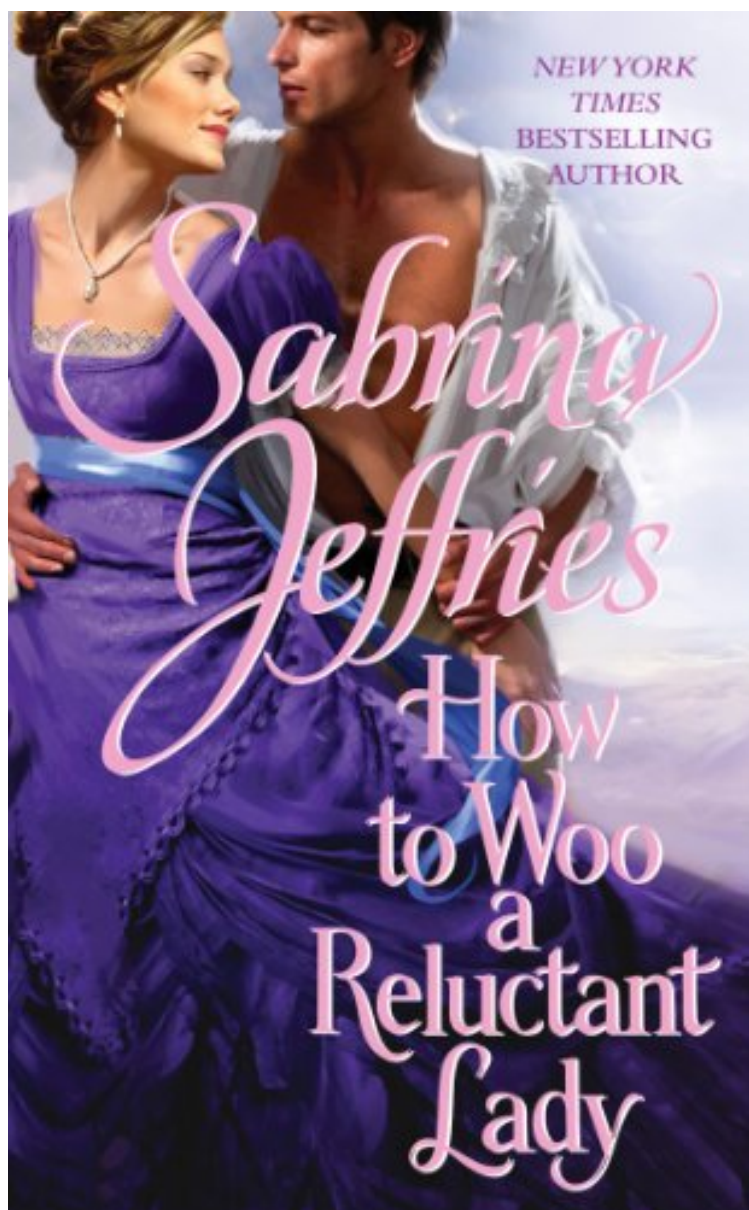


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How to Woo a Reluctant Lady



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurNew York Times bestselling author Sabrina Jeffries delights readers yet again with the third sizzling Regency romance in her Hellions of Hallstead Hall series, featuring the independent Lady Minerva Sharpe and the reckless Giles Masters.When a charming rogue proposes she marry him to meet her grandmothers ultimatum, the Sharpe clans strong-willed sister makes a tempting counter-offer that preserves her inheritanceand ignites his imagination. Lady Minerva Sharpe has the perfect plan to thwart her grandmothers demands: become engaged to a rogue! Surely Gran would rather release her inheritance than see her wed a scoundrel. And who better to play the part of Minervas would-be husband than wild barrister

Giles Masters, the very inspiration for the handsome spy in the popular gothic novels she writes? The memory of his passionate kiss on her nineteenth birthday has lingered in Minervas imagination, though she has no intention of really falling for such a rakehell, much less marrying him. Little does she know, he really is a covert government operative. When they team up to investigate the mystery behind her parents deaths, their fake betrothal leads to red-hot desire. Then Minerva discovers Giless secret double life, and he must use all the cunning tricks of his trade to find his way back to her heart.

Extrait How to Woo a Reluctant Lady
Chapter One London 1825

Shortly after dawn, Giles watched from the trees as the Viscount Ravenswood, undersecretary to the Home Office, entered the boathouse on the Serpentine River in Hyde Park. When fifteen minutes had passed and no one else had come along, Giles crossed to the boathouse himself and went inside. After he and Ravenswood exchanged the usual pleasantries, the viscount said, I hear youre being considered for a Kings Counsel. Giles tensed. He should have known Ravenswood would find that out. The man had eyes in the back of his head. So they tell me. I suppose that if youre selected, you wont be able to continue your efforts for me. Kings Counsel is a demanding position, Giles said warily. He hadnt expected to have this conversation quite so soon. And a very prestigious one for a barrister. Not to mention highly political. So pretending to be a scapegrace while you gather information for me wont be very convenient anymore. Exactly. He searched Ravenswoods face, unable to read his stoic expression. To be honest, whether they choose me as Kings Counsel or not, Ive decided to stop my work for you. Things are quieter now, and I doubt I would be No need to explain, Masters. Im surprised you continued with it this long. Youve served your country well, with little benefit and even less pay, when you could have focused on your more lucrative position as a barrister. I dont blame you for thinking that its time you consider your own career. Youre what, thirty-seven now? Certainly youre old enough to want more out of life than doing this. And Ill support your decision as much as possible. Giles released a long breath. Hed been dreading this conversation. But he should have known that Ravenswood would remain his friend no matter what. He and the viscount had first met at Eton. Though the other man was three years older than Giles, theyd forged an unusual friendship, considering that Ravenswood had been sober and industrious and Giles wild and adventurous. So it was Ravenswood, already being groomed for politics, whom Giles had turned to nine years ago when hed burned to see justice done. Ravenswood had taken the documents Giles had stolen from Newmarsh and made good use of them. Thus had begun Giless covert association with the Home Office and its role as keeper of the peace. It had proved fruitful for them both. From time to time, Giles had passed information on to the undersecretary that the man wouldnt have learned any other way. Men in the stews let all sorts of juicy details slip out around the profligate Giles Masters. After the war, the Home Office had been swamped with cases of fraud, forgery, and even treason, and with different parts of the country on the verge of revolution, it had needed all the help it could get. Occasionally Giles had actively sought out information, even from fellow noblemen. In return, Ravenswood had given him a reason for living after his fathers suicide. A way to make up for the sins of his youth. But hed been paying for those sins quite a while now. I suppose I dont need to tell you that your activities must be kept secret even after youve... er... retired, Ravenswood cautioned him. You can never discuss it with anyone, never reveal I know my duty, Giles broke in. That was the trouble. It was hard to have a real life when he kept secrets from everyone he knew. He was tired of keeping secrets. Tired of playing the role of hard-living rogue that had suited him once, but didnt anymore. If he stopped his work for the government now, no one would ever be the wiser, and he could start being more himself. People would assume hed finally grown up. He could put these days of being an informant for the government behind him. This will be my last report, Giles said. Will that leave you in any kind of difficulty? As you might imagine, well regret the loss of you. But well manage. And as you say, things are quieter now. Which is why I dont have much to report. Giles told him of a magistrate he suspected of taking bribes and of a problem he feared was brewing with investments in South American mining companies. Ravenswood scribbled notes, asking questions where it was pertinent. When Giles paused, he asked, Is that all? Almost. Theres that favor I asked of you last month, Giles said. Ah, yes, the one for your friend Jarret Sharpe. Ravenswood thrust his notebook in his coat pocket. Thus far, none of my other informants have the sort of knowledge concerning Desmond Plumtree that youre looking for. Is it possible that your friend is mistaken in his suspicions? Ever since Jarret and Oliver had married, theyd been looking into the deaths of their parents. Jarret had asked Giles for legal advice concerning the matter, and the situation had piqued Giless interest. As far as I can ascertain from Mrs. Plumtrees will, Giles admitted, Desmond Plumtree had nothing to gain by killing them. Yet that answer doesnt satisfy you. I cant explain it, but Plumtree has always rubbed me wrong. If I could suspect anyone of murdering the Sharpes, it would be

him. And Giles hadn't risen as far as he had in his career as a barrister without paying heed to his instincts.

Well, I'll let you know if anyone comes across anything pertinent. Sorry I can't be of more help than that.

With a sudden twinkle in his eye, Ravenswood reached into his coat and pulled out a newspaper. On a lighter note, with all your recent interest in the Sharpe family, I couldn't resist bringing you this. Giles took the paper from him, then cast his friend a quizzical glance. The Ladies Magazine? It's my wife's. Just came out yesterday. She read something to me from it that I thought you'd find amusing. Look at the bottom of page twenty-six. He flipped through, then sucked in a breath as he realized that it was the first chapter of Minerva's latest gothic novel. He hadn't known it was going to be serialized. Can I keep this? Certainly. Abby's already done with it. Ravenswood eyed him closely. Have you ever read her novels? Giles went on the alert. Have you? I read what's in there. It was very interesting. There's a character in her book who rather reminds me of you. Is there? he said, trying to sound bored. Damn it all to hell. If even Ravenswood noticed... As soon as he got home, he'd have to read every word. Unbidden, an image from nine years ago rose in his mind of the pretty young woman wearing a Marie Antoinette costume with such sweetness, it made his teeth ache to remember it. By the age of nineteen, she'd grown into a classic beauty with bow-shaped lips, thick lashes, high cheekbones. But beyond her looks, there'd been nothing classic about Minerva. He still couldn't believe the saucy wench had plagued him about what he was doing at Newmarsh and then had blackmailed him into kissing her. He still couldn't believe what had happened when he'd given her the kind of kiss meant to teach her a lesson about the dangers of tempting a rogue. Somehow he'd forgotten she was his best friend's sister. That he was a dissipated second son at the beginning of a shaky career, in no condition to take on a sweetheart, much less a wife. Somehow the kiss had become bigger, more dangerous... more intoxicating. She'd made him want and yearn and think the unthinkable. She still did. A pity that she hated him now. She'd made that perfectly clear in her books, laying him out on the pages in the guise of fiction, skewering him even as she circled ever nearer to his secrets. He'd first been alerted to the problem at the Valentines Ball they'd both attended a few months ago. Until then, he'd never read her novels. He'd had enough trouble putting their kiss behind him without having her voice in his head. But the dance they'd shared had stoked the fire anew. They'd danced around each other in their conversation, layering innuendo upon innuendo until his blood ran hot and her remarks grew sharper, and he'd feared he might be reckless enough to do something foolish. Like whisk her out onto a balcony and kiss her senseless. After it was over, he'd been left aroused, angry, and confused. Until that night he'd assumed that she'd forgotten about him, that his callous remarks when they'd kissed had squelched anything she might have felt. Discovering that they hadn't had sent him to her books. And that's when he'd discovered what Minerva was up to. He'd put off doing something about it, hoping that her grandmother's recent demands might keep her too occupied to write anymore. But here was a new installment. He could no longer ignore the problem of Minerva. What if she started including allusions to his activities that night at Newmarsh's town house? Anyone in the judicial system who connected him to the theft would realize he'd been the one to inform upon Newmarsh and his partner, Sir John Sully. Then it wouldn't take much to connect him to other cases for the Home Office, and those he'd informed upon would set out to ruin him. They'd start by ending his chance of becoming King's Counsel. You haven't even reached the pertinent part yet, Ravenswood said, jolting him from his thoughts. Go to the page I told you. Giles found it and immediately noticed the two paragraphs in a different font at the bottom. The first was about Lady Minerva's connection to the Sharpe family, something that only she would have the audacity to include. The bloody woman refused to take a pseudonym; it was a bone of contention between her and her grandmother. But it was the next paragraph that left him staring in shock: Dear Readers, If you wish to read future installments of this book, you must help me with a troublesome domestic situation that has arisen in my life. I suddenly find myself in dire need of a husband, preferably one who possesses a tolerance for authoresses of gothic fiction. To that end, I ask that you send any of your unmarried brothers, cousins, or acquaintances to Halstead Hall on June 20, where I will be conducting interviews for the position of husband. I thank you for your support. Regards, Lady Minerva Sharpe The twentieth of June? That was today, damn it! Amusing, isn't it? Ravenswood said. My wife laughed for a full ten minutes. What a clever joke. Not a joke, Giles retorted. Her grandmother laid down an ultimatum earlier this year: the Sharpe siblings must all marry or they all lose their inheritance. Knowing Lady Minerva, this is her way of irritating her grandmother. Ravenswood gaped at him. You mean the woman is seriously interviewing husbands? I don't know how serious she is, but the interviewing is undoubtedly real. The chit was mad if she thought this would gain her anything. He could only imagine how Oliver and Jarret would react, not to mention Mrs. Plumtree. The old woman had a spine of steel; she wouldn't tolerate Minerva's

nonsense for one moment. She certainly wouldnt change her mind about her plans. He tucked the magazine under his arm. I have to go. Planning to show up for the interview, are you? Ravenswood joked. Its a thought, he said tersely. You and Lady Minerva? Thats interesting. You have no idea. An hour later, after hed read Minervas first chapter, he was furious. Damn her to hell. Shed gone too far this time. So she wanted to interview men for a husband, did she? Fine. She was about to have one hell of an interview. MINERVA PACED THE Chinese drawing room at Halstead Hall, her spirits falling lower by the moment. How was she to get Gran to rescind her ultimatum if no one showed up? Shed envisioned scores of young fools and fortune hunters clamoring for her attention, overrunning Halstead Hall and making such a to-do in the press that Gran would have to give up. Or cut her off completely. And since Minerva refused to believe that Gran would make her siblings suffer for one grandchilds indiscretions, that was the outcome she was hoping for. Then she could find a small cottage somewhere and write what she pleased, free of any husband. Hard to believe that shed once considered marriage a good idea. Her parents marriage had been disastrous. And through the years, shed seen that men had no respect for the institution. Thered been the publishers shed approached to sell her book whod made colorful suggestions about what she could do to gain their favor. And the legions of fortune hunters who were never far from her door. Respectable gentlemen wouldnt have her, since she wrote novels under her own name. Not that she wanted a respectable gentleman anymorethey were the worst. Shed had a few as suitors and shed even kissed a couple. But as soon as theyd learned what she was really like, theyd run as far and as fast as they could. Men didnt particularly like women who spoke their minds. Even her brothers were no great endorsement of respectable gentlemen, with their wild living and autocratic behavior toward their sisters. Perhaps Oliver and Jarret had been domesticated a bit, now that they were married, but would it last? And what if it didnt? Their wives would be trapped. Women were always trapped. Minerva would never forgive Gran for trapping her with the cursed demand that they all marry. And Oliver and Jarrethow dare they betray their siblings by going over to Grans side? Six months ago, they would have been leading the charge. Now, if they realized what she was up to and why, they would scuttle her plans at once. Her eyes narrowed on the door. Was that why no gentlemen had shown up?

Had her brothersor Granfound out that she was being outrageous again? No, how could they? Shed purposely put her advertisement in The Ladies Magazine because it was delivered in the evening and no one in the family read it. Celia was too much a tomboy for such things, Gran only read the Times, her brothers wouldnt be caught dead even opening the thing, and Their wives. Drat it all. They had wives now. And while Jarrets wife, Annabel, didnt seem the sort to read a ladys magazine, Olivers wife, Maria, was an avid supporter of Minervas books. She wouldnt have missed the first installment of the latest one. Minerva cursed under her breath as she headed for the door. How could she have forgotten about Maria? So help her, if Maria had done something to A man entered the room. But he wasnt one of her brothers, and he certainly wasnt anyone whod come to be interviewed. He was the last, but not the least, of her reasons for not marrying. Giles Masters, her weakness... and the focus of a most unhealthy obsession. What a pity that she still found him more devastatingly attractive than any other man, even after all these years. And far more interesting. Not that she would ever let him know it. Good morning, Mr. Masters, she said in her frostiest voice. Same to you, my lady. He dragged his gaze down her person in a roguish glance. Youre looking well today. So was he, unfortunately. Giles had always known how to dress. Today he was resplendent in a well-tailored riding coat of cobalt superfine, a figured waistcoat of sky blue marcella, white doeskin trousers, and highly polished black Hessians. He looked perfectly at home amid the Ming vases and gilt dragons meant to intimidate her would-be suitors and keep them in line. Somehow she knew they wouldnt intimidate him.

And no one ever kept Giles in line unless he wanted to be there. She strove to appear nonchalant. If youre here to see Jarret Im here to see you. He tossed something onto the golden silk chair nearest her. Ive come to be interviewed. When she saw The Ladies Magazine lying open, a pounding began in her chest. How much

had he read? Just the advertisement? Or the chapter of her book, too? You subscribe to The Ladies Magazine? she asked with what she hoped was just the right dollop of condescension. How droll. Apparently

Im not the only one, judging from the horde on your lawn. She blinked at him. What horde? You didnt know? He let out a sharp laugh. But of course you didnt. You would have been out there railing at Gabe and Oliver by now if youd known they were turning gentlemen away as fast as they arrive. Why, those arrogant, meddlingWhat about Jarret? Isnt he out there, too? Apparently hed already left for the brewery by the time they mustered the troops. But theyve sent for him, so Im sure hell join the fray as soon as he gets here. Giles leaned against the doorway with a smirk. I dont think youll be interviewing any other gentlemen today. She glared at him. Yet they let you in. They think Im here to visit Jarret. I chose not to disabuse them of the

notion. Im supposedly cooling my heels in the study while I wait for his return. She headed for the door. Well, you can cool your heels in here if you like, but Im going to give my brothers Not so fast, my dear. He pushed off from the doorway to block her path. You and I have some unfinished business. Without taking his eyes from her, he shut the door behind him. An uneasiness rose in her that she fought to hide. You know perfectly well its improper for you to be alone with me with the door closed. Since when do you care about propriety, Minerva? he drawled. And I havent given you leave to call me by my Christian name, either. His cold smile gave her pause. I havent given you leave to use me in your books, but that hasnt stopped you. Oh, Lord. Steady, Minerva. He might just be fishing for information. Are you saying that youve read my novels? Is that so hard to believe? Frankly, yes. Even my brothers dont bother. Your brothers havent been vilified in them. Though her unease exploded into alarm, she forced a smile. If youre insinuating that Im not insinuating anythingIm stating it flat out. He circled her like a shark seeking to intimidate his prey. Youve made me into your favorite villain: the Marquess of Rockton. Drat it all. He really had read her novels. She tried to brazen it out. Youre confused. Everyone knows that Rockton is based on Oliver. Right. Thats why Rockton has blue eyes and dark brown hair. I couldnt make him be exactly like Oliver, for goodness sake. I had to change a few details. Is that why Rockton has a father rather than a mother who committed suicide? he went on, those blue eyes gleaming. How clever of you to anticipate that people would assume you changed that detail, too. Your little personal joke. She colored. Never in a million years had she thought he would read her books. Youre making absurd assumptions. Really? What about the lines in *The Stranger of the Lake* where the hapless Lady Victoria falls in love with Rockton and throws herself at him? He stopped in front of her. What was it he says? Ah, yes. Do be careful, my dear, next time you decide to act like a doxy. Some men dont take kindly to blackmail. Sound familiar? That one she really couldnt get around. But the passage that settles it is the one I read this morning. With a blatant confidence that rubbed her raw, he strolled over to where hed left *The Ladies Magazine* and picked it up to read aloud: Lady Anne pushed her way through the crowds at the masquerade, praying that her Marie Antoinette costume was innocuous enough to keep her from being noticed by Lord Rocktons loathsome friends. As she burst into the study, relieved to have escaped unscathed, she realized she was not alone. Rockton himself stood by the fireplace in his priest costume. He tossed the magazine back onto the chair. The chapter ends there. What comes next? Rockton helping himself to the files in the study? She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. All right, so I used some of our... encounter at Lord Newmarshs party in my novels. I dont see how You swore to keep quiet about that night. He strode up until he stood so close that she could smell the spicy scent of Guards Bouquet on him. You exacted a price for it, as I recall, and I paid your damned price. I did keep quiet about your stealing, at least. You ought to be glad that I have, considering that a brief explanation from you might have prevented my being interested in the first place. Or enticed you to write about it all the more. Youd probably even embellish the incident to make it worse. You made Rockton a spy for the French, for Gods sake! Why would you put that in there? Because Im a writer. I invent things. Its called fiction. He narrowed his eyes on her. Not when you use real people as characters. Youre missing the point. First of all, Rockton isnt you or Oliver or anyone. Just because I took a bit of what happened between us and A bit? His gaze bore into her. You put our kiss in the very first novel where Rockton appears. Rockton accosts the heroine in the mews and forces a kiss on her. She slaps him for not being nice, and he says, What made you think that a kiss from me would be nice? His gaze dropped to her mouth. You know perfectly well where you got that line. You read that book, too? she squeaked. How many of my novels have you read, anyway? Since I found out that youre putting me in them? All ten. Imagine my surprise to discover that youve been flaying me alive in your fiction for the last three. He was right, though shed never admit it to him. His rejection that night had stung her pride and wounded her heart, so shed taken her anger out on him in her novels. But shed honestly never believed he would read a word of it. Or that anyone would recognize him in it. She had certainly never believed hed be angry about it. Giles didnt get angry. He didnt seem to feel deep emotion of any kind. He joked and gambled and flirted his way through life without a care in the world. It surprised her to see him showing this much passion. I dont understand why youre so annoyed, she said. No one knows that Rockton is... partly you. No one has even guessed. Only because you havent given them enough hints, he bit out. Its very clever of you to use me. Anybody else would sue you for libel, but you know I wont because I dont want people looking too closely into my secrets. So you think you can put whatever you want about me in your books with impunity. Youre making a mountain out of a molehill, Mr. Masters. Am I? When were you planning to put the theft into your books? The next chapter, perhaps? I promised to keep silent about that, and I will. Why should I believe you? You havent kept silent about any of the rest of it. She glared up at

him. What do you want from me? There was a subtle change in his manner, from anger to something far more disturbing. Awareness of her as a woman, one he could seduce. It was just like that night at the Valentines Ball when theyd danced, when his flirtations had heated her blood while leaving him unmoved. Curse him for that. He cast her a veiled glance. What I want is to know why. Why you decided to put me in your books as the villain. Why you decided to make me a central character in your most recent novels. That... just happened. When Rockton first appeared, readers wrote me several letters about him, wanting to see more of him. Because you draw him in such loving detail. But why does he capture your imagination so? And why do you keep attributing to him things that I said and did? Were you so very angry at me over how I treated you that night? It has nothing to do with you personally Liar. He bent close to press his mouth to her ear. Admit it you put me in your books because you cant forget me. She jerked back. Dont flatter yourself. And God knows, I cant forget you. For a moment, she actually believed him, and her heart faltered. Then she cursed it for its fickleness. The last thing she needed right now was her own private version of Rockton mucking with her determined spinsterhood. Especially when he didnt mean any of his smooth words. According to her brothers, his casual treatment of women was legendary. Slipping past him, she went to stand at the window that looked out onto the courtyard. Why are you here? If its to berate me for putting you in my books, youve accomplished your aim, so you might as well leave. Youre certainly not here for any interview. Actually, youre wrong. She whirled on him. Seeming to enjoy her look of confusion, he sauntered toward her with a smile. Heres the situation, Minerva. Its obvious to me that youre going to plague your grandmother with increasingly reckless behavior until you get what you want from her. And what would be more outrageous than to expose me as Rockton, so you can create a scandal like the one Lady Caroline Lamb did with her novel about Lord Byron? She bristled. I would never So I cant really trust you not to keep writing about me. Im not sure I can even trust you to keep quiet about who Rockton is. That leaves me with two choices, if I want to keep my secrets safe. I can murder you to keep you silent. Not a good choice at all. No matter how you treat it in your novels, murder is messy. Not to mention illegal. A shiver swept her. And the other choice? The sudden glitter in his eyes did nothing to quell the pounding in her chest. I can marry you. Presentation de l'diteur New York Times bestselling author Sabrina Jeffries delights readers yet again with the third sizzling Regency romance in her Hellions of Hallstead Hall series, featuring the independent Lady Minerva Sharpe and the reckless Giles Masters. When a charming rogue proposes she marry him to meet her grandmothers ultimatum, the Sharpe clans strong-willed sister makes a tempting counter-offer that preserves her inheritance and ignites his imagination. Lady Minerva Sharpe has the perfect plan to thwart her grandmothers demands: become engaged to a rogue! Surely Gran would rather release her inheritance than see her wed a scoundrel. And who better to play the part of Minervas would-be husband than wild barrister Giles Masters, the very inspiration for the handsome spy in the popular gothic novels she writes? The memory of his passionate kiss on her nineteenth birthday has lingered in Minervas imagination, though she has no intention of really falling for such a rakehell, much less marrying him. Little does she know, he really is a covert government operative. When they team up to investigate the mystery behind her parents deaths, their fake betrothal leads to red-hot desire. Then Minerva discovers Giles secret double life, and he must use all the cunning tricks of his trade to find his way back to her heart.