



A Lady Never Surrenders (The Hellions of Halstead Hall Book 5)

By Sabrina Jeffries

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New York Times bestselling author Sabrina Jeffries delights readers with the final novel in her sexy Regency Hellions of Hallstead Hall romance series, featuring Lady Celia Sharpe and the upstanding Bow Street runner, Pinter.

Lady Celia Sharpe has always been wary of marriage...but now her future depends on it.

With two months left to find a husband and fulfill her grandmother's ultimatum, Celia sets her sights on three eligible bachelors. Becoming betrothed to one of these wealthy, high-ranking men will surely prove her *capable* of getting married, so hopefully the wedding itself won't be necessary for Celia to receive her inheritance. Step two of her audacious plan is hiring the dark and dangerously compelling Bow Street Runner, Jackson Pinter, to investigate the three men she's chosen.

With Lady Celia bedeviling Jackson's days and nights, the last thing he wants is to help her find a husband. And when she recalls shadowed memories that lead his investigation into her parents' mysterious deaths in a new direction, putting her in danger, Jackson realizes the only man he wants Celia to marry is himself!

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Editorial Review

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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Lady Never Surrenders

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 content.

First came the great lord himself—Oliver Sharpe, the ninth Marquess of Stoneville, said to be a near copy of his olive-skinned, black-haired, and black-eyed father. Initially Jackson had despised the man, having made the mistake of believing the gossip about him. He still thought Stoneville had chosen the wrong path after his parents' deaths, but since the marquess seemed to be making up for it now, perhaps there was good in him after all.

Beside him walked Lord Jarret, whose blue-green eyes and black hair were said to make him look more a blend of his half-Italian father and blond mother. He was Jackson's favorite of the brothers. No-nonsense and even-tempered, Jarret was the easiest to talk to. And once his scheming maternal grandmother, Mrs. Hester Plumtree, had allowed him to take over the family business, the man had flourished. Jarret worked hard at Plumtree Brewery; Jackson could admire that.

After him came Lord Gabriel with his new wife, Lady Gabriel, on one arm. No doubt the other two men's wives were in their confinement—Lady Stoneville was expected to deliver within the month, and Lady Jarret wasn't far behind. But Jackson wouldn't be surprised to hear of an impending child soon from the youngest Sharpe brother. The couple seemed very much in love, which was rather astonishing, considering that their marriage had initially been contracted just to fulfill Mrs. Plumtree's ridiculous ultimatum.

That august woman clung to Gabe's other arm. Jackson admired Mrs. Plumtree's determination and pluck—it reminded him of his beloved aunt Ada, who'd raised him and now lived with him. But what the elderly woman was demanding of her grandchildren reeked of hubris. No one should have such power over their descendants, not even a legend like Hetty Plumtree, who'd singlehandedly built the family brewery into a major concern after the death of her husband.

Behind her, the two Sharpe sisters came out to cross the courtyard. He dragged in a heavy breath as the younger one caught his eye.

Masters approached to look out the window, too. "And there she comes, the most beautiful woman in the world."

“And the most maddening,” Jackson muttered.

“Watch it, Pinter,” Masters said in a voice tinged with amusement. “That’s my wife you’re talking about.”

Jackson started. He hadn’t been staring at Mrs. Masters. “I beg your pardon,” he murmured, figuring he’d best not explain.

Masters would never accept that Lady Celia was to her sister as a gazelle was to a brood mare. The newly wedded barrister was blinded by love.

Jackson wasn’t. Any fool could see that Lady Celia was the more arresting of the two. While Mrs. Masters had the lush charms of a dockside tart, Lady Celia was a Greek goddess—willowy and tall, small-breasted and long-limbed, with a fine lady’s elegant brow, a doe’s soft eyes. ...

And a vixen’s temper. The damned female could flay the flesh from a man’s bones with her sharp tongue.

She could also heat his blood with one unguarded smile.

God save him, it was a good thing her smile had never been bestowed on him. Otherwise, he might act on the fantasy that had plagued him from the day he’d met her—to shove her into some private closet where he could plunder her mouth with impunity. Where she would wrap those slender arms about his neck and let him have his way with her.

Confound her, until she had come along, he’d never allowed himself to desire a woman he couldn’t have. He’d rarely allowed himself to desire anyone, only the occasional whore when he felt desperate for female companionship. Now he couldn’t seem to stop doing so.

It was because he’d seen too little of her lately. What he needed was a surfeit of Lady Celia to make him sick of her. Then he might purge this endless craving for the impossible.

With a scowl, he turned from the window, but it was too late. The sight of Lady Celia crossing the courtyard dressed in some rich fabric had already stirred his blood. She never wore such fetching clothes; generally her lithe figure was shrouded in smocks to protect her workaday gowns from powder smudges while she practiced her target shooting.

But this morning, in that lemon-colored gown, with her hair finely arranged and a jeweled bracelet on her delicate wrist, she was summer on a dreary winter day, sunshine in the bleak of night, music in the still silence of a deserted concert hall.

And he was a fool.

“I can see how you might find her maddening,” Masters said in a low voice.

Jackson stiffened. “Your wife?” he said, deliberately being obtuse.

“Lady Celia.”

Hell and blazes. He’d obviously let his feelings show. He’d spent his childhood learning to keep them hidden so the other children wouldn’t see how their epithets wounded him, and he’d refined that talent as an

investigator who knew the value of an unemotional demeanor.

He drew on that talent as he faced the barrister. "Anyone would find her maddening. She's reckless and spoiled and liable to give her future husband grief at every turn." When she wasn't tempting him to madness.

Masters raised an eyebrow. "Yet you often watch her. Have you any interest there?"

Jackson forced a shrug. "Certainly not. You'll have to find another way to inherit your new bride's fortune."

He'd hoped to prick Masters's pride and thus change the subject, but Masters laughed. "You, marry my sister-in-law? That, I'd like to see. Aside from the fact that her grandmother would never approve, Lady Celia hates you."

She did indeed. The chit had taken an instant dislike to him when he'd interfered in an impromptu shooting match she'd been participating in with her brother and his friends at a public park. That should have set him on his guard right then.

A pity it hadn't. Because even if she didn't despise him and weren't miles above him in rank, she'd never make him a good wife. She was young and indulged, not the sort of female to make do on a Bow Street Runner's salary.

But she'll be an heiress once she marries.

He gritted his teeth. That only made matters worse. She would assume he was marrying her for her inheritance. So would everyone else. And his pride chafed at that.

Dirty bastard. Son of shame. Whoreson. Love-brat. He'd been called them all as a boy. Later, as he'd moved up at Bow Street, those who resented his rapid advancement had called him a baseborn upstart. He wasn't about to add money-grubbing fortune hunter to the list.

"Besides," Masters went on, "you may not realize this, since you haven't been around much these past few weeks, but Minerva claims that Celia has her eye on three very eligible potential suitors."

Jackson's startled gaze shot to him. Suitors? The word who was on his lips when the door opened and Stoneville entered. The rest of the family followed, leaving Jackson to force a smile and exchange pleasantries as they settled into seats about the table, but his mind kept running over Masters's words.

Lady Celia had suitors. Eligible ones. Good—that was good. He needn't worry about himself around her anymore. She was now out of his reach, thank God. Not that she was ever in his reach, but—

"Have you got news?" Stoneville asked.

Jackson started. "Yes." He took a steadying breath and forced his mind to the matter at hand. "As you know, your father's valet insists that your father wasn't having an affair with Mrs. Rawdon nineteen years ago."

"Which I still don't believe," Stoneville put in. "She certainly led me to think otherwise when she ... er ... was found in my room."

In his lordship's bed, to be precise. Although the entire family now knew of Mrs. Rawdon's seduction of the

sixteen-year-old heir on the day of his parents' deaths, it wasn't something they liked to dwell on, least of all Stoneville.

"I'm aware of that," Jackson said. "Which is why I've been trying to confirm it through another source."

"What source?" Mrs. Masters asked.

"Mrs. Rawdon's former lady's maid, Elsie. The valet wouldn't have been the only servant with private information. If your father and Mrs. Rawdon were involved, her lady's maid probably knew of it, too." He sucked in a breath. "Unfortunately, I haven't yet located Elsie."

"Then why are we here?" Jarret asked, always right to the point.

"Because while searching for her, I discovered a curious circumstance. It seems that her last place of employ was with a rich gentleman in Manchester."

Although the others took a moment to catch the significance of that, Jarret and Gabe realized it at once. They'd been with Jackson at the inquest of Halstead Hall's former head groom, Benny May, whose body had been found after he'd traveled to visit a "friend" in Manchester.

"Surely you don't think that Elsie might have had something to do with Benny's death," Mrs. Plumtree exclaimed, horror showing in her aging features.

"I have no idea," Jackson said. "But it seems quite the coincidence that Benny would travel to where Elsie had been, only to end up dead shortly after he left that city."

"Had been?" Gabe asked. "Elsie left Manchester?"

"She did. I find that suspicious. According to her family, she sent them a quick note saying she was leaving her post and heading to London to look for a new one. Apparently, she'd always refused to tell them the identity of her employer. They suspected she was involved with the man romantically. Whatever the case, I'm having trouble finding her. No one in Manchester seems to know anything. But she told her family she would send them word as soon as she settled in London."

"Is it possible we're barking up the wrong tree with Elsie and Benny?" Stoneville asked. "The authorities were never sure he was murdered. He might have been the victim of a hunting accident. Elsie might have moved on because she didn't like her employer. Their both being in Manchester at the same time could be coincidence."

"True." But in Jackson's business, genuine coincidences were rare. "I did learn she was younger than your mother."

"Quite pretty, too, as I recall," Stoneville said.

"How strange that Mrs. Rawdon would have a fetching young lady's maid," Mrs. Plumtree said. "That's asking for trouble, men being what they are."

"Not all men, Gran," Mrs. Masters said stoutly.

Mrs. Plumtree cast a glance about the table, then smiled. “No, not all men.”

Jackson fought to shield his thoughts. Masters did seem an excellent husband, but he’d already reformed by the time he’d begun courting his wife. And the Sharpe men seemed devoted to their wives, but would it last?

His mother had been seduced by a nobleman, a brash young lord in Liverpool with a penchant for sweet maidens. Instead of marrying her, the arse had married a wealthy woman and set up Jackson’s mother as his mistress, abandoning her when Jackson was two. So Jackson had no illusions about what marriage meant to the aristocracy.

Don’t blame your father, Mother had said as she lay dying in his aunt and uncle’s home. If not for him, I wouldn’t have you. And that made it all worth it.

He couldn’t see how. The memory of her emaciated body lying on that bed ...

With an effort, he tamped down his anger and forced himself to pay attention to the matter at hand. “I’m waiting to hear from Elsie’s family about her location in London. I heard from Major Rawdon’s regiment in India that he’d taken a three-year post in Gibraltar, so I’ve sent a letter there asking him questions concerning the house party. Until I get responses, I should stay close to town rather than returning to Manchester on a probable wild-goose chase.” He glanced to the marquess. “With your lordship’s approval.”

“Whatever you think is best,” Stoneville murmured. “Just keep us apprised.”

“Of course.”

Taking that for a dismissal, Jackson headed out the door. He had another appointment this afternoon, and he had to stop at home to pick up the report his aunt was transcribing. Only she could transform his scribbles into legible, intelligible prose. If he left now, he might have time to eat before—

“Mr. Pinter!”

He turned to find Lady Celia approaching. “Yes, my lady?”

To his surprise, she glanced nervously at the open door to the library and lowered her voice. “I must speak to you privately. Do you have a moment?”

He ruthlessly suppressed the leap in his pulse. Lady Celia had never asked to talk to him alone. The singularity of that made him nod curtly and gesture to a nearby parlor.

She preceded him, then stood looking about her with uncharacteristic anxiousness as he entered and left the door open, wanting no one to accuse him of impropriety.

“What is it?” he asked, trying not to sound impatient. Or intrigued. He’d never seen Lady Celia looking unsure of herself. It tugged annoyingly at his sympathies.

“I had a dream last night. That is, I’m not sure if it actually was a dream. I mean, of course it was a dream, but...”

“What’s your point, madam?”

Her chin came up, and a familiar martial light entered her gaze. "There's no need to be rude, Mr. Pinter."

He couldn't help it; being this close to her was doing uncomfortable things to him. He could smell her perfume, a tempting mix of ... whatever flowery things noblewomen wore to enhance their charms.

Her charms needed no enhancement.

"Forgive me," he bit out. "I'm in a hurry to return to town."

She nodded, taking his excuse at face value. "Last night I had a dream that I often had as a child. I don't know if it was because we'd been working in the nursery, or Annabel and Maria were discussing..." When he raised his eyebrow, she steadied her shoulders. "Anyway, when I used to have it, it seemed unreal, so I assumed it was only a dream, but now..." She swallowed. "I think it might also be a memory of the day my parents died."

That caught his attention. "But you were only four."

"A few weeks shy of five, actually."

Right. She was twenty-four now, and the murders had happened nineteen years ago last April. "What makes you think it's a memory?"

"Because I heard Papa making an assignation with a woman to meet her at the hunting lodge."

A chill coursed down his spine.

"In the dream, I assume it's Mama, but even there she doesn't behave right."

"In what way?"

"Papa used to call Mama 'mia dolce bellezza,' and she would blush and tell him he was blind. Well, in the dream the man called the woman 'mia dolce bellezza,' and she got angry. She told him she hated it when he did that. Don't you see? She probably resented being called the same thing he called his wife."

"I don't suppose you could tell who she was from the voice."

She sighed. "Unfortunately, they were both whispering. I only know it was Papa because of the 'mia dolce bellezza.'"

"I see."

"If it really happened, it means Mama somehow found out about Papa's assignation. That's why she asked Benny not to tell Papa where she was going. Because she wanted to catch him and his mistress in the act. And whoever Papa was going there to meet arrived first and shot Mama."

"Then when your father showed up, she shot him, too?" he said skeptically. "Now that she'd ensured that her lover was free to marry her?"

Lady Celia's expression turned uncertain. "Perhaps Papa was angry that she'd killed Mama. Perhaps they

struggled for the gun and it went off.”

“So she reloaded the gun after shooting your mother. She lay in wait for your father—her lover—with a loaded gun.”

“I-I don’t know. All I know is what I heard.”

“Which might have been a dream.”

She sighed. “It might. That’s why I came to you with it rather than mentioning it during our family meeting. I didn’t want to get everyone excited about it until we were sure.”

“We?”

“Yes. I want you to investigate and find out if it might have been real.”

The plea in her lovely hazel eyes tugged at him, but she was asking the impossible. “I don’t see how I can—”

“Other things happened in the dream,” she said hastily. “Gabe’s tutor, Mr. Virgil, came in later, and my nursemaid sang to me. I overheard things.” She drew a folded sheaf of paper from her pocket and held it out to him.

Reluctantly, he took it.

“I wrote down everything I could recall,” she went on. “I figured you could talk to Mr. Virgil and Nurse and find out if I’m remembering that part correctly. If not, then the rest doesn’t matter. But if I am...”

“I understand.” She might have stored something important in her memory. But which parts? How could he sort the wheat from the chaff?

He skimmed the neatly penned words, and something leapt out at him. “Your nurse gave you medicine?”

Lady Celia nodded. “She calls it paregoric elixir. I suspect that Annabel and Maria’s discussion about it yesterday was what prompted my dream.”

“You do know that paregoric contains opium.”

“Does it?” A troubled frown crossed her brow. “My sisters-in-law did say they would never use it on their own children.”

“I’m told that doctors disagree on its usefulness.” He weighed his words. “You may not realize this, but opium can sometimes provoke—”

“I know,” she said tersely. “Dreams and phantasms and things that aren’t real.” She met his gaze. “But I feel in my bones that it was real. I can’t explain it, and I know I might be wrong, but I think it at least deserves attention, don’t you? If we discover it really is a memory, we might piece together who was missing early that morning and figure out Papa’s mistress by a process of elimination.” Her chin came up. “Besides, Nurse gave me the paregoric after I overheard the conversation.”

“Unless she gave you some to sleep the night before,” he said gently.

Her face fell, and he felt her disappointment like a punch to the gut.

He cleared his throat. “I agree it’s worth pursuing. Your nurse is on my list of people to track down anyway, and Mr. Virgil is certainly of interest. I’ll speak to them both and we’ll continue from there.” He shoved the paper in his coat pocket. “You were right to come to me with this.”

She smiled at him then, the first smile she’d ever given him. It brought life to her face and a softness to her features that blazed a path through to his very soul.

“Thank you,” she said.

God save him, he must keep his wits about him. “You’re welcome.” He turned for the door. He had to get out of here. If she ever guessed what she did to him, she’d mock him mercilessly for daring to raise his gaze so high. “If that’s all—”

“Actually,” she said, “I need something else from you, too.”

Confound it all, he’d nearly escaped. Slowly he faced her once more. “Yes?”

She took in a breath, then lifted her chin. “I need you to investigate my suitors.”

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