name, of breaking her heart over a man who didn’t want her. But now she knew Simon did indeed want her. His unabashed desire banished all fear, created a new, brave Lydia who scorned her previous self’s timidity.

She cupped his cheek, staring into eyes opaque with need. He looked strained and unsure as she’d never seen him before. “Kiss me again.”

His laugh was unsteady, and he stroked her jaw with a tenderness that set her heart somersaulting. “You test my control to the limits, lovely girl. If I kiss you again, it won’t stop at a kiss.”

Knowing she was about to make a decision that could destroy her life, but unable to relinquish this enchantment, she snatched a shallow breath. She was more frightened that Simon would never touch her again than she was of any consequences. “I don’t want you to stop.”

Happiness transfigured his face. “Lydia …”

Brazenly she rose on her toes until her lips touched his. She felt him struggle for control, even as his hands drifted down to clasp her waist and bring her near again. She knew the precise moment when he gave in. His mouth ravished hers with a passion that made her toes curl in her half boots while his hands deftly released the hooks on the back of her gown.

Carefully, as though she might break if he handled her too roughly, he drew her down to kneel with him on the soft hay. She clasped her sagging bodice to her chest and met his eyes.

He looked at her as if he loved her. She could deny him nothing when he looked at her like that.

The last of her uncertainty evaporated and her heart began to bang hard against her ribs. She slid her hand free of her gown so that her dress slipped to her waist, revealing her transparent shift. Simon’s eyes burned as they focused on her body.

“Oh, my darling—” He reached out to trace the lacy edge of her shift, slowly dragging it lower. Her eyelids fluttered down as she ceded herself to the promise of rapture.

Then, when finally everything in Lydia’s world miraculously turned right, the barn door crashed open and everything in her

world shattered into irredeemable disaster.

Chapter 1

Rothermere House, London
April 1826

The ball to celebrate a woman's forthcoming wedding should be one of the happiest events in her life.

Suppressing a sigh, Lady Lydia Rothermere surveyed the throng crowded into her brother Cam's white and gilt ballroom and told herself that of course she was happy. This mightn't be the night she'd dreamed about as a foolish adolescent, but she'd long ago relinquished her dreams. She was a mature, sensible woman of twenty-seven marrying a mature, sensible man of forty-one. She was content with her decision. For a woman well past her debut, contentment was something with which she should be, well, content.

The bracing lecture didn't notably raise her spirits. She muffled another sigh and plastered a smile on her face. This party was in her honor and she intended to enjoy it, even if it killed her. She wore a new dress to mark the occasion, dark blue brocade with Brussels lace, and her maid had twined red and white rosebuds through her thick auburn hair.

"I'm neglecting you, my dear." Sir Grenville Berwick turned from the political cronies who had occupied his attention for the last half hour and took possession of her white-gloved hand.

Her fiancé's touch aroused no frisson of anticipation. But then

only one man had ever made Lydia tremble with desire, and that had been so long ago, she now viewed the events of that summer day as an aberration in an otherwise blameless life. She didn't pretend to love the man she'd promised to marry, but she respected him. And God willing, she'd have children, lots of children, to whom she would devote the vast well of frustrated love in her heart.

Please let it be so.

As she turned to Grenville, she kept the smile on her lips, even though it felt like a rictus grin. Tonight he looked the perfect parliamentarian in his sober, dark coat, with his graying brown hair combed back from his high forehead. "I'm not some giddy young thing. You don't have to fuss over me."

Sir Grenville's square-jawed face didn't lighten and his brown eyes remained grave. "You deserve to be fussed over, Lydia. I still find myself astounded that you consented to be my bride."

"You're too good for me."

She meant it. If Grenville knew how once she'd verged on surrendering her virtue to a scoundrel, he wouldn't place her on a pedestal. Since that calamitous day at Fentonwyck, her behavior had been exemplary, unless it was a sin to lie awake reliving the only passion she'd ever tasted. To lie awake regretting, wicked creature she was, that her father had erupted into the hay barn before Simon had ventured beyond kisses.

"Your modesty does you credit." Grenville surveyed the gathering with a satisfied air. "The world wishes us well. It's quite

a turnout."

Hundreds had gathered to celebrate. Sir Grenville was a rising political star and Lydia was much admired for her charity work. She'd even caught sight of the brooding and scarred Jonas Merrick in one of the card rooms. Her brother who hosted the ball was an acknowledged leader of society. This was despite questions shadowing Cam's legitimacy. It was common knowledge that his mother had shared her favors with her husband and his younger brother. The identity of Lydia's sire was never in doubt—the late duke's dashing, rakehell brother had died well before her arrival—but both Rothermere children had grown up weathering scandal.

From habit, Lydia sought Cam in the crowd. Her brother was so tall, she easily spotted his glossy dark head over the heaving sea of people. Beside him stood the ever elegant Sir Richard Harmsworth, her brother's closest friend and as golden fair as Cam was dark.

Distantly, she was grateful that so many people offered their congratulations. Since consenting to Grenville's proposal a year ago, she'd felt as if a thick wall of glass separated her from the world. She supposed the sense of disconnection would pass. Eventually.

The passionate hoyden who still lurked in Lydia's heart insisted that she was more than this staid, benevolent cipher. Except that after ten barren years of acting as the sedate woman the world considered her, the bleak suspicion lurked that she had

in truth become this dull creature. At least the dull creature was safe and respected and armored against the anguish of strong emotion.

If she hadn't entirely conquered her longing for something … *other,* she would do so by the time she walked up the aisle of St. George's in Hanover Square in two weeks' time. This marriage to Grenville was right for her, promising a calm haven and a useful future. She'd spent her life holding her head high against spiteful whispers, the cruel assumption that, like mother, like daughter, bad blood would eventually tell. It was only a matter of time before her true nature would surface. Only once had Lydia kicked over the traces. And hadn't that been a complete disaster?

"Shall we dance?" Grenville asked. The musicians had just struck up a waltz, the scratch of the violins barely audible above the chatter.

Grenville danced well, if without particular flair. But then, Simon's desertion had taught Lydia to mistrust flair. What she needed was steadiness and kindness and a devotion to shared ideals. Grenville offered her all of that. She ignored a jeer from her inner woman as she circled the ballroom, her heart beating as steadily as if she sat alone at her embroidery.

From long habit, she made sure that her troubled thoughts didn't show on her face. For so many years, she'd presented an appearance of unruffled calm that it was second nature to her now. Perhaps after another ten years, the appearance would be truth, not pretence.

"I apologize for bringing House business to our party, my love."

"No need," she said calmly. She didn't mind that Grenville had devoted the weeks before their wedding to political maneuvering, although something rebellious inside her carped that she *should* mind.

Not really listening to his travails with the current bill, she made encouraging noises. With unwelcome grimness, it struck her that this would form the pattern of conversation for the rest of her life. She would be a witch to cavil at what fate arranged. She went into this marriage with her eyes wide open. If Grenville's company lacked something in excitement, excitement was overrated.

Or at the very least, it was dangerous. And she'd decided at seventeen that she'd never do anything dangerous again. Her blood still ran cold when she remembered her father's contemptuous tone as he'd called her a brainless slut like her mother.

As if the memory alerted long buried instincts, Lydia glanced over Grenville's shoulder to the staircase sweeping down into the ballroom. A tall man in immaculate black tailoring paused on the landing and surveyed the room. A cynical smile curved familiar lips. Light from the chandeliers slanted across gilded hair. He stood loose-limbed and relaxed, as if the entire world offered him welcome.

"Lydia, are you well? Lydia?"

Grenville's worried voice pierced her blind distress. She realized that she'd stopped dead in the middle of the dance. She hadn't blushed for years, but uncomfortable heat flooded into her cheeks now.

Dear God, let her misstep go unremarked. And what had caused it. She glanced around nervously, the old horror of scandal gripping her. Nobody seemed to have noticed her stumble.

She made herself move again, but her feet felt like bricks and she staggered against her partner. Grenville's hand tightened around her waist. "My dear, are you feeling faint? The room is close and the night is warm. You've been working such long hours, getting that new soup kitchen running. Should I take you onto the terrace?"

"Yes … yes, please take me outside." She hardly recognized the stammering reply as her own. To remain upright, she curled her hand over Grenville's shoulder. Her heart raced so fast, she felt light-headed, as though the ground shifted beneath her.

She was addled to think that the man on the staircase was Simon. Not after all this time. Not now when she had finally come so close to severing the chains of her past.

For years she'd pined after him. Then when he didn't contact her after her father's death, she'd finally understood that Simon had no intention of returning for her. Stupid girl. Five years before that without so much as a note should have indicated his indifference.

Even after acknowledging at last that Simon cared nothing for her, no man could compete with the ghost of her first *amour*. Until she'd met Grenville and realized that life could offer rewards separate from Simon's unattainable love. Independence. A family. A life dedicated to service.

Deliberately she didn't look toward the staircase again. She had to be mistaken. The illusion resulted from wedding nerves and the fact that so close to her nuptials, memories of her long-lost love would inevitably resurface. Simon had left England immediately after the incident in the barn. She'd only rarely heard about his doings—Simon Metcalf's exploits were considered too outré for the ears of an unmarried girl, even one past first youth. He'd fallen in with a rakish crowd on the Continent; raffish women, louche aristocrats, penniless adventurers. If polite society mentioned Simon Metcalf, it was in censorious terms. The last report Lydia had had of Simon was from somewhere in the remote reaches of the Ottoman Empire.

Still the merest idea that he could be back in London made her heart flutter like a bird longing to break out of its cage. Would she never be free of him?

With his usual aplomb, Grenville steered her through the crowd to where the French doors opened to the fine night. With the unseasonal warmth, many guests had resorted to the garden. Lydia and Grenville's progress toward the terrace aroused no curiosity, thank goodness.

Lydia soon returned enough to herself to deride her loss of

control. Even in the unlikely event that the man was Simon, she hadn't seen the reprobate for ten years. She was no longer a dewy-eyed adolescent panting for his attentions. She was renowned for her poise and her ability to quell unrest in a bread line with a single word.

They didn't make it to the terrace. Her brother strode toward her. To anyone who didn't know Cam well, he appeared his usual cool self. The Rothermeres specialized in looking untouched, even when scandals threatened to blow their world apart. But as he caught her arm, she saw a spark of what could be guilt in his green eyes. "Lydia, I've got a surprise for you. An old friend is here to wish you well."

Every muscle in her body stiffened into horrified immobility, although for all her self-serving denial, she'd known from the first that the man was Simon. What on earth was Cam doing bringing him to her betrothal ball? She suddenly remembered that her brother had always defended his friend to their father, even after Lydia's indiscretion. But Cam must know that tonight, Simon Metcalf was the last man she wanted to see.

Simon stood at Cam's shoulder and the comprehensive glance he swept over Lydia heated her blush to fire. The noisy room, loud with talk and music, faded into an echoing void. The sight of Simon jammed Lydia's throat with painful silence. She couldn't help remembering that the last time they were together, she'd been half out of her dress.

As if from a long way away, Cam continued. "Sir Grenville,

allow me to present an old family connection, Simon Metcalf. We grew up together. Simon, this is Lydia's intended, Sir Grenville Berwick."

The courtesies the men exchanged were meaningless gabble in Lydia's ears. All she heard was her heart's pounding. She couldn't tear her gaze from Simon.

Devil take him, he was even more breathtakingly attractive than she remembered. All this time she'd told herself she'd idealized his looks. It turned out she'd hardly done him justice. Tall. Lean. Tanned from exposure to foreign suns, his once flaxen hair now a rich bronze.

He arched a mocking eyebrow at her. His long, thin mouth curled with a sardonic amusement alien to the pretty youth with whom she'd been so head over heels in love.

She stiffened with resentment. After all this time, he had no right to inspect her as if she were a sugarplum ready for devouring. Dear heaven, no man had surveyed the Duke of Sedgemoor's strait-laced sister with such blatant sexual interest since …

Since Simon himself had forsaken her for the excitements of his European wanderings, God rot him. Still, her skin tingled with a sensual response unacceptable in a woman due to marry another man in a fortnight.

Anger came to her rescue and allowed her to sound composed as she curtsied and extended her hand. "Mr. Metcalf. I'd hardly have known you."

If he was half as perceptive as his younger self, he'd surely guess that she lied, although he bowed with a surprising smoothness of address. Young Simon had been charming, but even after Oxford, scarcely practised in social niceties. Through their gloves, his touch seared.

"Lady Lydia," he said neutrally.

How irritating. How lowering. This encounter with the girl he'd once pursued apparently left Simon completely unaffected. Lydia heartily wished she could say the same, but she'd be boiled in oil before she betrayed how her blood pulsed with exhilaration. An exhilaration she hadn't felt since he'd kissed her in her father's barn.

He held her hand a fraction longer than decorum permitted. She was proud of how she drew free without snatching away as instinct urged. She was desperate to counter his assurance with coolness of her own. Her pride would countenance nothing less. "I'm delighted that you've returned to England in time for my bridal ball."

Ah, not quite so superior now. His dark blue eyes flashed in response to the veiled barb in her comment. "How could I stay away after reading Cam's letter telling me you were engaged?"

"Easily, I imagine," she snapped, then glanced swiftly at her fiancé. But Grenville was focused on haranguing Cam about some political matter, leaving her isolated with Simon in strangely public intimacy. Grenville clearly felt her reunion with a childhood friend sanctioned by her illustrious brother merited

no special attention.

Grenville had no reason to doubt her constancy. Her steady temperament was famous. It had been one of the qualities he'd extolled in his proposal. Even at the time, that had pricked at her vanity. Steadiness of temperament made her sound like a well-bred horse, not a woman capable of tormenting a man with desire.

But, of course, she'd never been that woman, had she? The one occasion when she'd believed a man's heart beat faster for her, he'd disappeared from her life.

"You haven't changed a bit," Simon said without emphasis.

She didn't take that as a compliment, given how silly she'd once been over him. Her eyes narrowed. "Oh, yes, I have."

She studied his face, seeking clues to his intentions. Just how had Cam lured Simon home from his exotic pleasures? Her brother must have been persuasive. As far as she knew, Simon hadn't communicated with their family since the late duke had threatened him with ruin.

Now she thought about it, Cam's purpose in making mischief was transparent enough. He considered Sir Grenville Berwick a self-righteous prig and he'd frequently verged on quarreling with her over her choice of husband. Winkling Simon away from the fleshpots must be a last-ditch attempt to make her cry off her engagement. Surely her brother knew her better. She loathed the thought of setting tongues wagging, as she certainly would if she jilted a good man in favor of a rapscallion whose name was a

byword for license.

And to what purpose would she take up with Simon? Although he'd indicated news of her engagement had brought him here, he was hardly likely to want to marry her. No word since he'd left and gossip about his numerous conquests put paid to any such foolish notion.

The only result Lydia could envision if she fell in with her brother's plans was her disgrace. Her brother's machinations seemed half-cocked, which was odd—Cam rarely did anything without plotting long in advance.

Lydia had no difficulty working out what Simon wanted from the scheme. To cause trouble. She read the old reckless enjoyment of mayhem in his glittering blue eyes as she faced him down with what she prayed was a dismissive expression. Nor was he averse to the idea of a flirtation; she'd been out in society for nine years, and immediately recognized that particular light in a gentleman's glance.

"May I request the pleasure of this dance?" Simon asked with a charming smile that had her on guard immediately.

"I already have a partner," she said coldly.

"That's me," Cam pointed out cheerfully, interrupting his conversation with Grenville to prove that he'd always been alert to what Simon and Lydia said to each other. "Your brother is happy to step aside in favor of an old chum."

The most bizarre element of Cam's conniving was that he flirted so heedlessly with scandal. Camden Rothermere always

trod carefully, as if to prove that he was a man of unwavering principle and decorum, whatever the circumstances of his birth.

Lydia's glare branded her brother a traitor. She'd have plenty to say to him after the ball. He shrugged with a hint of apology that didn't mollify her at all.

Gritting her teeth and consigning all Derbyshire men to Hades, she turned to Grenville. At her side, she sensed Simon's avid interest in her interactions with her fiancé. She fought back the urge to jab her childhood love with her elbow and tell him to take himself and his curiosity elsewhere. Preferably Outer Mongolia.

"Grenville, we've hardly spoken a word to one another all evening. I'm sure Mr. Metcalf will renounce his claim."

"I'd hoped to discuss Grenville's plans for the next session in the Commons." With unlikely enthusiasm, Cam clapped his hand on Grenville's stocky shoulder. No chance now to divert her betrothed, curse her brother's stratagems.

"My love, His Grace's interest could be vital." Grenville's eyes brightened at the prospect of enlisting Cam's political influence. Lydia had never deceived herself that at least part of her appeal to her fiancé was her kinship to a major powerbroker. "You go and enjoy yourself."

"In that case, this dance is mine." Simon's hand snaked out to circle her arm in a ruthless grip. Had she imagined that he'd become unnaturally still when Grenville called her his love? Surely she had. Simon had never been the jealous type. She couldn't picture him getting het up about a woman he'd known

a decade ago.

Quickly her eyes raked the room. To her surprise, the reunion of rakish Simon Metcalf and punctilious Lydia Rothermere hadn't created a stir. She had no wish to alter that state of affairs by making a scene, so with ill grace, she nodded. "Very well."

Chapter 2

Lydia had become so involved in her unspoken battle with Simon that she hadn't paid attention to the music. She would have preferred to hear a cotillion, which presented little opportunity for private conversation. But the tune playing now was undoubtedly another waltz.

"Your enthusiasm warms my heart," he said drily, stepping closer. In comparison with Grenville who only had an inch or two's advantage on her, Simon seemed dominatingly tall.

"I can imagine," she snapped, even as her own heart skipped a beat when he slipped one hand around her waist and took her hand firmly in the other.

His touch shouldn't still retain this power. Not after ten years. But every inch of her skin prickled with response. She drew herself up to her full height and regarded him with what she hoped was cold indifference.

"I see you still favor roses." His blue gaze rested on the flowers in the elaborate coronet of braids. "No matter where I went, whenever I saw roses, I thought of you. Do you remember I gave you a rose on that last day?"

"Did you? I don't recall." She lied, but he provoked her pride, pretending he still cared. Did he imagine he merely needed to smile and ask her to dance to turn her back into a complete henwit? Her voice hardened. "Just what asinine caper are you

and Cam up to?"

"Up to?" he asked with theatrical innocence as he swept her into a turn that left her dizzy.

The moment she'd glimpsed him on the staircase, the wall of glass between her and the rest of the world had shattered. Ten years without seeing him and still he made her heart sing. It was absolutely unacceptable. She would not tumble back into infatuation with this intriguing scoundrel. He'd left her without a word and had spared her nary a word since. And she was betrothed to a worthy man who deserved her loyalty.

The reminder of her duty made her straighten a backbone that showed a lamentable tendency to bend in Simon's direction. "Don't play games."

To his credit, he didn't pretend to misunderstand. "Cam thinks you're making a mistake."

The handsome face above hers had settled into uncharacteristic austerity. He'd been a lighthearted, easygoing young man. That was one of the reasons she'd loved him. For all its luxury, life at Fentonwyck had been bleak, even before her mother's death when Lydia was ten. Simon came from a large, loving family where nobody scrutinized the children's every move for the risk of the world's disapproval.

"Cam has no right to interfere," she said sharply. "And neither do you."

"Consider it a privilege of old friendship."

"Dead friendship." She told herself that the description roused

no pang. “If you expect to call on our childhood affection, you should have dropped me the occasional note.”

“Now your father has passed on, it was safe to come back.”

“Oh, valiant,” she said sarcastically. In spite of their argument, their bodies moved in perfect accord. She followed each subtle nudge of Simon’s lead as if they’d danced together a thousand times. The heat of his touch throbbed through her blood like a symphony.

His expression turned wry. “Leaving seemed the best solution back then. You know the duke would have ruined the Metcalfs if I’d so much as squeaked in your direction after he caught us … kissing.”

They’d veered close to doing more than kissing, she recalled with renewed mortification. Her father had been so livid to catch his daughter offering her maidenhead to a penniless commoner that he’d threatened Simon’s family. As Duke of Sedgemoor, he was capable of destroying a mere knight, even if the Metcalfs had held estates in Derbyshire since the Norman Conquest.

“My father’s plans didn’t include marrying me to a man without title or fortune.”

An uncharacteristic expression of guilt settled on Simon’s spectacular features. “Nonetheless, I hope you’ll accept my condolences on his passing. I’ve been out of touch with affairs in England or I’d have written at the time.”

“And of course my father’s death five years ago was the only matter you could possibly want to communicate about.”

He winced under her gibe. “I hadn’t played the man of honor with you. I should have stayed to protect you from your father’s temper.”

“You tried.” To be fair, he had. He’d stood up to the duke until six stout stable hands had hauled Simon away, still protesting that Lydia bore no fault for what had happened.

“Without succeeding. Was it very bad?”

Yes, it had been awful. Unbearably, excruciatingly awful. Her stomach still tangled into knots at the memory. For the only time in her life, her father had beaten her. But worse than the physical pain and humiliation had been the prospect of never seeing Simon again. “I learned the error of my ways.”

“I thought you might. I tried to as well. Then, when I finally mustered courage to ask some stray travelers about you, the gossip was that you were to marry Leath.”

Startled, she tripped. Only Simon’s quickness saved her from an embarrassing tumble. Dear Lord, she’d have to pay for dancing lessons at this rate, or warn any partner he risked his toes when he stood up with her.

“My father wanted the match.” But she hadn’t. The only man she’d wanted to marry had been kicking his heels on the Continent by that stage.

“Even if you hadn’t agreed to marry the Marquess of Leath, I knew there would be a line of men begging for your hand. I was astounded when I received Cam’s letter saying you’d waited so long to make your choice.”

"I …" She swallowed and stared directly into his eyes. "I found it difficult to trust any man."

Shocked, she watched the color leach from his skin and a stricken expression darken his blue eyes. His manner lost its taunting edge. "I'm sorry, Lydia. More sorry than I can say."

Hostility was easier to bear than pity. She couldn't endure this sense that he saw into her soul to all the loneliness and longing and rage there. She blinked to clear the mist of tears from her eyes and forced a cheerful reply. "It's all for the best, anyway."

"Is it?" he asked and a shiver ran through her at the dangerous rawness in his question. After a bristling silence, he went on, his voice returning to lightness. "Whatever your marital plans, I assumed that after I'd led you into such a compromising situation, you'd never want to speak to me again."

"I didn't." Yet another lie. She paused and went on with a bitter edge and perfect sincerity. "I don't."

His hand tightened around her waist and he drew her closer. She tensed to prevent her body meeting his. The gossip she'd heard over the years about his wildness indicated that he wouldn't balk at creating a public fracas to break her engagement.

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