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By Anne Stuart

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Seeking to destroy the Rohans, Lucien traps Miranda in a marriage she thinks is based on friendship but instead is rooted in vengeance. Yet even when she realizes the truth, their enmity fuels a shocking passion—and perhaps even more.

Such a man might drive anyone to murder....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Anne Stuart loves Japanese rock and roll, wearable art, Spike, her two kids, Clairefontaine paper, quilting, her delicious husband of thirty-four years, fellow writers, her three cats, telling stories and living in Vermont. She's not too crazy about politics and diets and a winter that never ends, but then, life's always a trade-off. Visit her at www.Anne-Stuart.com.

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"I don't think this is a good idea," the honorable Jane Pagett said, wringing her hands. "Mr. St. John isn't very good ton. I don't trust him."

Lady Miranda Rohan looked at her dearest friend with a wicked grin. They were sitting in Miranda's bedroom in the Rohan townhouse on Clarges Street as the young lady of the house prepared for a clandestine night out. "Oh, I don't trust him, either," she said cheerfully. "That's half the fun. Don't lecture me, darling. I've been a very good girl for three seasons now, and this is the first time I've done anything even remotely naughty. They want me to find someone to marry, and I'm just... experimenting."

"I don't think your parents are going to let you marry Christopher St. John," Jane said tartly.

"No, I don't expect they will," she said with a sigh. "I don't think it's fair, though. They'd probably reject him because he has no money, but I have more than enough for both of us. We could live very well on my income."

Jane looked at her strangely. "Would you really want to marry Mr. St. John?"

Miranda shrugged. "He's as good as anyone, I suppose. It's not as if I were a great beauty and could take my pick. Certainly there are a number of men who'd have me, and I expect I'll end up with one of them, but in the meantime I just want to indulge in a tiny bit of wicked flirtation."

"You're very pretty, Miranda!" Jane protested.

"Well, I'm not a complete antidote," Miranda admitted. "I'm just ordinary. I'm neither tall nor short, plump nor thin, my eyes and my hair are a nice boring brown. My face is inoffensive. Nothing for anyone to take a disgust of. But nothing to induce a wild passion, though Christopher St. John seems quite enthusiastic. Though I expect he's probably more enthusiastic about my money than my person," she added in a practical voice.

"Then why risk your reputation by going to Vauxhall with him? Alone!" Jane cried. "I'd be happy to come with you, or you could take your maid..."

"Absolutely not," Miranda said briskly, tying her domino at her neck and pulling it around her. Her clothes were far too discreet and modest for a raucous night at the pleasure gardens, but the domino would be

adequate disguise. "I want to dance wildly and drink wine and play cards for high stakes and laugh too loudly. I want to kiss and be kissed until I get tired of it, and I want to do it with the most beautiful man I've ever seen. You have to admit Christopher is beautiful."

"His chin is too weak," Jane said in a grumpy voice.

"Not as far as I'm concerned," Miranda said. "I'm only sorry this just came up, though I doubt I could have made my escape if you weren't here. My sister-in-law takes her duties very seriously since my parents have gone up to Scotland, and she's always asking me what I'm doing. The thing is, I don't want you to have to lie for me if anyone notices I'm gone."

"Well, I'm not going to lie for you," Jane said. "I'll tell them exactly where you went and with who."

"With whom," Miranda corrected absently. "And it won't be a problem. It'll be too late to find me, and my family knows I'm not an idiot. I'll be home around midnight, uncompromised, and no one need ever know. I just want a taste of freedom before I agree to marry one of those boring young men my brothers keep bringing home. Just a few stolen kisses while we watch the fireworks at midnight, and then I'll be safely back and chances are no one will even notice that I went out. And what can they do to me if they find out—beat me?"

"You know you'll manage to charm your entire family out of being angry with you," Jane said. "You'll even manage to charm me."

Miranda pulled the hood over her boring brown hair and reached for her luo mask. "That's because I'm adorable," she said pertly. "Don't worry about me, love. I'll be back before you know it."

Jane looked at her, worried. "I wish you wouldn't go. I don't think Mr. St. John is trustworthy."

"We've already gone over that. I'll marry someone trustworthy. I'll be just a tiny bit wicked with someone beautiful beforehand." She leaned over and planted a kiss on Jane's cheek. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." And a moment later she was gone.

There were times, looking back on that night, when Lady Miranda Rohan couldn't believe how stupid she'd been. How gullible, how certain of her own invulnerability that she never considered the danger. Christopher St. John was charming, rakish, ever so slightly dissolute, and spending a few unchaperoned hours with him should have been perfectly safe. He'd been so handsome. Penniless, but that hadn't bothered her. She would inherit more than enough for both of them. And after three years on the marriage mart there'd been no one she'd even considered as a possible husband, until Christopher had glided into her life, with his perfect face and tall, straight body, his white teeth and his charming smile.

She'd laughed when he'd suggested she elope with him. It took her far too long to realize that the closed carriage he was using to return her home was taking too much time, that while Christopher was dozing on the seat opposite her the road was becoming rougher. And when she pushed up the blind she saw only pitch-black night, not the lights of London.

She hadn't succumbed to hysterics, though she'd been tempted. She'd been firm, angry, determined. And in the long run, helpless. He'd maintained his charm throughout her protests. He loved her, he adored her, he couldn't live without her. And yes, without her substantial fortune.

"I won't marry you," she'd said firmly. "You can drag me in front of a minister at Gretna Green and I'll still say no."

"First off, Miranda darling," he'd said in the smooth voice she'd once found enchanting and now found irritating. "Ministers don't have to do the marrying in Scotland. Anyone is qualified. Secondly, you'll say yes, once you realize you have no other choice."

"I'll always have another choice."

"Not once you're ruined. Now, stop fussing. You've been spoiled and willful and now you're going to have to pay the price. We'll deal well enough together. I won't be a demanding husband."

"You won't be my husband at all," she'd said darkly.

"Now that's where you're wrong."

She'd hoped he'd take her to an inn where she could throw herself on the mercy of the innkeeper. Instead he brought her to a small cottage in the country, miles away from anyone else, with one sullen servant who'd ignored her.

It had been her own fault, Miranda told herself, refusing to cry. And St. John was right about one thing: it was up to her to pay the price. Just not the price he thought he'd guaranteed.

Because compromising her was not enough. St. John was a man who cared about the details, and the second night he took her virginity, to ensure his financial future.

It hadn't been rape. Miranda had curled up, holding her stomach afterward. She'd neither screamed nor fought, and when it became clear that it was going to happen she did her best to get into the spirit of the thing.

Vastly overrated. He kissed and slobbered over her breasts, actions that left her entirely unmoved. She'd never seen a penis that hadn't belonged to a baby, but she found the adult version fairly unprepossessing. It was short and squat in a nest of hair and really quite unattractive. It was just as well she didn't intend to seek out any future acquaintance with one.

It hurt, of course. She'd been warned that it would the first time, but St. John apparently considered her listless response to be arousing, for he repeated the process two more nights, and each night she hurt, each night she bled, and when he told her to prepare for him on the fourth night she'd slammed a water ewer down over his head, watching him slump unconscious at her feet.

It had been an oversight that she hadn't tried that before. If she'd just had the brains to consider brute force the first night she might still have retained at least her physical innocence, if nothing else.

She'd stepped over St. John's body, only slightly concerned that she might have killed him, went downstairs and headed for the stables. The hired carriage had been returned, but Christopher's showy chestnut was there, and it had taken her only a few minutes to saddle and bridle him, thanking God her father had always insisted his children know about horseflesh. Riding astride was its own misery, particularly considering St. John's attentions, but by the time she was an hour away from the cottage she ran into a small army come to rescue her, including her three brothers and her formerly annoying sister-in-law Annis.

"Don't kill him," she'd said calmly as she was hustled into the carriage they'd brought with them.

"Why not?" her brother Benedick grumbled. "Father would tell me to. Don't tell me you're in love with the creature?"

Her expression had answered that ridiculous question. "I just want to forget about it."

"Miranda is right," Annis had said, earning her eternal gratitude. "The more fuss we make, the bigger the scandal, and we'd like this to blow over quickly, would we not? I suggest you horsewhip him and leave him at that."

"He didn't touch you, did he? Didn't force himself on you?" Benedick had demanded.

It wasn't that she wanted to lie. But her fiery-tempered older brother would have gutted St. John if he'd known the truth, and even peers couldn't get away with murder.

"Of course not. He wants to marry me, not make me hate him."

Benedick had believed her calm assertion, and she and Annis had started back for London, while her brothers moved on for revenge. "I don't know if we're going to be able to keep this quiet, Miranda," Annis said in a practical voice. "You know how the gossips are, and I think Mr. St. John might have deliberately dropped a few hints before he absconded with you." Her dark blue eyes swept over Miranda, warm with sympathy. "I'm afraid you might be ruined."

Miranda ignored the sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. It was becoming second nature to her. "There are worse things in this life," she had said.

But in truth, it didn't appear that there were. Her parents had rushed back to England, her mother full of hugs and comfort and not a word of reproach, her father coming up with outrageously intricate plans to remove parts of St. John's anatomy and feed it to the fishes. When her monthly courses had arrived, on time, she had breathed a sigh of relief, and the rest of the family remained safely ignorant of her loss of innocence.

But in the end it hadn't mattered. Miranda was no longer welcome among the ton. Her invitation to Almack's had been politely withdrawn. Mothers and daughters had crossed the street rather than be obliged to speak to her, and when forced, gave her the cut direct. She was a pariah, an outcast, just as Christopher St. John had sworn she'd be.

He'd had the consummate gall to show up at her house and offer to do the honorable thing. He'd sworn that it was his passion for her that had overcome his scruples, that he would marry her and the scandal would soon die down. They loved each other, and his darling Miranda would soon get over her case of the sulks.

Marriage to him was still her only route. If she wished, they could even live in separate establishments, and he'd be certain to see that she received a generous allowance from the money that would now be in his control.

And it had been her father, Adrian Rohan, the Marquess of Haverstoke himself who'd thrown him down the stairs of their vast house on Clarges Street.

Miranda had retired to the country for a few months, until a new scandal occupied the ton's attention. Not for

one moment did she believe her sins would be forgiven—she was ruined, now and forever, and nothing would change it. But by the time she returned life had moved on, and so had Miranda.

And she had discovered, to her immense joy, that being ruined was much more fun than being on the marriage mart. She didn't have to simper and flirt with shallow young men, she didn't have to make certain her every move was accompanied by a footman and an abigail. She bought a house of her own, just a pied-a-terre that was nevertheless all hers, and she rode in the parks, ignoring both the cuts and the importunate young men. She went to the theater and the library and Gunter's, and while she enjoyed the companionship of her cousin Louisa, the older lady was mostly deaf, sadly stout and the most indolent creature on the face of the earth.

For the first time in her life Miranda was free, and she reveled in that freedom. She had her staunchly loyal family and she had her dearest friend Jane and the rest of the Pagetts. In truth, she'd lost little and gained every thing. Apart from the trouble the whole contretemps had brought upon her family, she didn't regret it. By the following spring she'd happily settled into her new life, and she wouldn't have changed it for the world.

Christopher St. John didn't fare nearly as well.

The house on Cadogan Place had always given him an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't that the place was huge and dark and gloomy, sitting on the edge of the better areas of town, a bit too near the purview of the criminal class that haunted the darkened alleys and side streets. It was the man who owned that house, the man awaiting him and his excuses for failing to do what he'd been paid to do. It was The Scorpion, known more formally as Lucien de Malheur, Earl of Rochdale, who would sit there and look at him with those colorless eyes, his thin lips curling in disdain, one elegant hand gripping the top of his cane as if he'd like to beat a man to death with it.

Christopher St. John shuddered, then shook off his nervousness. A light, icy rain had begun to fall. February in the city was always dismal. Had it been up to him he would have stayed out in the countryside with Lady Miranda Rohan warming his bed. If the bitch hadn't clocked him one and taken off.

And she and her family were proving most unreasonable, he thought, absently rubbing his bruised shoulder. He had a cracked rib, a broken wrist, several torn muscles and scrapes and bruises over most of his body. No, the Rohans didn't seem likely to become sensible any time soon.

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