

Ravishing Minerva

The Marriage Broker – Book Three

By

Viola Morne

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*Little girls, this seems to say,
Never stop upon your way,
Never trust a stranger-friend;
No one knows how it will end.
As you're pretty so be wise;
Wolves may lurk in every guise.
Handsome they may be, and kind,
Gay, and charming — never mind!
Now, as then, 'tis simple truth —
Sweetest tongue has sharpest tooth!*

- Charles Perrault

Little Red Riding Hood

Table of Contents:

CHAPTER ONE	6
CHAPTER TWO	20
CHAPTER THREE	32
CHAPTER FOUR.....	47
CHAPTER FIVE	59
CHAPTER SIX.....	72
CHAPTER SEVEN	86
CHAPTER EIGHT	101
EPILOGUE	119
Viola Morne	125
EBook Offer.....	126
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	127
Blushing Books.....	128

CHAPTER ONE

London, 1812

Minerva murmured and her hands clenched in her sleep as the dream began. It was always the same. The coach she rode in bumped along a rough road. The evening light beyond the windows was dim and cool. The road wound through a wood, growing ever narrower until it ended abruptly. Minerva climbed down from the coach to find herself in a small clearing. It was utterly still—no call of bird or insect. A path beckoned from beyond the line of trees.

She was alone, the intrepid Mrs. Minerva Pringle, marriage broker and agent for the Crown. There wasn't even a coachman, let alone any horses. A fact that she accepted calmly, as one does in dreams. The heft of her pistol tucked in a pocket was her only reassurance. She didn't want to enter the forest, but she must. Minerva took a deep breath and stepped onto the path.

It was like walking straight into a fairy tale. The path twisted through stands of pine and birch. Wildflowers bloomed along a winding stream, which splashed silently over mossy rocks. It was darker in the forest than on the road. Minerva shivered as a sudden cold breeze lifted a lock of her red hair and tossed it into the air like a pennant. The air thickened and she knew that she was not alone.

A gentleman stepped from the shadows of a large tree. He doffed his tall hat and bowed. He was striking, with dark hair tumbling over his shoulders and whiskers framing a smiling red mouth with very large teeth.

"All alone, little girl?"

His voice was deep and it made her shudder. Minerva straightened her shoulders. Her mother had taught her never to speak to strangers. She sniffed and walked past him. But he was suddenly in front of her again.

"Won't you take a moment to speak to me? I'm quite harmless."

And then he smiled again, a smile that stretched too wide along jaws that looked too long.

"I'm not a little girl," she said coldly and walked on. The path turned sharply and there he was again.

"You'll have to speak to me some time, Annabel. That's the way the story goes."

"My name is Minerva."

"Little liar." The gentleman's voice dropped provocatively. "You were called Annabel when you lived in *my* woods."

A shudder passed over her. "Annabel is dead. I am Mrs. Pringle now."

"Liars get punished, little girl." He leaned closer. "Would you like to know how?"

"No, get out of my way. My grandmother is waiting for me."

He moved swiftly, grabbing her arm. "Come with me, my dear. We have a score to settle." He sat down on a log and pulled Minerva over his lap, as if he had done it a thousand times before. "You know the price of disobedience." He pulled up her skirts. She was naked beneath them and so scared.

"Stop it."

Was that *her* voice, so small and so vulnerable?

"You spoke to me, though you shouldn't have. You made your choice."

He spanked her hard with one huge hand that covered both cheeks with a single slap.

Minerva kicked out, struggling to escape.

The gentleman only laughed, soft and deep. "Ah, ah, ah. None of that. Take your punishment like a *good little girl*."

Those three words acted like a spell, freezing her in a humiliating position over the gentleman's lap. He spanked her thoroughly, until her bottom bloomed red and sore, and a tear plopped onto the forest floor.

"That's what I like to see, my love. I like to see your tears."

The hand that punished her slipped between her legs, tracing her entrance with one long finger that pushed inside her. Minerva gasped.

"You like that, little girl. You always did."

He added another finger, thrusting insistently, without stopping. His thumb found the little nub above her passage and strummed it until she climaxed in a haze of pain and pleasure. Then the gentleman pushed her to her knees and unbuttoned the fall of his breeches. His member sprung free—dusky red, slick with moisture, and framed in a nest of dark curls.

"Suck me, Annabel. You're so good at it."

She bent to take him in her mouth. He was so large that he barely fit between her lips. She drew her tongue across the tip of his phallus and he moaned. It made her feel powerful to

hold him like this, between her teeth.

"Minerva."

She ignored the voice and started to suck, his essence bathing her chin.

"Minerva, wake up!"

A hand shook her shoulder. Minerva gasped and her eyes flew open. Her maid, Polly, stared down at her.

"Wake up, now."

Minerva lay safe in her bed as Polly stood over her with the tea tray. "Your first appointment will be here in half an hour. You told me to wake you."

Minerva pulled herself back to the present. It had seemed so real. "Thank you, Polly."

The dream receded as Minerva sipped her tea and dressed and did her hair. By the time she was ready, it had faded away and Annabel was tucked away in the corner of her mind where she had lived for the past ten years. Minerva walked down the stairs to her office. She sat at her desk overlooking Russell Square and pulled a file from the drawer. She opened it and read her notes, while the past diminished along with the dream. Mrs. Pringle was ready for her next client.

#

"Lady Treloar!" Minerva stood to take the hand of the small brown-haired woman, fashionably dressed in a fawn pelisse. "It has been far too long. How are you and your husband?"

Freya, Lady Treloar, bustled into the office and embraced Minerva before dropping into a chair by the fire. The former Mrs. Carr was a client who had contracted an advantageous marriage with a gentleman in Cornwall.

"We are well, Mrs. Pringle. And, I am pleased to report, the estate is flourishing."

Minerva smiled. "Under your diligent care, I have no doubt."

"Oh, I am always busy, that is a certainty. My husband has re-opened several of the old tin mines, in partnership with a childhood friend. We also bought the hotel in town and have refurbished it as a seaside resort. Business is brisk, which has led to increased commerce in the village, new shops opening, etcetera."

Minerva's gaze softened. "And you are content."

Freya blushed. "More than I ever thought possible. Not that my husband can't be a handful...but he makes me very happy."

"I'm always pleased to hear of a satisfied client, of course. Now, how can I help you?"

"I can't have simply dropped in for a cup of tea?"

Minerva raised a brow. "It's possible, of course, but you always have some scheme in mind, my lady. What is it today?"

"Please, call me Freya. I feel that we have become friends after all our adventures."

"Of course, and I am Minerva."

Freya smiled as she pulled off her gloves. "It's my sister, Hestia. She has spent her whole life caring for my parents and all my brothers and sisters. I want her to have a chance at a real life."

"I see. Does she wish to marry?"

"She says not. But I am convinced she wants to meet a man, to fall in love...to experience everything she has denied herself."

"So, a love affair?"

Freya giggled. "You've obviously never met my sister! She is very strait-laced, if not prim. But a darling all the same, with the warmest, kindest heart in England. So it must be a husband and not a lover. But not, perhaps, a husband who is in need of an heir. Hestia has had a surfeit of child care."

Minerva strummed her fingers on the desk. "So, perhaps an older gentleman, with a family already established. Or a younger son, in need of a companionship, who wishes to establish a household, but not necessarily a family. You mentioned your cousin, Mr. Ericson, when we first met. Perhaps an academic gentleman like Mr. Ericson might suit your sister."

Freya laughed. "My goodness, a man like Thor would drive Hestia to distraction. She is a very practical woman. She could never see the sense in Thor haring all over Europe and Africa in search of antiquities. Besides, it appears that my poor cousin will never return to Egypt. He has not been able to secure funding for his expedition."

"What a pity." Minerva re-arranged one of her folders. "Mr. Ericson has been on many adventures?"

"Heavens, yes. Thor is never happier than when he is mucking about on foreign soil littered with broken buildings and, I dare say, old bones."

"Still, it must take a great deal of planning and skill to be an archaeologist. And, I imagine, a high degree of physical prowess."

Freya clapped her hands together. "You have described Thor perfectly. He is very

resourceful. If only he could meet someone with money. He would be off to the desert in a trice."

"He sounds ideal," Minerva murmured.

"I don't know about that, but I am very fond of him. Now, as to Hestia, I believe she requires a man of good sense—and property, of course. I have often thought..."

"Yes?"

"It's just that Hestia has been a virtual mother since she was seven years old. She needs someone who will take care of her for a change. A man who will allow her the opportunities she never had the chance to experience as a young girl."

"So, an indulgent older man, possibly a little fatherly?"

Freya blushed. "Not too old and not too fatherly. But a man who possesses a natural authority, who will insist that Hestia takes the time she needs for herself."

An odd silence fell between the two women.

"You believe your sister needs a man who will not hesitate to be...the master of the house."

"I know I needed such a man, though I didn't realize it before I met my husband."

"A man, who though kind and fair, would take his wife in hand if needed?"

"Yes, that's it. A firm hand, if needed. But he couldn't be cruel or capricious."

"I believe I understand your requirements."

"Do you..." Freya cleared her throat. "That is, have you ever known a man like that?"

Minerva closed her eyes against the bolt of pain that shot through her like a strike of lightning. "Once I thought I did. He was wealthy and masterful, and, for some reason, he wanted the foolish, dreamy girl that I was. We were married when I was but fifteen years of age."

"Minerva, I'm sorry. How did he die?"

"As far as I know, he still lives. I left him when I was seventeen. He was, unfortunately, both cruel and capricious."

Freya's voice dropped. "Did he hurt you?"

Minerva's hand clenched on a file folder. "More than I thought possible. I might have died, but for Oliver. He saved me and we boarded ship for London where we have been ever since."

Freya's fingers touched hers gently. "Oliver is a most remarkable man."

Minerva bit her lip to conceal its tremble. "He is everything to me. I just don't let him know it."

"Are you in love with him?"

"With Oliver? Gracious, no." Minerva regained her composure. "He is my foster brother. We grew up together in Canada. I could never think of him in that way."

"He is a native?"

"His mother was an Algonquian Indian and his father was French. We were both adopted as children by a Mohawk tribe."

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to pry."

"Of course not. It is simply a story I don't share with many people."

"Then, I am honored by your confidences and I shall keep them."

"Thank you, my dear." Minerva shuffled her papers together. "Now, as to your sister. I shall make some inquiries. How long are you in town?"

"Only another week or so. Jago loathes London."

"I shall contact you in a few days, then."

"Thank you, Minerva."

"It is my pleasure, Freya. Let me walk you out."

Once Lady Treloar had left, Minerva sat down at the desk and stared out the window at the square below. Why did she recall her past so vividly these days, when she had scarcely thought of it in ten years? Even her dreams troubled her, jumbled as they were with odd references to the fairy tales she had devoured as a child. What was so different now that these images returned so persistently to taunt her?

Enough of this useless speculation. She had tasks aplenty to deal with. What was the name of that fellow back in Cornwall, the friend of Viscount Treloar? He seemed a masterful fellow. Would Hestia like him? Minerva settled her spectacles on her nose and drew a file folder towards her.

#

Oliver caught a glimpse of Lady Treloar's neat figure walking down the front steps from his post by the library window. She looked happy. Thankfully, everything had worked out for her, though it had been a near thing. Minerva had been a shade ruthless about putting the little widow in danger in order to catch the Englishman smuggling guns to the French. At least, it had

been a bit of action. Life in London palled after a while. He felt restless, the way he always did when he had been too long in the city.

The last time he had felt this way, he and Minerva had spent a week in Scotland. Oliver had stalked deer with his bow and arrow while Minerva had finally achieved a few days of rest at their lodgings. They had both returned to the city feeling happier. Oliver wished life could always be like that—just the two of them. But Minerva needed her crusade against the forces of Napoleon too much to let it go. He understood why. Her marriage had taken so much away from her. Bruised in body and spirit, she had arrived in London looking for a cause and she had found it in service to the British Crown. Now they were agents working for Sir Laurence Gaines. Minerva seemed happy enough, except for those times when she retreated from him, into a past that still had a hold on her.

Minerva had promised that some day they would go home again. Though Oliver didn't doubt her good intentions, it seemed less likely by the day as Minerva became more entrenched in her secrets and assignments. He had finally told her not to promise what she couldn't deliver and the subject had been shelved. Oliver couldn't help longing for the wild sweet air of Canada and the silence of the bush, but he could never leave Minerva—could he?

Oliver's memory of his birth mother consisted of only a few impressions—her long, dark braids falling over his face as she brushed his hair, the scent of pine and smoke, and her soft voice whispering endearments in the language of her people. And that was all. His parents left him in the care of friends while they traveled west in search of furs. His mother served as his father's guide and she was wise in the ways of the wild.

How old he was when they died, he didn't know. One year they simply did not return, and Oliver ran away into the woods. He never came back. Instead, Oliver wandered in the bush for many months, living off the land and seeing no one, until he became as feral as the wolf cubs he played with. He stayed with the wolves in their den one winter, living off scraps the animals left behind, drinking melted snow, surviving the cold only because of the warmth of their rough coats as they huddled together during the long dark months.

In the spring, Oliver wandered away. The pups were older now and fiercer, and he knew he could not stay with them. He fished from the fast running streams and ate wild berries. At last he wandered into the territory of the *Kanien'kehá: ka*, the People of the Flint. The English called them Mohawk. He spied on a hunting party, in awe of their speed and strength, their sharp

blades, and the marvelous instrument that gleamed and barked. He stayed closed to them for days, stealing food from their camp while they slept. They were like him and he was drawn to them, wanting to know more.

One day Oliver fell asleep under a blueberry bush, lulled into slumber by the warm summer air. He awoke with a shriek, dangling over the water, while a tall laughing man held him by his ankles.

"We have found our thief."

They dunked him in the stream, scrubbing away the dirt and grime of years while he shrieked and fought. Afterward, while Oliver shivered on the bank, the man, who was named Shawatis, threw him a deerskin tunic that hung to his knees, which made them all laugh again.

Shawatis, who would become his foster father, brought him back to the long house. Minerva was waiting outside and the setting sun had seemed to set her hair alight in a fiery nimbus. He had never seen hair of that color before. Oliver thought then that she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Twenty years later, that hadn't changed.

#

The Black Dog Inn, Somewhere in Bloody Kent, October 27, 1812

My dearest Freya,

I trust that all is well with you and Lord Treloar. I had tea with your family yesterday and they are all very pleased for you—especially Hestia.

By the time you read this, I will have embarked on a new enterprise. A fortnight ago, I received an extraordinary communication from a Mrs. Minerva Pringle. She is, apparently, one of the most successful marriage brokers in London. But you know this, because she told me you were her client. I need know nothing further about that!

I do hold you to blame for mentioning me to that formidable woman. She has embroiled me in an attempt to rescue a young widow who has been committed to a private asylum for lunatics. Yet, Mrs. Pringle informs me, the lady in question is quite sane. It appears that she was placed in the asylum by her brother-in-law, in an attempt to gain her fortune.

Will you be shocked to learn that I plan to benefit instead from that same fortune? Mrs. Pringle has brokered an agreement between the widow and me, whereby I will rescue her from the Elysium Towers and provide her with the protection of my name, in return for her agreeing to finance my next expedition to Egypt.

I hope you will not be disgusted by my decision. I am not romantic, as you know. Indeed, I never planned to marry. But I have met the lady and she is the bravest little soul that I have ever encountered. I could no more leave her to rot in that tower, than I could kick a dog in the street.

So there you have it. Call me ambitious or label me as mad as any other inmate in the asylum, but I am committed to the enterprise. Should I fail, I fear that incarceration and ruin will be my fate. If this should occur, I entreat you to write to my father and give him my love and my apologies. If I were to write to him myself, I might abandon the greatest adventure of my life—and I cannot forsake her.

Affectionately,

Your cousin,

Thor Ericson

#

Minerva spread jam on her toast while she read her post. It was a lovely moment of solitude and tranquility. Life in general tended towards the chaotic around the marriage brokerage, not counting the other secret endeavors she and Oliver were involved in.

"Any news?"

She jumped in her seat.

The deep voice came from a seat at the end of the table. Oliver had entered the room without a sound—again.

"Stop doing that!"

Oliver grinned and poured himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the table. Breakfasts in Russell Square were rather informal. One never knew when a desperate client or an agent on the run might show up for sausages and kippers, rather than the insipid buttered toasts that most people considered breakfast. They both knew what it was like to be hungry and there was always plenty of food in the house.

"I've had a visit from Lady Treloar."

Oliver smiled at her over his cup of coffee. He had a fondness for her ladyship.

"How is Freya?"

"Flourishing, as usual. She is a woman with spirit and common sense." Minerva tapped a long finger on the letter. "She came to see me concerning her elder sister, Hestia. Now that Freya

can support her family, she wants Hestia to find her own happiness."

"You mean she wants to find her sister a husband."

"The catch is she doesn't want Hestia to know. Apparently the sister has no intention of marriage."

"And I suppose the two of you can't just leave things alone, to take their natural course."

"Oliver, what a naïve question!" Minerva's eyes twinkled. "Of course not. In any case, Freya just wants to give her sister a chance. Whatever Hestia decides to do is ultimately up to her."

Oliver raised a skeptical brow, but a spark of appreciation lit in his beautiful dark eyes.

"I know how you enjoy a devious woman, Oliver."

He made no further comment, retiring behind the newspaper.

Minerva picked up the last of her toast just as the dining room door slammed open. She winced. Polly clomped into the dining room, loudly, just like she did everything else.

"You lot done then? I have to clean up so Cook can get started on lunch." She began piling the crockery on a tray.

"Polly, I am not finished my coffee." Minerva pulled her cup from Polly's grasp.

Oliver's shoulders shook behind the paper.

Minerva gulped the last of her coffee and swept from the room. Honestly, the girl would never learn to be a proper servant. She glanced back as Polly chatted to Oliver, while he leisurely finished his own breakfast. Typical. She swept up the stairs to her office on the first floor. Here, at least, was order and industry. Neat piles of file folders lay stacked on the desk; her pen and inkwell were set at a perfect angle to her blotting paper.

"Any word from Ericson?"

Minerva swore under her breath. Oliver was suddenly in his usual chair by the fire, smirking.

She leaned back in her chair. "None. But we aren't likely to hear anything either way. If he is arrested, we may have to bail him out. If he succeeds in rescuing Lady Saxon from the Elysium Towers, they will appear at the safe house in Chelsea. When is he due?"

Oliver glanced out the window. "He should be here within the hour." He stood up in the fluid motion only he possessed. "I'm headed to Chelsea. I'll let you know if he shows up." He paused. "Do you think he'll do it?"

Minerva frowned, tapping her fingers on the desktop. "Mr. Ericson seems competent enough. It will all depend on the strength of his resolve, I imagine. We must hope for the best."

"Don't I always?" Oliver murmured as he slid from the room.

Really, optimism was not among Oliver's best qualities. But loyalty, steadfastness, and fierce courage were. Those qualities and the man who bore them had made all the difference in her life. Without Oliver, she would have been dead, ten years gone. Minerva shivered and picked up her pen. Work was always the best remedy for bad memories.

#

Later that afternoon, Minerva leaned back in the carriage as it drove her toward London, her mind racing. Mr. Ericson's rescue attempt had been successful and her new client, Lady Saxon, was safely installed inside the small house in Chelsea under Oliver's watchful eye. He had seemed quite taken with Lady Saxon and she was certainly beautiful enough to merit his attention. Thankfully, the fragile damsel-in-distress wasn't Oliver's type. Minerva recalled the gleam of appreciation in Oliver's dark gaze. Was she?

Not that Oliver's affairs were any of her business. Oliver's handsome face, combined with the exotic attraction of his mixed blood, drew the attention of many society women at the various assemblies and parties she dragged him to. Of course, a woman would have to be blind not to notice the width of his shoulders or the way his dark hair rippled down his back. Goodness, what was she thinking? This was Oliver, for goodness sake. She had known him since he ran around in a loincloth as a skinny child in the Mohawk village where they had both been raised. He was her foster brother!

At any rate, Lady Saxon was now betrothed to Minerva's client, Thor Ericson. It was the lady's recollections of her incarceration in the asylum called the Elysium Towers that had captured Minerva's attention. Lady Saxon claimed she had been approached by a gentleman in the gardens who gave her a note containing Minerva's name, with the recommendation that she contact Minerva for help. Most unusual.

"It was a little odd, " Lady Saxon had recounted, her violet eyes full of shadows. "I did not receive any visitors, except for Roger, my husband's brother. But one day, about a month ago, I was approached by a strange man while I walked in the gardens. I was permitted to do so, under escort, in fine weather. I don't know how he gained access to the Towers, but he gave me a slip of paper with your name, Mrs. Pringle, and your direction inscribed on it. He told me you

were a marriage broker and that you might be in a position to help me. I was so surprised I took the paper from him. When I looked up, he was gone. I don't know who he was or why he wanted to help me. The warder must have known him because he didn't raise the alarm. It was quite strange.

I didn't write at once. I suspected it might be a trap, set by Mrs. Scrope, the head wardress, to catch me out misbehaving so that she could punish me again. I finally summoned the courage to contact you, and one day Mr. Ericson showed up with a length of rope and his crazy plan for setting me free." Lady Saxon shook her head. "I still can't believe it worked."

Minerva's brow crinkled. "Yes, we are all happy about that. Can you describe the man?"

"He was tall and slim, very polished in appearance. He was dark, with a penetrating gaze. That is all I recall, I'm afraid."

Lady Saxon's description of the gentleman was troubling—a tall dark man with a penetrating gaze. It couldn't be Dominic. Her husband was still in Canada, when last Minerva had received word of him. Of course, he could have returned to England. No. Why would he be at the Elysium Towers, let alone speaking with her client?

After all, there must be many men of that description in London. It could almost apply to Oliver himself, though he could never be characterized as slim. Oliver was built like a warrior, with a broad chest and thickly muscled arms. She could only hope he never asked Lady Saxon about her visitor.

It had been a near thing all those years ago. Oliver had wanted to track Dominic down and kill him. Her fear of discovery and the extent of her injuries had prevented him. She had wanted only to leave, and Oliver had made it possible.

Minerva hadn't wanted Dominic dead, even after what he had done, and she would never put Oliver at risk. It was best to simply flee and put her marriage behind her.

The carriage slowed as it reached Russell Square. The narrow house, so long her sanctuary, brought Minerva no comfort this night. The cook would be at her sister's and Polly had an outing planned with her gentleman friend. She would be alone.

Minerva let herself into the hallway. It felt cold and, for the first time, unwelcoming. If only Oliver was here. She would serve the dinner Cook always left in the oven, and they would drink wine and talk about the events of the day.

But Lady Saxon's safety was paramount and, for that, Oliver was indispensable. He could

make killing an art when he chose to. If Roger Saxon made a move against her client, Oliver would simply take care of it. Minerva frowned, considering. It wouldn't be the worst outcome. Saxon would be dead, and Lady Saxon would be free to live her life with her fortune relatively intact.

Still, such action should only be considered as a last resort. She would not stoop to French methods—unless she had to.

#

A hot bath did little to calm Minerva's spirits. She felt unsettled and on edge, as if her skin was stretched too tightly over her bones. She went to her study and checked her calendar. She could fit in an appointment by the end of the week. Minerva drew a fresh sheet of paper towards her and sent off a note to a certain establishment in King Street. Oliver need never know. He would never understand what she needed and she could never tell him.

The only time Oliver had ever touched her was when she had foolishly put her own life in danger. It was a case involving a woman, whose husband beat her regularly. Minerva knew it was her Achilles' heel, but not every mistreated woman in London had an Oliver to protect her. She had gone after the culprit when Oliver was out of town, outstripping the other agents assigned to protect her during the pursuit—something Oliver had strictly forbidden her to do. Oh, she ran the marriage brokerage and planned their operations for the most part, but when it came to security, Oliver's voice was always the deciding vote. He thought like a predator. It was Oliver with his fine mathematical brain that could plot contingencies and make decisions on the turn of a coin. Combined with his physical prowess and agility, it made him a powerful ally—or foe.

It had been a near thing. Minerva had rescued the wife and then chased the husband down to London Bridge. In the struggle, he had gone over the side of the bridge, nearly taking Minerva with him. Oliver, arriving back in town in the nick of time, had tracked her down and saved her life, while the culprit plummeted to his death in the Thames. Oliver had been so angry with her. Never had she seen him in such a towering rage. He brought her home to Russell Square and dressed her down with all the precision of a drill sergeant in the British Army.

"I told you not to take unnecessary chances. I told you to wait for me. I told you not to risk your life. And you flagrantly flouted all my instructions. You were criminally foolish and you nearly died."

Minerva's mouth dropped open in sheer shock. Oliver had never spoken to her like that

before or since.

"I'm sorry, Oliver," she whispered.

Oliver poked her shoulder with his finger. "I don't believe you. You have no thought for your safety—or for my happiness. I cannot trust you."

"What? Of course you can trust me. I was a little reckless, I admit. But, Oliver, your happiness is of paramount importance. It always has been."

Oliver crossed his arms over his broad chest. "How happy do you think I would be if you had ended up in the river tonight? If you don't care what happens to you, at least care that I do."

He was right. Minerva had been carried away by the thrill of the chase. Since leaving her husband, she had been careless of her own safety on more than one occasion, but never like this. Did she have a death wish?

"Oliver..."

He cut her off. "I have had enough, Minerva."

And then he picked her up as if she weighed nothing and sat down by the fire, pulling her over his knee. Oh, no, this wasn't going to happen.

Minerva fought back, kicking and wiggling, but Oliver used his superior size and strength to hold her down down easily. He pulled up her dress, leaving her petticoat in place, and smacked her, hard, on both cheeks. She yelped in outrage.

"Stop! I won't permit you..."

"Keep quiet," Oliver growled and proceeded to spank her with a firm stroke until her bottom glowed beneath his hand. Tears burned in her eyes, but she wouldn't let them fall. And then she gave in, realizing that Oliver was going to do this, regardless. Because she needed it.

He stopped spanking her as soon as she grew pliant over his lap and helped her up. Then he kissed her forehead and sent her off to bed. And the intrepid Minerva Pringle, agent for the Crown, went meekly up the stairs and went to bed without another word of protest.

They never spoke of it again, but Minerva had learned her lesson and was never so careless of her safety again. She knew that Oliver would always be there to protect her, even from herself. Wouldn't he?