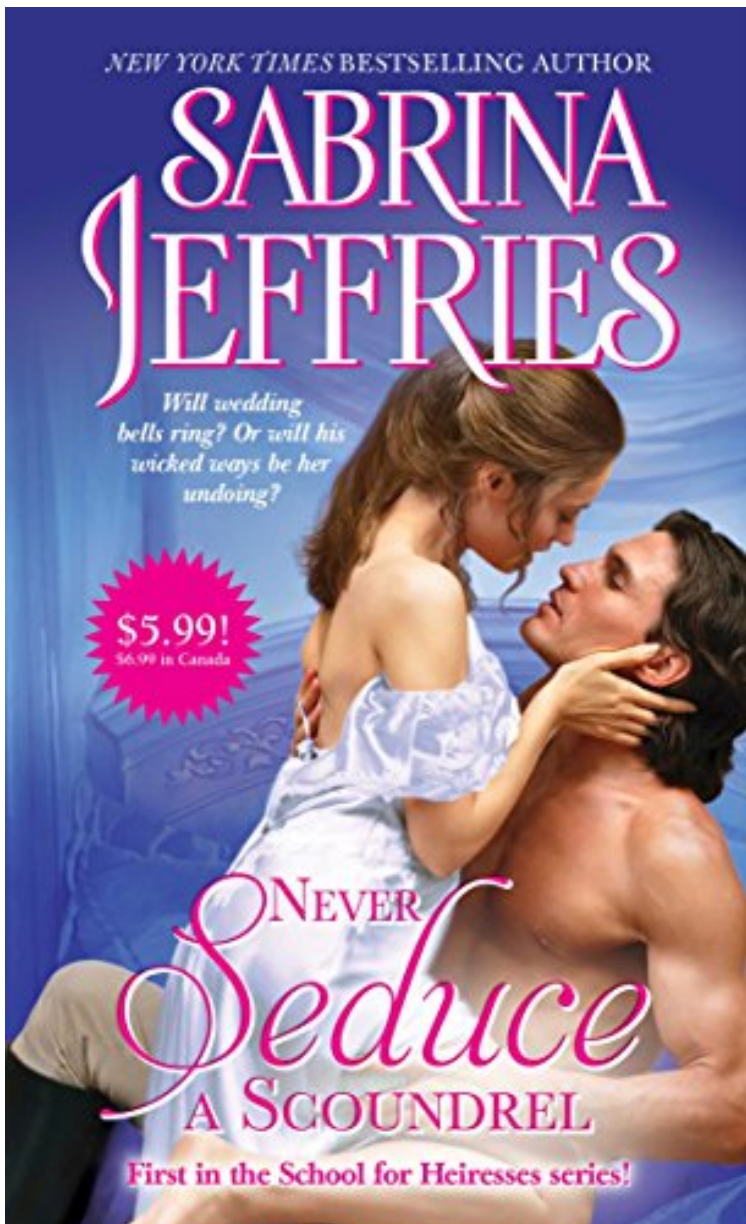


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Never Seduce a Scoundrel



Par Sabrina Jeffries
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ventes : #204594 dans eBooksPubli le:
2006-03-14Sorti le: 2006-02-
28Format: Ebook Kindle

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBestselling author Sabrina Jeffries's enticing new series introduces the spirited graduates of Mrs. Harris's School for Young Ladies -- unconventional heiresses who are more than matches for society's most irresistible rogues.... "Be careful, Amelia -- you know how reckless you can be!" -- Mrs. Charlotte Harris, headmistress Lady Amelia Plume has many admirers -- it's too bad they're all fortune hunters and fops who can't provide the exotic adventures she seeks. But the ballrooms of Mayfair have become much more appealing since the arrival of Major Lucas Winter, an American with a dark past and a

dangerous air. Lucas is brash, arrogant -- and scandalously tempting. Every thrilling kiss sparks hotter desire, yet Amelia suspects that Lucas has a hidden motive in wooing her. And she intends to discover it, by any means necessary....

Extrait Never Seduce a Scoundrel Chapter One London June 1818 Dear Cousin Michael, For the next few weeks, I shant be at the school, but in London chaperoning Lady Amelia while her father and stepmother are in the country. Do continue to send your missives. Ill need your sage advice, for Lady Amelia is high-spirited (dare I say, almost as much as I?) and liable to land us both in trouble before the season ends. Yours sincerely, Charlotte Who would ever guess balls could be boring? Certainly not Lady Amelia Plume. When shed first come to London from the tiny seaside town of Torquay, every tea, every ball, every soiree had been a wonder. But that was two years ago, before shed realized they were all alike. And the Dowager Viscountess Kirkwoods annual spring ball was no exception, judging from the crowd Amelia surveyed as she entered the rose-bedecked ballroom. It was the same dull people the same prancing fops and gossipy matrons and frivolous young misses. No aspiring lady adventurer with an ounce of self-respect would stay. Unfortunately, shed promised her Scottish friend, Lady Venetia Campbell, that she would. At least Venetia, whom she spotted a short distance away, knew how to enliven a tedious evening. Thank heaven youve come, Venetia said as she approached. I swear I shall die of boredom. Theres hardly anybody interesting here. Nobody? Amelia asked, her disappointment acute. No Spanish ambassadors or explorers newly arrived from the Pacific, or even an opera singer? Venetia laughed. I was thinking more in terms of eligible men. For Venetia, that meant clever men. Not that she couldnt have her pick of the male crop, clever or otherwise. Besides being obscenely wealthy, she had the sort of beauty men slobbered over, with raven tresses and creamy skin and rather enormous breasts. Next to Venetia, Amelia was abominably average of average height, with average skin, of average tone. Her average figure would never inspire rhapsodies, and her medium brown hair vacillated between being curly and straight. But she had quite a lot of hair, thank goodness, and kept it lustrous with pomatum and her American stepmothers honeysuckle water. Amelias eyes might not be the sirens green of Venetias, but men described them as sparkling, and her breasts generally commanded attention. In short, Amelia possessed her share of modest attractions and modest suitors. Granted, most men only cared about her not-so-modest inheritance and her position as the Earl of Toveys daughter. But she didnt intend to marry any of them, anyway neither the Marquess of Pomeroy, an aging general who fancied her and her fortune, nor their hostesss son, the Viscount Kirkwood himself, whod made overtures to her last year. She aspired to a more adventurous life touring Turkey like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, or living in Syria like the legendary Lady Hester Stanhope. Actually, Venetia said, theres one person here wed both find interesting: Lord Kirkwoods American cousin. She nodded to a spot beyond Amelia. Major Lucas Winter is apparently in England on assignment with the United States Marine Guard. Expecting some weather-grizzled older fellow, Amelia followed Venetias gaze. Then stared. Good Lord, how had she missed him when shed come in? Major Winter stuck out in the cramped ballroom like a hawk among pigeons. He wore quite the dashing blue-coated uniform, which bristled with gold braid, and a wide, bloodred sash around his trim waist. Her heart raced just to look at it. And not only his uniform, either. His inky hair matched his inky boots, and though far from grizzled, his sun-browned skin made the other gentlemen look positively anemic. It hinted at days spent at sea, at battles on the Mediterranean. Oh, the adventures he must have had! Now that is a man, Venetia remarked. They do grow them tall and well built in America, dont they? Even if his features are somewhat rough. True. The mans jaw was a bit too angular and his nose a touch too narrow for handsome. And any English lord would ruthlessly pluck those thick, unruly eyebrows. But even if his appearance were changed, as long as the man wore that brooding scowl, he would continue to look rough. And fascinating. He hasnt yet asked a single lady to dance. Mischief glinted in Venetias eyes. But youll adore this they say he travels with a veritable arsenal. If he keeps insulting the officers, he may even have to use it. He insulted them? Drat it, shed missed everything by coming late. He told Lord Pomeroy that the Americans won their recent conflict with us because English officers are more interested in promenades than pistols. Amelia laughed. She could only imagine how the general had taken that pronouncement. Especially from a man like the major, who clearly saw this as enemy territory, even though the war had ended three years ago. As Major Winter sipped champagne, he scanned the ballroom with the barely leashed contempt of a spy doing reconnaissance. Is he married? Amelia asked. Venetia frowned. Come to think of it, no ones actually said. I do hope he isnt. Amelia slid another glance his way. He must be remarkably brave to face his old enemies in their own territory. And he must have something more than deadwood under his kilt, Venetia added, her Scottish burr faintly evident. Amelia eyed her askance. Youve been reading the chapbook of harem tales again, havent you? Its quite informative.

Venetia lowered her voice to a whisper. What do you think? Does the major have a sword worth worshipping with ones mouth? Goodness, even Im not shameless enough to speculate on the majors sword. Venetia chuckled. Your stepmother will be delighted to hear it. Amelia laughed. Lord knows Dolly despairs of me enough as it is, poor thing. She hated being dragged across the world by her late husband, so she cant understand why I would jump at the chance to travel. Her gaze drifted back to the major. The American marines were famous for battling the Barbary pirates in years past. Was he too young to have experienced that? Did she dare wangle an introduction to him to find out? Lord Kirkwood glanced in her direction and murmured something to his cousin, who followed his gaze. It was the first time the American had looked her way, so she flashed him an inviting smile. He didnt return it. His eyes narrowed on her with a sudden predatory intensity, then drifted rather impudently down her gown of yellow Chinese silk with its Oriental red flounces. By the time they trailed back up to fix on her face, hot color was rising in her cheeks.

Goodness gracious, the man was bold. No Englishman had ever looked at her as if she stood there stark naked. How very intriguing. It sent a delicious chill right down her spine. Then he ruined it with a curt nod and returned his gaze to his cousin. Well! What was she to make of that? Wheres your stepmother tonight, anyway? Venetia asked. She and Papa left for Torquay yesterday, Amelia said absently. Now that Dolly was expecting her first child, Papa was determined to coddle her in the country. They nearly made me go, too, but Mrs. Harris fortunately agreed to come to town and chaperone me while shes not needed at the school.

Amelia and Venetia had graduated from Mrs. Harriss School for Young Ladies two years ago, and their schoolmistress still bore a strong affection for them as they did for her. Thats why they rode out there monthly for tea and her lessons for heiresses. Not to mention the wealth of information she received regularly from her mysterious benefactor, Cousin Michael. Much as I adore Mrs. Harris, Venetia said, I wouldnt want her for a chaperone. Shed never allow you a private moment with a gentleman. What gentleman is Amelia having a private moment with? a querulous voice asked behind them. Amelia stifled a groan. It was Miss Sarah Linley, another schoolmate. Amelia had tried to like her, but Silly Sarahs petulance and snobbery made even Amelia clench her teeth. Hello, Sarah. She pasted a polite smile on her face. We were just talking about the lack of eligible men here. What lack? Sarah said. I see several. Lord Kirkwood, for example. Who I hear is trying to marry a fortune, Venetia pointed out. Sarah twirled one of her golden ringlets about her finger. And I have a fortune, dont I? The bankers daughter also had the exquisite features of a porcelain doll. A pity she had nothing resembling a brain. Lord Kirkwood would never show an interest in you, Venetia bit out, not bothering to hide her loathing. Thanks to Sarahs frequent mentions of those dirty Scots, the two of them were always at daggers drawn. Ah, but he has already done so, Sarah said, in a voice dripping condescension. Then she sighed dramatically. Unfortunately, my parents disapprove. Papa calls Lord Kirkwood a titled wastrel and wants me to marry some tea merchant with pots of money. They only let me attend tonight because the merchant was coming here, too. Me, married to a tea merchant! Can you imagine? When I could be Lady Kirkwood? Im sure the viscount is brokenhearted, Venetia said sarcastically. Oh, the tale isnt over yet. Sarah flashed them a secretive smile. Amelia knew better than to encourage her, but Venetia clearly couldnt stand having Sarah know something she didnt. Really? Venetia prodded. Sarah leaned close. Promise you wont tell anyone? Venetia exchanged a glance with Amelia. Certainly not. He slipped me a letter at the last assembly declaring his intentions. Amelia barely disguised her shock. Shed thought Lord Kirkwood sensible, but if he would seriously contemplate marriage to Silly Sarah, he was clearly mad or more desperate for funds than society realized. I wrote him a response, too. Sarah assumed a tragic air. But its likely to remain in my reticule forever. Mama watches the mail closely and has threatened to take away all my jewels if I even dance with Lord Kirkwood. She glared across the room. Still, he could manage a word with me if not for his awful cousin. Their gazes turned to the American major just as he exchanged words with two male guests. As tempers erupted, Lord Kirkwood stepped in to douse the flames. Sarah sighed. Every time his lordship heads toward me, his ruffian of a cousin annoys someone else. And its not as if I can just walk up and hand my note to him. Someone might see, and Papa will have my hide. Give it to a servant then, Venetia said dismissively. And if Mama notices? Or the servant tattles? My parents will probably lock me in my room or do something equally horrible. You could leave it somewhere hes sure to find it, Amelia suggested. Like his study. Men are playing cards in there, Sarah said, with a petulant frown. Then put the letter on his bed, Amelia said. Or better yet, his pillow. No servant would dare remove it until his master saw it. As Sarah stared at her aghast, Venetia added, eyes gleaming, Yes, Sarah, why dont you trot upstairs and put it on his bed? Very funny, Sarah said with a pout. You both just want to see me get into trouble so you can have Lord Kirkwood for yourself. Amelia nearly retorted that

Lord Kirkwood had approached her before he'd even thought of Sarah, but she couldn't be that mean. I'm only pointing out, she said tersely, that the house is small, and there are servants' stairs. You could sneak up and do it before anyone even noticed you were gone. If it's so easy, why don't you do it? Sarah snapped. You're the one who craves adventure. Amelia started to retort, then paused. She did like a good adventure. The stealth of it, the sheer excitement of sneaking about—why not do it? Not for Sarah, of course, but just to see if she could get away with it. It wasn't as if anything else exciting would happen tonight. Besides, the major's room was probably up there, so she might even get a glimpse of the arsenal Venetia had mentioned. All right, Amelia said. I'll take the letter up myself. Sarah looked surprised, but Venetia scowled. Don't be absurd. You can't go into the man's bedchamber. It's the best way to make sure he reads Sarah's letter. It's the best way to be ruined if anyone sees you, Venetia snapped. Might as well walk over and hand him the letter, for pity's sake. The gossips would tear you apart either way. If Amelia wants to help me, Sarah protested, why shouldn't she? Because she'll get herself caught, you little fool. If I get caught, I'll play dumb, Amelia said. I'll bat my eyelashes and pretend to be a flibbertigibbet wandering the house in search of the retiring room. The flibbertigibbet act won't work with everyone, Venetia warned. Then I'll be sure not to get caught.

Amelia turned to Sarah. Give me the letter. Sarah slipped it out of her reticule and into Amelia's hand. Ignoring Venetia's continuing protests, Amelia shoved the envelope into her own reticule, then hurried off toward the hallway. All right, so this wasn't exactly the sort of wildly exotic adventure she dreamed of, but it was better than nothing. Now if she could just reach the door to the back stairs without being seen. She was in luck. The stairway was next to the retiring room, so it was easy to choose one door over the other when no one was watching. Upstairs, her luck continued, for the floor with the bedchambers was deserted. But which room was his lordship's? Listening for approaching servants, she opened doors in rapid succession, dismissing the one smelling of rosewater as belonging to the Dowager Viscountess, and the second as belonging to the lady's maid. Just as Amelia opened one across the hall, voices came from the stairs. With her blood thundering in her ears, she slipped inside the room and closed the door. As someone passed by out in the hall, she glanced about her. This room was certainly a man's. A pair of polished boots sat at the foot of the bed, and a sword belt with an oddly shaped sword in its scabbard hung from a chair's post. Lord Kirkwood's sword would be kept in a cabinet downstairs, so this must be Major Winters' room. A forbidden thrill tingled along her skin. This was her chance to see his arsenal. And find out more about him—where he'd been, where he was going. Whether he was married. As excitement spiked her blood, she crept over to examine his shaving stand. Like most military men, he was scrupulously neat, his brushes and comb kept quite clean. The same was true of his orderly dressing table. She found no jewelry, but did discover a wicked-looking ivory-handled dagger tucked in the single drawer. A peek inside the hanging wardrobe revealed clothing that was well made but not dandyish, serviceable gloves and boots, and two well-worn beaver hats. She found more of his arsenal, too—a locked pistol case, another dagger, and even a rifle, for goodness sake. But nothing to show whether he had a wife, drat it. Then she spotted the opened letters on the writing table. She hesitated, her blood running high. Did she dare? It would be going rather far, wouldn't it? Oh, but that was the reason she should do it. No adventure was without risk. Hurrying over, she peered down at the topmost sheet. The letter from the Navy Board to the American consul gave Major Lucas Winter permission to view the Deptford shipyards. Interesting, but not terribly informative. She thumbed through the others.

More boring correspondence, no wifely letters. Then she reached the bottom sheet, which contained a curious list of names with comments scrawled beside them. Mrs. Dorothy Taylor was annotated with a series of French addresses, a date, and a terse description. Miss Dorothy Jackson had no description, but the French addresses and mention of a brother. Mrs. Dorothy Winthrop—goodness, the man had a penchant for Dorothy—had only a date and one address, along with a reference to her American husband. The last name was underlined twice: Mrs. Dorothy Smith. Amelia froze. Before Dolly had married Papa, her name had been Dolly Dorothy Smith. Amelia swallowed. It meant nothing. There must be a hundred Dorothy Smiths in London alone. But as she scanned the comments beside Mrs. Dorothy Smith, her heart sank: 270 Rue de la Sonne, Paris. May have had companion in Rouen in Nov. 1815? Departed Calais for Plymouth alone on Feb. 1816. Fair-skinned, green eyes, reddish hair, short. Amelia stared blankly at the paper. The description certainly fit Dolly. And Dolly had visited both Paris and Rouen before arriving in Plymouth in 1816, when Papa had swept her off her feet and married her. May have had a companion, of course. She'd had a companion. Her now deceased merchant husband. But why would Major Winter be interested in Dolly? Clearly her name was what triggered his interest, so he probably hadn't known her personally. Turning the sheet over, she found more chilling notes: Dorothy Frier alias Dorothy Smith? Times match when Frier fled US to

escape capture Dolly? Trying to escape capture? By whom? And why? The word alias sounded perfectly criminal. Did Major Winters involvement mean that the American government was part of it, too? Perhaps the Dorothy whom Major Winter sought had been a British spy. But the war was over who cared about spies now? Anyway, it couldnt be timid Dolly, who flinched when people argued, who bent over backward to please Amelia and Papa, who had been eager to marry Papa and give him full use of her fortune when she could easily have married a rich A sick apprehension settled in her belly. What if Dolly had come by her fortune dishonestly? When Amelias widowed father had met Dolly in Plymouth, the two had fallen in love almost instantly. Dolly had been so sad, so delicate, that Amelias big, gruff Papa had wanted nothing more than to protect her. And who wouldnt? Dolly was a sweet-natured darling. But it was Dollys fortune that changed their lives. Dollys money had paid for Mrs. Harriss expensive school. Dollys money had provided Amelias dowry and come out in London. And Dollys money had allowed Papa to bring the estate into good working order after their years of frugality. Amelia searched the papers, hoping for other information, but found none. What now? Dolly had never mentioned the name Frier, but then, shed said little about her past. Could Dolly have had another sort of life? Dolly did enjoy card playing could she have been a gambler? Or the wife of a gambler or a card cheat? No, it was absurd. Dolly would never participate in any sort of criminal scheme. She lacked the temperament for it. She couldnt even deny Amelia the smallest request, and she cried over the deaths of goldfish, for goodness sake. The idea of her doing something criminal was ludicrous. That her recent life mirrored this other Dorothy Smiths was merely a horrible chain of coincidences. But the major wouldnt think so. She could tell he was the sort to be a thorough investigator. Indeed, he might already know about Dolly. It would explain why hed stared at Amelia in the ballroom. So how long before the major traveled down to Devon and spoke to Papa? Or tried to haul Dolly off to America for something she was surely innocent of? Amelia had to warn her, but how? And about what? She didnt know what he was after it might be nothing. She wasnt even sure hed connected Dorothy Smith with Dolly. And upsetting Dolly in her delicate condition was out of the question. Besides, wouldnt it be better to find out why the man was there first? A pop nearby made her jump. It was only a log in the fireplace, but still she had to escape. The room had taken on a distinctly threatening cast, with its boldly displayed sword and hidden weapons and ominous notes hinting at treachery. If the major caught her here, no telling what hed do. She carefully restored his papers to the way shed found them, then hurried out the door. Thank goodness the hall was deserted. She still had to deliver Sarahs letter, a task she now wanted to be rid of as swiftly as possible. As she hastened toward the only remaining bedroom, she retrieved Sarahs letter from her reticule. But she couldnt get it closed again, which was why she didnt notice until too late that someone had ascended the stairs. What the hell are you doing up here? snapped an unfamiliar male voice with a distinctive accent. She nearly had heart failure. Thrusting the letter and her reticule behind her back, she jerked her head up, only to come face-to-face with the one man she should avoid. Major Lucas Winter. Booklist Lady Amelia Plume is bored with Regency London society and tired of the same unappealing gentlemen seeking her fortune. Craving adventure while attending a ball, she agrees to deliver a note to the host's bedroom. While there, she ends up snooping in the room where an American soldier, Lucas Winter, is staying, and discovers papers that may implicate her family in a scandal. When she runs into him, she acts like a silly flirtatious twit, starting a game of cat and mouse to find out about his investigation. Lucas hates the English and cannot wait to complete his mission and leave, until he meets Amelia. He believes she is the key to his success, so he pretends to court her. Then, just as he begins to suspect that her silly manners are an act, her kisses become addictive, complicating his mission. Or is his mission complicating his courtship? Jeffries delivers lively lovers in an entertaining, sensual historical romance. Patty Engelmann Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved