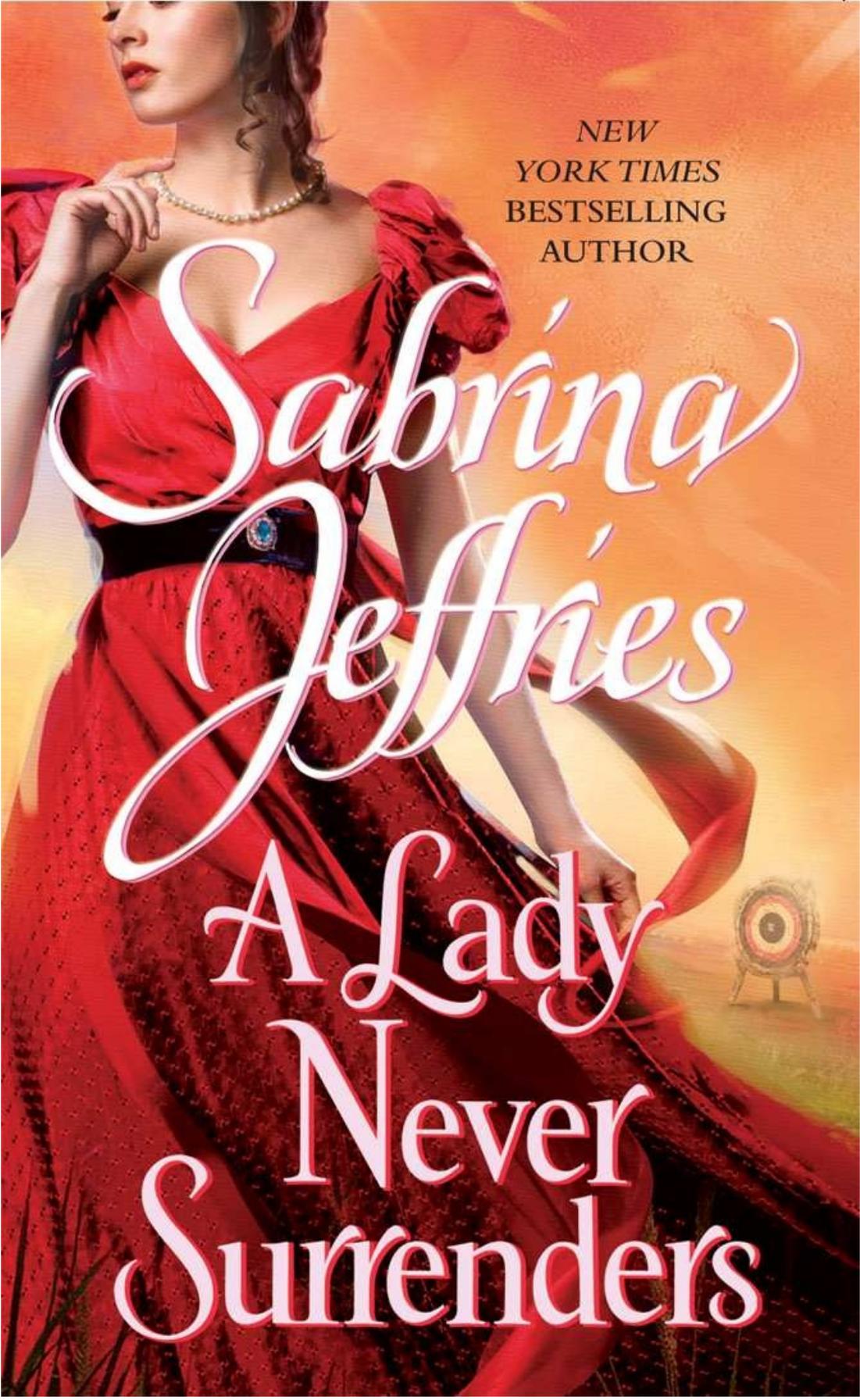


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YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

Sabrina
Jeffries
A Lady
Never
Surrenders



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Teaser

*To my dear sister, Jamie McCalebb, who was part
of the inspiration for Celia—you're the best sister
a woman could have!*

*To my mom, Gladys Martin, who fled a hurricane
and ended up putting in line edits on my book!
Thanks, Mom, you're the best.*

*And to Becky Timblin, for all the things you do.
Thanks for everything!*

Acknowledgment

Much thanks goes to Wagner Dias da Silva, for his invaluable input concerning the Italian and Portuguese phrases in the book. It was greatly appreciated!

Dear Readers,

Thank heavens Celia has taken seriously my demand that she marry. She has gathered several gentlemen here for a house party so she can make her choice.

Only one thing worries me—Jackson Pinter. The Bow Street Runner is showing a most inappropriate interest in her. I do not like it. He is apparently the bastard son of some nobleman who never claimed him, so he needs to marry well in order to further his ambition to be Chief Magistrate. That means he might consider her a very good choice for a wife.

It would not bother me if I did not suspect that she, too, harbors a secret interest in the man. I have caught them alone together on more than one occasion, and sometimes she gazes on him with such alarming evidence of a budding infatuation. . . .

My other grandchildren think I should not interfere. Even my dear Isaac (yes, I have become quite friendly with that audacious cavalry general) says I meddle in matters beyond my ken. But she is so young and naïve! I cannot stand by and do nothing if his interest is merely in her rank and fortune. I did that once with her mother; I will not do it again.

Isaac, the old fool, insists that Mr. Pinter's fascination for her is decidedly *not* mercenary. He claims that the man follows her with his eyes every time they are near each other. While I concede that Mr. Pinter does seem rather . . . intrigued by her, that does not necessarily mean that he is in love with her. He can desire her money *and* her body without caring a whit about *her*.

Meanwhile, she has a duke, an earl, and a viscount sniffing at her heels, none of whom needs her money. She could be a duchess, my Celia! Why should she settle for a mere Runner, even if he *is* working hard to solve the murders of her parents? Can you blame me for wanting something more for her?

Sincerely,
Hetty Plumtree

Prologue

Halstead Hall
1806

Celia roused to the sound of grown-ups whispering in the nursery. The tickle in her throat made her want to cough. But if she did, the grown-ups would tell Nurse to put more nasty stuff on her chest, and Celia hated that. Nurse called it a mustard plaster. It was greasy and yellow, and it smelled bad.

The whispers got louder until they were right behind her. She lay still. Was it Mama and Nurse? Either one would put the mustard plaster on her chest. She kept her eyes shut so they would leave her be.

“We can meet at the hunting lodge,” whispered one voice.

“Shh, she might hear you,” whispered the other.

“Don’t be absurd. She’s asleep. And anyway, she’s only four. She won’t understand.”

Celia frowned. She was *almost* five. And she did too understand. Lots and lots. Like how she had two grandmamas—Nonna Lucia in heaven and Gran in London—and how she had to have stuff on her chest whenever she had a cough, and how she was the littlest of all the Sharpes. Papa called her Elf. He said she had pointy ears, but she didn’t. She always told him that, and he just laughed.

“Everyone will be at the picnic,” the second voice went on. “If you plead a headache and don’t go, and I slip away in the hubbub, we could have an hour or two to ourselves before dinner.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Come now, you know you want to, *mia dolce bellezza*.”

Mia dolce bellezza? Papa called Mama that. He said it meant “my sweet beauty.”

Her heart leapt. Papa was here! Whenever he came to the nursery, he told them about Nonna Lucia, his mama, and spoke funny words in ’talian. She wasn’t sure what ’talian was, but Papa talked it when he told stories about Nonna Lucia.

So the other person must be Mama. Which meant she still had to lie quiet to avoid the mustard plaster.

“Don’t call me that. I hate it.”

Why did Mama say that? Had Papa made her angry again? He made her angry a *lot*. Gran said it was on account of his “hoses.” One time Celia asked Nurse what a hose was, and Nurse paddled her and told her that was a bad word. Then why did Papa have them?

Celia squinted one eye open to see if Mama was frowning, but Mama and Papa were behind her, and she would have to turn over to see them. Then they’d know she was awake.

“Sorry, darling,” Papa whispered. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Promise you’ll meet

me.”

There was a long sigh. “I can’t. I don’t want us to be caught.”

Caught doing what? Were Mama and Papa doing something naughty?

“Neither do I,” Papa whispered. “But now is not the time for us to attempt any sort of —”

“I know. But I loathe how she looks at me. I think she knows.”

“You’re imagining things. She knows nothing. She doesn’t want to know.”

“Someone’s coming. Quick—out the other door.”

Why would Mama and Papa care if someone was coming?

Celia lifted her head to peek at them, but she couldn’t see the main door. Then the servant’s door opened, and she dropped her head back down and pretended to be sleeping.

It was hard, though. The tickle in her throat was really bad. She tried to resist, but finally it had to come out.

Nurse came up to the bed. “Still got that nasty cough, do you, dearie?”

Celia squeezed her eyes shut really hard, but that must have given her away, for Nurse turned her onto her back and started unbuttoning her nightdress.

“It’s going away,” Celia protested.

“And it will go away quicker with the mustard plaster,” Nurse said.

“I don’t *like* the mustard plaster,” Celia complained.

“I know, dearie. But you want the cough to go away, don’t you?”

Celia frowned. “I guess.”

Nurse clucked at her, then got a glass and poured something from a bottle into it. “Here, this will help.”

She gave it to Celia to drink. It tasted odd, but she was thirsty, so she drank it as Nurse set about preparing the mustard plaster.

By the time Nurse started patting it on, Celia felt *so* sleepy. Her eyelids were so heavy she forgot about the bad-smelling stuff on her chest.

She slept a long time. When she woke again Nurse gave her gruel but said the mustard plaster could wait until night. Then she gave Celia more of that odd drink, and Celia got sleepy again. The next time she awoke, it was dark.

Lying there confused, she listened to her older sister Minerva and her older brother Gabe fight over who got the last pear tart. She wouldn’t mind a pear tart; she was hungry.

Nurse came in again, with two men: Gabe’s tutor, Mr. Virgil, and Tom, Celia’s favorite footman. “Minerva,” Nurse ordered, “you and Gabe go down to the study with Tom. Your grandmother wants to speak to you.”

After they left, Celia lay there, not sure what to do. If Minerva and Gabe were getting treats from Gran, she wanted some, but if Nurse meant to give her another mustard plaster . . .

She’d better keep quiet.

“You’re not going to wake the girl?” Mr. Virgil asked Nurse.

“It’s better if she sleeps. She has to hear it eventually, and the little dear won’t understand. How can I tell her that her parents are gone? It’s too awful.”

Gone? Like when they went off to London and left her and Minerva and Gabe at Halstead Hall?

“And for her ladyship to shoot his lordship?” Nurse went on. “It ain’t right.”

Papa went out shooting birds with guests sometimes. Her older brother Jarret told them all about it. The birds fell to the ground, and the dogs picked them up. And they never flew again. But Mama wouldn’t shoot Papa. Must be another “ladyship.” There were lots of them here for the house party.

“It is upsetting,” Mr. Virgil said.

“And we both know her ladyship didn’t mistake him for an intruder. She probably shot him because she was angry with him over his soiled doves.”

“Mrs. Plumtree said it was an accident.” Mr. Virgil sounded stern. “If you know what’s good for you, madam, you’ll speak nothing to gainsay that.”

“I know my duty. But what her ladyship did after she shot him . . . How could she leave the poor children without a father *or* a mother? That’s an abomination.”

Bomination sounded bad. And she began to fear it *was* Mama they were talking about.

“As Dr. Sewell wrote in ‘The Suicide,’” Mr. Virgil said in his loftiest voice, “‘The coward sneaks to death, the brave live on.’ It’s sheer cowardice, is what it is. And I’m disappointed that her ladyship has proved a coward.”

Celia began to cry. It couldn’t be Mama. Mama was *not* a coward! *Coward* was bad. Papa had explained it to her. It meant someone wasn’t brave. And Mama was always brave.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Nurse said. “You’ve woke the lass.”

“Mama isn’t a coward!” Celia sat up in bed. “She’s brave! I w-want to see her. I want to s-see M-Mama!”

Nurse picked her up and smoothed back her hair. “Shh, now, dearie, calm down. It’s all right. Do you want something to eat?”

“No! I want Mama!” she wailed.

“I can take you down to see your grandmama. She’ll explain everything.”

Panic seized her chest. Why wouldn’t they let her see Mama? Whenever Celia had one of her coughs, Mama always came if she asked. “I don’t *want* Gran! I want Mama!” She was crying hard. “I-want-Mama-I-want-Mama-I-want-Mama—”

“She’ll make herself sick again with sobbing,” Nurse said. “Hand me that paregoric elixir, Mr. Virgil.”

Mr. Virgil had a funny look on his face, like someone had struck him. “The girl will have to learn the truth eventually.”

“She’s in no state to hear it right now.” Nurse pressed a cup to Celia’s lips, and the drink that made her sleepy poured into her mouth. She nearly choked on it before she got it down. It did stop her wailing.

Nurse gave her more. Celia didn’t mind. She was thirsty. She drank it, then whispered, “I want Mama.”

“Yes, dearie,” Nurse said soothingly. “But first, let your old nurse sing you a song, all right?”

Her eyelids felt heavy again. “Don’t want any songs,” she complained, laying her head

on Nurse's shoulder. She glared at Mr. Virgil. "Mama isn't a coward," she spat.

"Of course not," Nurse said soothingly. She picked up something and laid it in Celia's arms. "Here's the pretty new doll your mama gave you."

"Lady Bell!" Celia clutched it to her.

Nurse carried her over to the rocking chair and sat to rock her, back and forth, back and forth. "Is there a song you want me to sing to you and Lady Bell, my sweet?"

"Sing me about William Taylor." The lady in "William Taylor" wasn't a coward, and *she* had shot someone.

Nurse shivered. "Do you hear what the lass wants, Mr. Virgil? It's downright spooky."

"Clearly she understands more than you realize."

"How do you know that song, dearie?" Nurse asked her.

"Minerva sings it."

"I'm not going to sing you that," Nurse said. "I'll sing another. 'Golden slumbers kiss your eyes / Smiles awake you when you rise / Sleep, pretty wantons, do not cry . . .'"

Celia pushed fitfully against Nurse's chest. She usually liked hearing about the golden slumbers, but not tonight. She wanted to hear about the lady who got a pistol and "shot her true love William with the bride on his right arm." The captain in the song made the lady a commander for shooting William. That meant the lady was brave, right? And since Mama had shot someone, Mama was brave, too.

But she shot Papa.

That couldn't be right. Mama wouldn't shoot Papa.

Her eyelids got heavy. She didn't want to sleep. She had to explain how Mama couldn't be the "ladyship." Mama was brave. Celia would tell them so.

Because Celia was brave, too. Not a coward ... never a coward...

Chapter One

Ealing

November 1825

When Bow Street Runner Jackson Pinter entered Halstead Hall's library, he wasn't surprised to find only one person there. He was early, and no one in the Sharpe family was ever early.

"Good morning, Masters," Jackson said, inclining his head toward the barrister who sat poring over some papers. Giles Masters was husband to the eldest Sharpe sister, Lady Minerva. Or Mrs. Masters, as she'd chosen to be called.

Masters looked up. "Pinter! Good to see you, old fellow. How are things at Bow Street?"

"Well enough for me to take the time to hold this meeting."

"I daresay the Sharpes have run you ragged investigating their parents' deaths."

"Murders," Jackson corrected him. "We've determined that for certain now."

"Right. I forgot that Minerva said the pistol found at the scene had never been fired. A pity no one noticed it nineteen years ago, or an investigation might have been mounted then and a great deal of heartache prevented."

"Mrs. Plumtree paid off anyone who might have explored further."

Masters sighed. "You can't blame her. She thought she was preventing scandal."

Jackson frowned. Instead she'd prevented the discovery of the truth. And that was why she'd ended up with five grandchildren stuck in the past, unable to go on with their lives. That's why she'd laid down her ultimatum—all of them had to marry by the end of the year or none would inherit. So far, they'd obliged her. All but one.

In his mind arose an image of Lady Celia that he swiftly squelched.

"Where is everyone?"

"Still at breakfast. They'll be trooping across the courtyard soon, I'm sure. Have a seat."

"I'll stand." He strode over to the window that overlooked the Crimson Courtyard, named for its red tile.

Being at Halstead Hall always made Jackson uneasy. The sprawling mansion shrieked "aristocracy." Having spent his early childhood in a Liverpool slum before moving to a terrace house in Cheapside at age ten, he found Halstead Hall too large, too sumptuous—and too full of Sharpes.

After nearly a year with them as his clients, he still wasn't sure how he felt about them. Even now, as he saw them walking across the courtyard beneath a cloud-darkened November sky, he tensed up.

They didn't *look* as if they planned to spring anything on him. They looked happy and