



Never Less Than a Lady

Kensington Mass Market \$6.99

May 2010

ISBN-10: 1-4201-0329-6

ISBN-13: 978-1-4201-0329-8)

Excerpt, *Never Less Than a Lady*

In the first three chapters, Julia finds herself in big, big trouble. Now Randall rescues her.

Chapter 4

Swearing, Crockett handed the chain to Haggerty. “Take her damned ladyship into the bushes before I strangle her.”

He took a swig from the jug and passed it to one of the others as Julia struggled dizzily to her feet and followed Haggerty into the nearest clump of shrubs, a hundred yards or so from the carriage. At least the chain was long enough to allow her a measure of privacy, and her captor turned away as she went behind a bush.

When she emerged, the young man said awkwardly, “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

“Probably not sorry enough to set me free,” she said dryly.

“No, ma’am,” he said with regret. “Even if I did, you wouldn’t get far.”

He was right. The hills were mostly plain pasture and the moonlight would make her easy to chase down.

Wishing she had brought a shawl, she was turning toward the carriage when she saw a dark shape loom up behind Haggerty. An instant later, the young man collapsed, Julia's chain rattling as it dropped to the ground.

Julia gasped. "Who...?"

Her words were cut off as a hard hand clamped over her mouth. "Silence," the man breathed in her ear. "We must leave as fast and quietly as possible."

She froze, shocked. There was something familiar in that whispered voice. But the man whose name flashed through her mind couldn't possibly be here.

No matter. Any rescuer would do. She nodded and he released her. He carried some sort of rifle, she saw.

After she wrapped the loose chain around her arm to silence it, he bent over, gesturing for her to do the same. His clothing was dark and his face covered, making him a shadow among shadows. Her own gown was also dark. They moved away from the cluster of bushes, heading parallel to the road and back the way she'd come.

Her rescuer was a master at taking advantage of any cover available. Luckily Crockett and his other two men were talking and laughing as they passed the jug around. She hoped they wouldn't notice how long her visit to the shrubbery was taking.

After they rounded the bend and had the hill and some trees between themselves and Crockett, her rescuer stopped and turned to her. His lean, broad-shouldered form still seemed familiar, but his identity was obscured by a dark scarf.

She caught her breath when he tugged off the concealing scarf. Cool moonlight

slid over blond hair and the lethal elegance of his chiseled features. Impossibly, her rescuer was Major Randall, as beautiful and fearsome as hell's own angels.

Recognition was followed by a feeling of inevitability. She'd first met Randall at Hartley Manor, when he and two others had come in search of their missing friend, Ashton. They'd found him with Mariah Clarke, mistress of the manor at the time. Of Ashton's friends, Randall was the prickliest, the wariest.

For some reason, probably punishment for her sins, there was an itchy, powerful connection between them that was as undeniable as it was unwelcome. When the group made the long journey to London together, Randall wouldn't even ride in the same carriage with her. She'd been grateful for that.

Yet of all the men on earth, he was the one who had rescued her. "Why you, Major Randall?" she asked softly, her question more philosophical than practical.

He answered literally. "On the way back from Scotland, I decided to call on the Townsends." His voice was equally soft as he started off again at a brisk pace. Now that he had straightened up, his limp was visible and worse than she remembered.

She fell in beside him. "The Townsends are away."

"So I learned, but I was invited to spend the night. I was dining when your apprentice came to report that you'd been kidnapped."

"Jenny is all right?" she asked.

"Yes. She got her little girl to fetch a knife so she could cut herself free."

"Thank heaven!" Julia would never have forgiven herself if Jenny or Molly had come to harm because of her.

"You're shivering." Randall peeled off his coat and draped it around her

shoulders. Body heat radiated from the garment.

“You’ll freeze,” she said, glad for the warmth but uneasy with the way the coat made her feel as if he was touching her.

He shrugged. “I’ve spent enough time living rough that I don’t notice temperature much.”

Taking him at his word, she put her arms into the sleeves. The coat was almost cloak sized on her, and she welcomed every heavy woolen inch of it.

He led her into a copse on the left of the road. She thought the horse tethered there was Charles Townsend’s mount, though she couldn’t be sure. Randall slid his weapon into a saddle holster and mounted, then offered his hand. “Best ride astride.”

She took his hand and he lifted her with unnerving ease. Swinging her right leg over the saddlebags was awkward, but she managed. Randall set the horse into a walk and they returned to the road, heading back toward Hartley.

She reluctantly set her hands on his lean waist for balance. “The man you struck, Haggerty. Is...is he dead?”

“No, but he’ll have the devil’s own headache. Why do care?”

“He was the most decent of the lot.” She closed her eyes, shaking, still not quite believing that she was free. Randall was dangerous and uncomfortable, but he’d saved her life. He was a hero and rescuing females was what heroes did.

Shouts rose behind them, Crockett bellowing, “The damned bitch has escaped!”

Her hands tightened on Randall. He said, “Don’t worry. By the time they realize that you didn’t head off into the pasture away from the coach, we’ll be well away.”

“Won’t they come after us in the carriage?”

“They’ll try.” He chuckled. “They’ll find that the harnesses have been cut, so they won’t be going anywhere very soon.”

“You did that first?” she exclaimed. “How very efficient!”

“Military experience has its uses.”

“I thank God and you for that, Major.” She drew a deep breath, still not quite believing she was safe. “I thought I was doomed.”

He shrugged and didn’t reply. All in a day’s work for a hero.

The road curved around another hill, and he set the horse into a ground eating canter. Despite Turk’s smooth strides, she had to tighten her hold on Randall. They’d never touched before this night, and now she knew why. Being so close to him was...disquieting. “Are we returning to Hartley?”

He shook his head. “Even if Turk wasn’t carrying double, he’s too tired to go that far. And if they followed us and tried to get you back in Hartley...”

He didn’t need to complete the sentence. She would not call down violence on the town that had been her home for years. “I’m sure you have an alternative plan.”

“I noticed a track leading up to a shepherd’s hut not far from here. We can go to ground there and get some rest.”

“Rest. What a lovely thought.” She tilted her head against his back and relaxed. Disquieting the man might be, but she had complete faith in his competence.

Wearily she wondered what she would do next, now that they’d found her. She’d worry about that tomorrow.

Not long after, they swerved from the road onto a nearly invisible track that led up and around the tall hill. Patchy clouds were beginning to obscure the moonlight. For

once, the chronically damp weather was welcome.

They reached the dark square of a hut and he pulled the horse to a stop. “We’re in luck. Not only a roof, door, and four walls, but a lean-to for Turk.”

“I’d be happy in a cow shed as long as Crockett and his men can’t find us.” She slid from the horse, swaying as she reached the ground. Randall steadied her with one hand. She pulled away from his touch as soon as she regained her footing.

“The chances of them finding us are vanishingly small.” He dismounted himself. “If they do, I shall deal with them in a more emphatic fashion.”

“Four to one odds don’t bother you?” she asked, more curious than surprised.

“They’re amateurs. I’m not.” He unfastened the saddlebags and carried them into the hut. “Better and better. There’s a small fireplace and some stacked wood. If I give you my tinder box, can you start a fire while I tend to Turk?”

She followed him into the hut, glad to be inside. “Do you think a fire is safe?”

“We’re well concealed here, and the wind will carry any smoke away from the road.” He handed her the tinder box and moved toward the door. “There will be rain by morning, and that will wipe out any hoof marks if they look along the road then.”

As she knelt by the hearth, a glimmer of moonlight glowed through a parchment covered window. The single room hut had an air of disuse, but at least it was dry and they were protected from the wind. Though her hands were clumsy with cold and exhaustion, she had a small fire burning by the time Randall joined her.

He opened his saddlebags and pulled out a small blanket. “Take this.”

She returned his coat, then wrapped herself in the coarse woolen fabric as she settled to one side of the fire. Randall dug into the saddlebags again. “Are you hungry?”

She thought about it. “Starving, actually.”

“Here’s some cider.” After giving her the jug, he used his knife to divide bread and cheese.

She sipped the tangy cider gratefully. “You are well prepared. Military experience again, I presume.”

“The first lesson of campaigning is to insure supply lines.” He handed her chunks of bread and cheese, setting some aside for himself and repacking the rest.

She bit into the cheese with more enthusiasm than elegance. Her energy began to revive as she ate. There was silence as they demolished the bread and cheese. The cider was cool, tart, and welcome.

In the light from the fire, Randall’s handsome face was remote and enigmatic. She had no reason to fear him when he’d just saved her, but he was too powerful, too male, to be comfortable company. Even with her eyes closed, his presence was as vivid as the heat of the fire.

She wrenched her thoughts away from the major. The urgent issue was deciding what to do now that she was not heading to likely death.

She was so absorbed that she jumped when Randall asked, “Do you know why those men kidnapped you?”

He had a right to know, but she hated revealing the sordid story of her life. “I do.”

“Jenny said they called you a murderess,” he said bluntly. “Is that true?”

Her mouth tightened as she met his intent gaze. “Yes.”