

SECRETS OF LADY LUCY
(EXCERPT)

AGENTS OF THE HOME OFFICE

RACHEL ANN SMITH



PENFORD
PUBLISHING

SECRETS OF LADY LUCY is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locals are entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Edited by Victory Editing

Proofread by Gray Plume Editing

Cover by Impluvium Studios

Copyright © 2019 by Rachel Ann Smith

ISBN: 978-1-95112-01-1

CHAPTER ONE

“Lucy!”

Lady Lucille Stanford’s best friend whispered harshly at the open door.

Lucy pressed herself deeper into the desk cavity. *Blast*, she had nearly been found out. She hurriedly folded and tucked the unread parchment in her hand under her garter.

“Lucy, are you in here?” Muffled steps on the plush carpet came closer.

“Lady Lucille Stanford, come out from under the desk, *now!*”

Lady Grace Oldridge’s tone did nothing to alleviate Lucy’s frustration at having been discovered. She smoothed out her gown and slowly rolled to her full height, all five feet two inches. “Grace, please don’t be mad. I just needed a little time to myself.”

Despite having successfully kept her unusual activities and investigations a secret during her first Season, Lucy was finding it increasingly difficult in her second now that her twin brother Matthew, Marquess Harrington, was intent on finding her a husband.

At two and twenty, Lucy was practically on the shelf—and far too old for this to be merely her second Season. If she had her way,

she would have had none. After losing James, for years she had successfully avoided all of it—the Season, a husband. But Matthew was no longer amenable to her resistance to marriage. The only advantage of being in Town among the *ton* was her ability to access resources that facilitated what she now considered her true avocation.

Engulfed in a reassuring hug from Grace, Lucy was struck with guilt—which swiftly evaporated as she caught sight of Grace’s fierce expression. “You scared us all to death when we couldn’t find you in your usual hiding spots. I thought someone had... Well, never mind. We need to go back to the ballroom. I’m certain your brother is about to have an apoplexy.”

“Must we go back? I’ve already danced with all the gentlemen Matthew coerced into asking me, and I’m no good at simpering or making idle conversation.”

Lucy mentally pictured each of the suitors Matthew had deemed eligible. They totaled eight, doubled from last Season. Admittedly, all were rather dashing in their own way, but none had even come close to affecting her as James had.

Grace tried bargaining, as if she sensed Lucy was at her limit. “Perhaps we could convince Matthew to leave after the supper dance if you were to participate.”

Lucy nodded and allowed Grace to pull her back into the overcrowded ballroom. She blindly followed her friend, both pushing their way through the glittering sea of ladies in silk and men in their black evening attire. With each step, Lucy mentally admonished herself for letting Grace yet again convince her to attend the Duke of Fairmont’s annual ball.

The terrace doors were open on the opposite side of the room, and Lucy clasped her hands tightly, eyeing the doorway. The temptation of the night air was so alluring, yet she stood stock-still next to Grace, awaiting Matthew’s arrival, confident that her brother would impart another long lecture on how Lucy was to remain in sight at all times and needed to focus on finding a suitable gentleman to marry.

Grace turned to acknowledge an acquaintance Lucy did not

recognize. The movement caused Lucy's skirts to shift and the edge of the missive she'd secreted to graze against her leg. How to escape and gain a moment of peace to read the note? No matter how tempting the gardens sounded, they would not do. She needed adequate lighting. Lucy let out a slow, deep sigh and mumbled to herself, "Endure the endless balls and whatever other social events Grace wishes to attend. Eventually, my thickheaded brother will realize she is perfect for him."

Grace's piercing gaze returned to her. The look rivaled the ones Lucy's mother used to give her as a child whenever she was caught playing a trick on her brother. Lucy gave her friend a sheepish smile. Had she spoken too loudly? She really must cease the habit of talking to herself in moments of frustration.

Looking past Grace, she spied Matthew approaching. How was it that he slipped through the crowd with ease while she had to sidestep and perform pirouettes to ensure she was not trod upon? If only she had been blessed with a few extra inches.

Matthew nodded to acquaintances along the way but skillfully avoided being drawn into a conversation. Thus he was upon them in admirably quick order.

"Lady Grace, thank God you found her."

Lucy's admiration soured on being ignored and she rolled her eyes. "Grace suggested that we could all leave right after supper if I participate in the supper dance. Find me a partner, and I will happily oblige."

Matthew raised an eyebrow at her declaration. Despite his being the patriarch of the family, she was still older by six minutes. In this instance, being the older twin did not hold any weight. Lucy braced herself as her brother squared his shoulders and loomed over her. He was a full twelve inches taller, peering down on her. "I believe I've already assisted you this evening with dance partners—eight, to be exact. If you so desperately wish to leave, you will have to find your own dance partner."

"Matthew, really?" Lucy couldn't believe Matthew refused to help her. He had never denied any of her requests in the past. In fact, he was generally rather accommodating and often allowed her

much freedom, which meant she was able to conduct her clandestine activities without his knowledge.

“I believe you heard me clearly, dear sister.” Matthew calmly walked away to join a group of friends.

Her hands started to sweat in her gloves. Her heart rate increased at the prospect of having not only to dance again but also at the idea of trying to tempt a gentleman into approaching her. Could she even attract the attention of one?

She took a deep breath. Who would introduce her? Why was she short of breath? She was surrounded by women and men flirting with one another. If she could master the art of disguise, how hard could the task of luring a man to her side be? She needed to quickly develop the skills to take advantage of her full figure. She had seen many a barmaid employ her wiles to gain favors. She peeked at her own décolletage and began to calculate her odds of success.

The only gentlemen she had been properly introduced to were in Matthew’s set of friends, all with whom she had already danced. To do so a second time would provide gossip or, worse, imply an intimacy she adamantly wanted to avoid. Her shoulders, which she’d been trying to hold straight, now rolled forward as she exhaled. Rudimentary calculations led her to conclude leaving the ball early was an impossibility.

Lucy turned to Grace for support and raised her brows. *What am I to do?*

Grace lifted her chin and declared with confidence. “I’m sure we will be able to find someone suitable. Stop worrying.”

Unlikely. James was gone, and the idea of meeting a gentleman who might affect Lucy as James once had caused her heart to race. She scanned the crowd; her gaze flew past a pack of young lords who were known fortune hunters and fell upon a group of gentlemen seeking new wives, all of whom at least twice her age.

Appallingly, the Marquess of Markinson filled her vision. The man was a renowned rake and notorious flirt. Lucy averted her eyes, having no wish to be entangled in a scandal that would have her superiors questioning her judgment.

Grace stiffened beside her. Lucy scanned the perimeter and followed her friend's line of sight, only to see Matthew chatting with this Season's diamond of the first water. Lady Arabelle was the younger sister of the Earl of Hereford, who happened to be on Matthew's list of eligible suitors. Glancing from the corner of her eye, Lucy caught Grace throwing daggers at Matthew with a hard stare. Meanwhile, her twin was pretending to ignore the evil glare.

Slightly amused at the interplay, Lucy predicted Matthew's next move would be to try to evoke an inappropriate response from her usually calm, reserved friend. Another sharp intake of Grace's breath drew Lucy's attention back to her brother, who leaned in closer and carried on feigned interest in the debutante. Lucy had seen that mischievous look in his eyes many a time. He winked at Grace just before she looked away.

Lucy drew Grace away from needless agony and back to the matter at hand. "Matthew has tasked me with the impossible. I hate making small talk. In fact, I don't even like to converse with Matthew's friends. I really do wish we could leave."

A fresh breeze filtered in from the garden, redoubling Lucy's desire to escape. Her gaze locked on to the terrace doors. As she formulated her plan to flee, a warm breath on the back of her neck caused her whole body to stiffen. How had she let someone sneak up on her? And who would be bold enough to stand so inappropriately close? But rather than alarm coursing through her, a strong current of energy and heat spread throughout her body.

Grace's gaze left Matthew, and her eyes twinkled as she mumbled something about a man being the answer to their prayers. Who had Grace sighted behind her? If she was acquainted with the man, why did she not greet him? Grace leaned in and whispered, "I have a plan—remain here while I find Matthew."

The stranger bent to speak close to her ear in a deep baritone voice. "It's stifling in here."

Who dared to address her so intimately? Lucy turned, only to face a starched white shirt. The man was a giant. He had to be over a foot taller than herself. To hazard a guess, she would put him at six foot three, at least.

RACHEL ANN SMITH

Lucy was forced to take a step back to see his face, but only met with his nose. She had to raise her chin so she could look into his eyes. Deep emerald green with shards of gray stared back at her. Slightly stunned by his intensity, she remained mute. Surely she had never met the man standing before her—how could she have forgotten those mesmerizing eyes?

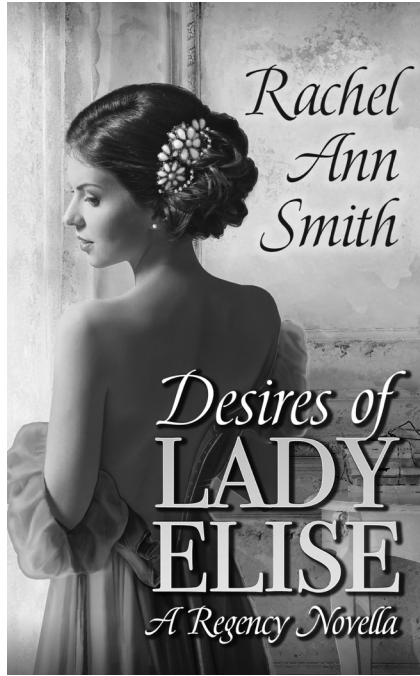


Thank you for reading.

DID YOU ENJOY THE EXCERPT?

Here is the link to buy the book *Secrets of Lady Lucy*
Book 1 of the *Agents of the Home Office* series. Enjoy!

ALSO BY RACHEL ANN SMITH

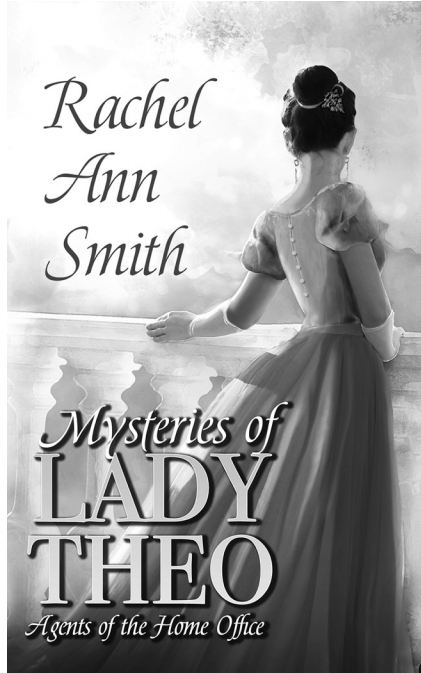


Desires of Lady Elise

He has the reputation of a rogue.

She is too busy with investigations to bother hunting for a husband.

But when the man who shattered her heart re-enters her world, will she be able to resist him?



Mysteries of Lady Theo

It was left to her to fulfill her family's duty to the Crown.

For years he prioritized his duty to the Crown before all else.

Will the same duty that forced them together be what ultimately drives them apart?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RACHEL ANN SMITH writes steamy historical romances with a twist. Her debut series, *Agents of the Home Office*, features female protagonists that defy convention.

When Rachel isn't writing she loves to read and spend time with the family. You will find her with her Kindle by the pool during the summer, on the soccer field in the spring and fall, or curled up on the couch during the winter months.

She currently lives in Colorado with her extremely understanding husband and their two very supportive children.



facebook.com/rachelannsmith11



twitter.com/rachelannsmith11



instagram.com/rachelannsmithauthor

