



Wed Him Before You Bed Him (The School for Heiresses Book 6)

By Sabrina Jeffries



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Editorial Review

Review

"A fast-paced, sexy romp...." -- *Library Journal* on *Let Sleeping Rogues Lie*

About the Author

Sabrina Jeffries is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of several Regency-set historical romance series, including the Royal Brotherhood, the School for Heiresses, the Hellions of Halstead Hall, the Duke's Men, and the Sinful Suitors. Whatever time is not spent writing in a coffee-fueled haze is spent traveling with her husband and adult autistic son or indulging in one of her passions: jigsaw puzzles, chocolate, music, and costume parties. With more than eight million books in print in twenty languages, the North Carolina author never regrets tossing a budding career in academics for the sheer joy of writing fun fiction and hopes that one day a book of hers will end up saving the world. She always dreams big.

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Chapter One

Richmond, England November 1824

Charlotte Harris, headmistress and owner of Mrs. Harris's School for Young Ladies, sat at her desk and reread -- twice -- the pleading letter she had composed to Cousin Michael, her anonymous benefactor.

Then she tore it up. What was the point of writing him, when every letter she sent to his solicitor was returned unopened?

She wiped her clammy hands on her skirt. He had to know what desperate straits the school was in -- he knew everything. And until six months ago, he had always told her everything he knew. But after she had pressed him so hard about his identity, he had ended their correspondence. There had not been a word from him since.

The hollow fear that gripped her so often these days made her stomach clench. All right, so perhaps he had good reason to be angry at her. She *had* agreed not to press him about his anonymity.

Still, how could he abandon them after all this time? He had been part of the school's inception fourteen years ago. Indeed, without him there would *be* no school. She would probably still be languishing as a teacher at the school in Chelsea, dreaming of the day when she could open her own institution governed by her own curriculum and her own rules.

Now their idiot neighbor, Mr. Pritchard, was about to sweep it all away. He was rumored to be on the verge of selling Rockhurst, the estate adjoining the school's property, to the owner of a racecourse in Yorkshire. She could just see it -- rough men flocking to bet on the races, spilling onto the school's lawn and accosting her girls.

How could Cousin Michael stand by and let it happen? He owned this property. Did he not care if she was forced out?

She sucked in a breath. That was what hurt the most -- the possibility that he was letting it happen so he could gain higher rents. From the beginning, her rent had been lower than that charged by other landlords in Richmond, and now, with property values in the area soaring, it was ridiculously low. In all these years, her mysterious cousin had never raised it. Why, she wasn't sure. Perhaps because he realized she could only afford a modest increase?

That was especially true now that enrollment had fallen off, fueled by the scandals dogging her pupils in the last year. If rumors about a possible sale of the property next door proved true, it would make matters even worse.

She would have to fight it. When she had thought that Rockhurst was about to be bought months ago, she and her friends had come up with several good ideas for thwarting Mr. Pritchard's plans. They could set up a petition to the licensing board again, or --

"Beg pardon, madam."

She looked up to see her personal footman in the doorway. "Yes, Terence?"

"Lord Kirkwood is here to see you."

A pounding began in her chest. David? *Here?* No, that could not be. What possible reason could he have now that his wife, a former pupil of the school, was dead?

She thrust her shaking hands under the desk to hide them from her too-perceptive servant. "Are you sure it's Lord Kirkwood?"

"The one who married Miss Sarah Linley, right?"

She nodded. "Did he say what his visit concerns?"

"I asked, but he told me it was private." Terence, always protective of her, crossed his arms over his meaty chest. "So I told him that men aren't entitled to privacy when they visit a girls' school."

"Terence!"

His lip twitched. "And he said *he* wasn't in the habit of giving up his privacy for the amusement of impudent footmen."

She gave a rueful laugh. "That does sound like something he would say."

Terence looked perplexed. "You know him, then? I didn't think he had ever been here, not even after he married Miss Linley."

"I know him socially through Lord Norcourt."

That was both an overstatement and a vast understatement of her association with David Masters, the Viscount Kirkwood.

She was fortunate he was even civil to her on the few occasions they met in society. Considering the great

wrong she had committed against him and his family years ago, she would not fault him for giving her the cut direct.

Indeed, she had been afraid of his doing exactly that when she had attended poor Sarah's funeral months ago. But despite knowing how uncomfortable her presence would make him, Charlotte had felt compelled to make an appearance.

She and David had exchanged the barest of greetings, though he had been surprisingly cordial for a man who must despise her. Why, just remembering the summer of the Great Debacle made her cringe.

So what on earth had brought him *here*? She could not imagine a more awkward situation. In all these years, she and David had never been alone together, never spoken of what she had done to him.

"Should I send him packing?" Terence asked.

For a second, she was tempted. But something important indeed must have brought him to visit the woman who had once wronged him so horribly. "No. Just show him in."

After Terence left, she checked her appearance in the mirror to make sure her auburn curls were not too badly askew and her face not too pale. Perhaps it was foolish, but she wanted to look her best before *him*, of all people. She scarcely had time to smooth her skirts and pinch her cheeks before he was ushered into her office, bringing her face-to-face with the man she had nearly married so long ago.

Pasting a smile on her lips, she walked forward with her hand extended. "Lord Kirkwood. How nice to see you again."

His eyes flashed with some hidden emotion. "Charlotte." He took her hand and pressed it briefly before releasing it.

Charlotte. Not *Mrs. Harris*, but *Charlotte*, spoken in the husky tone that had made her heart flip over when she was eighteen and he nearly twenty.

No, she must not think of that. Those days were gone forever, lost in the pages of their pasts. Time and her own mistakes, as well as his, had changed them both irrevocably.

Nothing proved that more than the dusting of gray at his temples, the lines of care worn into his brow. At thirtyseven, David was still uncommonly handsome, with the aggressively masculine features of a man who had always commanded attention, from the sharp blade of his nose to the cleft in his chin. His coloring reminded her of the forest -- his eyes a leafy green and his thick, wavy hair the dark brown of walnuts and bark and rich tilled earth.

And his body...

She turned sharply and hurried behind her desk, afraid she might blush. At eighteen, she had noticed his body in the vague way of a virgin unfamiliar with sensual delights. But now, as a widow of some years, she noticed it with an awareness bordering on pain.

Since Sarah had been dead for six months now, he wore half-mourning, with some white blended in with his black. Ebony trousers encased the lean hips and muscular thighs of a man who kept himself fit, while his finely tailored morning coat of jet black saxony showed off his broad shoulders. And she could well imagine those large gloved hands, one of which gripped the handle of a leather satchel, playing over a woman's body with the surety of experience...

Heavens, she had to stop this. Terence was eyeing her from the door with rank curiosity, obviously hanging about to make sure David did not harm her.

She frowned at him. "Thank you, Terence. You may go."

With a grunt the man left.

"Rather a rough sort for a footman," David said dryly.

"He used to be a pugilist."

"Why on earth would you hire a boxer as a lady's footman?"

Bristling at the criticism, she said, "Because his skills are more useful to a woman going about town alone than any niceties of behavior." She forced a smile. "But I'm sure you didn't come here to discuss my servants, Lord Kirkwood."

Gesturing to the chair before the desk, she took her own seat, needing something massive between them to keep her mind from wandering to her unwelcome attraction to a man who surely loathed her.

Yet he did not *look* as if he loathed her. He watched her steadily as he sat down with the easy motion of a man very comfortable in his surroundings. "Actually, I've come bearing good news."

Good news? From *him*? "And what might that be?"

"In going through Sarah's things recently, I discovered a handwritten codicil to her will. In it, she left a substantial sum of money to your school."

Had she heard him right? "I don't understand."

"She bequeathed some of her fortune to the school."

"Your wife, Sarah. Bequeathed me money."

"Not you," he corrected with a lift of his eyebrow. "The school."

"Yes, of course, the school. But..." She thought of Sarah's snide remarks, the way the woman had behaved at the last tea she'd attended, the seeming contempt Sarah had always shown her fellow pupils. "But why?"

He shrugged. "She always admired you and thought fondly of her days here."

"Your *wife*, Sarah, thought fondly of her days here."

"I believe we've already established that the woman under discussion is my late wife, Sarah," he said dryly.

No doubt he found her response insulting. "Forgive me. It's just that...she never seemed to...that is..."

"I know Sarah could be...difficult. But I believe she secretly held you and the school in high esteem."

Charlotte muttered, "That was a secret buried so deep as to be invisible." Then she groaned. "I'm sorry. That was rude. It is just such a shock to think that Sarah had any particular regard for me *or* the school."

"Well, the truth of the matter lies in the size of her bequest." He leveled her with a gaze of dark intent. "It's

thirty thousand pounds."

Charlotte sucked in a breath. "Oh my word. Are you sure?"

A faint smile touched his lips. "I wouldn't be here if I weren't." He removed a sheaf of papers from his satchel and placed them before her. "I took the liberty of having our family solicitor draw up a legal document tha...

Users Review

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Salina Juarez:

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