



River Lady

By Jude Deveraux

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Jude Deveraux is the author of more than forty *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Moonlight in the Morning*, *The Scent of Jasmine*, *Scarlet Nights*, *Days of Gold*, *Lavender Morning*, *Return to Summerhouse*, and *Secrets*. To date, there are more than sixty million copies of her books in print worldwide. To learn more, visit JudeDeveraux.com.

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Chapter One

Virginia Riverfront

September, 1803

The rain enclosed the little tavern, darkening it so that the lantern's golden light made eerie shadows on the wall. The late fall sunshine that had warmed the morning was gone now and the tavern was almost cold. Behind the tall oak counter washing pewter mugs was a woman, pretty, plump, clean, her soft brown hair caught in a white muslin cap. She hummed as she worked, smiling now and then and showing a dimple in one cheek.

The side door, not the one for patrons, opened and in a gust of cold, wet wind a girl slipped into the room, pausing for a moment until her eyes adjusted to the light. The barmaid looked up and, with a frown and a little click of disgust, hurried forward.

"Leah, you look worse every time I see you. Sit down here while I heat a toddy for you," the plump woman said as she pushed the shivering girl into a chair and went to set the poker in the fire, all the while surreptitiously studying her younger sister. If possible, Leah had lost weight. Her unfleshed bones seemed to poke through her dirty, mended dress; her eyes were sunken, the skin under them blue, her nose sunburned and peeling. There were three bloody scratches running the length of one side of her face: and a long bluish-green bruise on the other side.

"He give you that?" the barmaid asked in disgust as she jabbed the hot poker into the mug of flip.

Leah merely shrugged and eagerly put her hands out toward the hot beer and molasses drink.

"He give any reason for hittin' you?"

"No more 'n usual," Leah said after drinking half the contents of the mug and leaning back in the chair.

"Leah, why don't you -- ?"

Leah opened her eyes and gave her sister a hard look. "Don't start on me again, Bess," she warned. "We've been through this before. You do what you must and I'll take care of me and the kids."

Bess stiffened for just a moment before turning away. "Layin' on my back for a few clean gentlemen is a lot easier 'n what you have to do."

Leah didn't even wince at Bess's crudity. They'd had this argument too many times before for her to be shocked. Two years ago, Bess had had her fill of their crazy father who beat them constantly because "women were born in sin." The older girl had left their poor backwater farm to find herself a job, and, on the side, she was "friendly" to a few men. Leah, of course, had been beaten for Bess's sins. Now, Bess was always trying to get Leah to leave their father's shack of a house. But Leah remained to care for her six younger brothers and sisters. She plowed, planted, harvested, cooked, repaired the house, and, most of all, she protected the little ones from their father's wrath.

"Look at you!" Bess said. "You look forty-five years old and you're, what? Twenty-two now?"

"I think so," Leah said tiredly. It was the first time she'd sat down all day and the warm drink was relaxing her. "Do you have any clothes for me?" she whispered lazily.

Bess started to complain again, but instead she went behind the counter and reached for cold ham, bread, and mustard. As she set a plate on the table beside Leah, she took a seat across from her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Leah hesitate before touching the food. "You even consider not eatin' that and takin' it back to them kids and I'll cram it down your throat myself."

Leah gave a little quirk of a smile and tore into the food with both hands. Her mouth full, her eyes downcast, she said, as if the answer meant nothing to her, "Have you seen him lately?"

Bess gave the top of her sister's dirty head a sharp took. "You're not still thinkin'..." she began but stopped and looked back at the fire. A flash of lightning lit the tavern.

Poor Leah, Bess thought. In many ways Leah was like their father, as stubborn and hardheaded as a piece of stone. Bess could walk away and leave the little ones, but to Leah family was everything, even if a lunatic, rampaging old man was part of her family. After their mother died, Leah had decided that she was going to take care of the kids until the last one was old enough to leave. No matter what happened, or what was done to her, she refused to leave.

And just as Leah remained with her father, she stubbornly clung to a dream. The dream wasn't the one Bess had always wanted: food, shelter, and warmth. Leah's dream was one she could never attain. Leah fantasized about one Mr. Wesley Stanford.

When Leah was a girl, Mr. Stanford had come to their hovel, asked her a few questions, and, in gratitude for her answers, he'd kissed her cheek and given her a twenty-dollar gold piece. When Leah had told Bess of the incident, there'd been stars in the young girl's eyes. Bess had immediately wanted to spend the gold on new dresses, but Leah had gone into a rage, screaming that the coin was from *her* Wesley and that she loved him and he loved her and when she grew up she was going to marry him.

At the time, Bess's only thought had been of that shiny gold coin hidden somewhere, unspent, all its glory wasted. She began to wish this Wesley had given Leah a bunch of flowers. She tried to forget about that coin, but sometimes she'd see Leah, plow harness about her shoulders, stop and stare into space. "What you thinkin' about?" Bess would ask, and Leah would say, "Him." Bess would groan and turn away. There was no need for Leah to say who *him* was.

Years later, Bess decided she could take no more of her father's hideous temper and the constant work, so she left the farm and took a job across the river as a barmaid. Elijah Simmons had disowned his eldest daughter and had forbidden her to visit the farm or see her siblings. But during the last two years, Leah had

managed to slip away a few times to visit her sister and get the clothes Bess collected for her. The townspeople wanted to help the desperately poor Simmons family, but Elijah refused to allow his family to accept charity.

On her first visit to the tavern, Leah had asked after Wesley Stanford. At the time, Bess had been enthralled with having met all the rich plantation owners, and Wesley and his brother Travis were the wealthiest. Bess had talked for thirty minutes about how handsome Wes was, what a considerate man he was, how often he visited the tavern -- and how happy Leah would be when they were married. To Bess, it'd been like the creating of a fairy tale, something to pass the cold winter evenings, and she thought Leah had seen it that way too. But a few months ago, with a laugh, Bess had told Leah that Wes had become engaged to a beautiful young lady named Kimberly Shaw. "Now who are you going to love?" Bess laughed before she saw Leah's white face. Under the bruises and dirt Leah looked as if her blood were draining away.

"Leah! You can't be serious about a man like Wesley. He's rich, *very* rich and he wouldn't let a couple of...of, well a 'lady' like me and a scrawny, filthy thing like you in his second-best parlor. This Miss Shaw is from his own class."

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Quietly, Leah slipped out of her chair and headed for the door.

Bess grabbed her arm. "It was just a dream, didn't you realize that?" She paused. "But Wesley has a third gardener that just might be interested in a woman from...from our side of the river."

Leah didn't answer, but, still pale, she left the tavern, and the next time she visited, she acted as if she'd never heard that Wesley Stanford was engaged. She asked Bess for more stories about Wesley. This time Bess was reluctant, so she again tried to tell her of the engagement. Leah gave her sister such a chilling look that Bess turned away. For all Leah's look of frailty, there were times when she could be imposing.

Since then Bess hadn't tried to argue with her, and every visit she lifelessly recounted Wes's last time in the tavern. She didn't mention that he was in there more often now because the tavern was on the road between his house and the Shaws'.

Now Leah leaned back in the chair, slipped her hand into her much-mended pocket, and clutched the gold piece Wesley had given her years ago. Over the years she'd rubbed it so often it was completely smooth. There'd been many nights when the pain from one of her father's beatings had kept her awake and she'd sat on the straw tick rubbing the coin and remembering every second of the time she'd spent with Wesley Stanford. He'd kissed her cheek, and to her knowledge that was the one and only kiss she'd ever received. Sometimes Bess talked about him as if he thought of himself as a god, better than everyone else, but Leah knew how kind he could be, how he could kiss a skinny, dirty little girl he'd never seen before and reward her lavishly. Vain, arrogant men didn't do such things. Bess didn't know him as Leah did. Someday, she thought, she'd see Wesley again and he'd see the love in her eyes and -- .

"Leah!" Bess half shouted. "Don't fall asleep. The old man will miss you before long. You have to get back."

"I know. It's just so nice and warm here."

"You could stay all the time if --."

Leah stood, cutting off Bess's words. "Thanks for everything, Bess, and I'll see you again next month. We wouldn't be able to make it if it wasn't for you and your --."

The heavy front door flew open and a man entered, his body filling the opening, pushing the door shut behind him.

"Oh Lord," Bess gasped, paralyzed for a moment before grinning and moving toward the man. "Awful wet for anybody to be out, Mr. Stanford. Here, let me help you with that," she said, taking his coat from his shoulders and glancing toward Leah, who stood stock-still, gaping.

He hasn't changed much, Leah thought. He was taller, even more muscular than she remembered, and more handsome. His thick dark hair curled damply about his neck and there were drops of water on his lashes, making his eyes look even darker, even more intense. Bess was standing on her toes and using her hand to brush water from his dark green wool jacket. Buckskin pants hugged his big, hard thighs while tall boots encased his feet and calves.

"I wasn't sure you'd be open. Doesn't Ben ever give you the night off?" he asked Bess, referring to her boss.

"Only when he's sure I'll put the night to good use. Ain't nobody around to spend this evenin' with so I might as well tend bar," she teased. "Now you sit down and let me get you somethin' hot to drink."

Bess began ushering Wesley Stanford toward a tall, sided booth, trying to keep his back to Leah, who still stood in the middle of the room, her eyes wide.

With a chuckle, Wes disengaged himself from her pushing hands. "What are you trying to do to me, Bess?" It was then he saw Leah, and Bess saw the brief flicker in his eyes. He was judging her as a man looks at a woman and as to where she belonged on the social ladder. He obviously found her wanting in both aspects. "Who's your...pretty friend, Bess?"

Manners, Bess thought. Those people must be taught manners from the cradle. "This is my sister, Leah," Bess said tightly. "Leah, you best be gettin' home."

"It's early yet," Leah said, stepping forward into the light; Bess looked at her sister as a stranger would and saw poverty and hardship hanging over Leah like a black cloud. But Leah seemed oblivious to her appearance. Her eyes were fixed glassily on Wesley, who was beginning to look at her in speculation.

"Perhaps you two ladies will join me in a glass of ale."

Bess put herself between Leah and Wes. Leah, in her innocence, was giving Wes looks that usually only a seasoned prostitute could produce. "I got work to do and Leah here has to go home." She said the last while glaring at her sister.

"Ain't nothin' waitin' for me at home," Leah said, deftly sidestepping her sister. "I'd love to drink with you, Wesley. " She said the name as if she said it hundreds of times a day -- which she did -- and didn't notice the movement of Wes's eyebrows as she slid into a seat in the booth, looking up at him expectantly.

"The flip is good," she said.

Wes looked down at her dirty, scratched, bruised face for a second before taking the bench across from her.

"A couple of flips," he said quietly to Bess.

Angrily, Bess flounced away toward the bar.

"You work for Ben now?" Wes asked Leah.

"I still live with my family." Her eyes were eating him, remembering every angle of his face, memorizing every curve. "Did you ever find your friend's wife?" she asked, referring to the first time she'd seen Wes.

For a moment he didn't understand. "Clay's wife?" he asked, then smiled, astonished. "You couldn't be that little girl who helped us?"

Silently, reverently, Leah pulled the worn gold coin from her skirt pocket and laid it on the table.

Wonderingly, Wes picked it up and held it toward the light to look at the rough hole drilled in the top of the coin. "How -- ?" he asked.

"A nail," she said, smiling. "It took me a while to make that hole but I was afraid I'd lose it if I didn't tie it to me."

Frowning, Wes put the coin back on the table. It was odd that the girl would keep the gold when she obviously needed so many things. Her hair, greasy beyond belief, was pulled back from her head and, idly, he wondered what color it would be if it were clean.

As Leah reached for the coin, she touched his fingertips and, her breath held, she touched them with her two fingers, marveling at the cleanliness of his nails, the shape of his big square-tipped fingers.

Bess set two mugs of flip on the table with a splash, while glaring at Leah. "Mr. Stanford, why don't you tell my sister here about that beautiful young lady you're about to marry? Leah'd just love to hear all about her. Tell her how pretty she is, how she can dance, what pretty clothes she has."

Wes moved his hand away from Leah's and chuckled. "Perhaps you should tell her, Bess, since you seem to know so much about my wife-to-be."

"I think I'll do that," Bess said, grabbing a chair from a nearby table and moving it to the end of their booth. But a look from Leah stopped her from sifting down.

"I'd rather hear what Wesley has to say," Leah said quietly, but her eyes bored into Bess's.

Bess's eyes held her sister's for a moment. Why was she trying to protect her sister? Isn't this what she'd wanted her to do? If only Leah weren't so *serious* about the man. With a sigh, Bess left them alone.

Wes drank deeply of his steaming drink while he looked at the emaciated girl across from him, and wondered how long she'd been a prostitute. She certainly was good at getting a man's attention in spite of her unappetizing appearance. The way she looked at him made him feel as if she'd been waiting all her life just for him. It was flattering, but at the same time it was disconcerting. It was almost as if she felt he owed her something.

"You were saying, Wesley...?" Leah prompted, leaning forward so that he got a whiff of her body odor.

"Kimberly," he said, only half-aloud. It might be better to think of Kim or, heaven help him, he might be tempted by this fragrant witch. "You're sure you want to hear? I mean, usually one woman doesn't want to hear about another woman."

"I wanta know all there is to know about you," she said with heartfelt sincerity.

"There's really not much to tell. We met about two years ago when she came to visit her brother, Steven Shaw. Their parents died when they were young and Kimberly was sent East to live with an aunt and uncle, while Steve stayed here with relatives."

Wesley's "not much to tell" turned into an hour of extended rapture. Wes had fallen for the beautiful Kimberly instantly, but so had twenty or so other young men, and he'd had a two-year courtship battle to win her. He talked about how pretty Kim was, how gentle, delicate, how sweet-tempered, how she loved beauty, books, and music.

Leah's hands gripped the pewter mug so hard her knuckles turned white. "And you're soon to be married?" she whispered.

"Early spring. April. Then the three of us, Steven included, are traveling to the new state of Kentucky. I've bought land there."

"You'll leave Virginia?" She gasped. "What about your plantation here?"

"I don't think Virginia is big enough for my brother and me. For all my thirty-four years, I've been called Travis's little brother. It's made me want a place of my own. Besides, starting all over in a new land with a beautiful woman appeals to me."

"You won't return?" she whispered.

"Probably not," he answered, frowning at her intensity. In spite of her looks and her smell, he found himself drawn to her. "The rain's stopped and I better get home." He stood. "It was a pleasure meeting you." He tossed coins on the table for the drinks. "See you next week, Bess," he called as he started out the door.

Leah was after him in a second, but Bess caught her arm. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

Leah jerked away from her sister. "I always thought you wanted me to enjoy men."

"Enjoy them yes, but I'm afraid you're obsessed with Wesley Stanford. You're going to get hurt and hurt worse than from Pa's blows. You know nothing about men! All you know is how to plow and scrounge wild plants for food. You don't know --."

"Maybe I can learn!" Leah hissed. "I love him and he's leaving soon and I have this one chance and I'm going to take it."

"Please, Leah, please don't go after him. Something awful will happen, I know it will."

"Nothing *awful* will happen," Leah said softly and was out the door.

Wesley was just mounting his horse.

"Will you give me a ride?" Leah called, stumbling along the path in the dark.

Wes stood still, watching her in the moonlight and wishing with all his might that the girl would go away. There was something about her that was almost frightening, as if it were fate that had brought them together, as if what was going to happen were inevitable. And damn! He'd been so good, faithful to Kimberly since they'd become engaged, and he'd planned to remain celibate until they were married. But it wasn't worry of tumbling the girl that bothered him but her intensity, her seriousness. Why in the world had she kept that coin all these years?

"Let's walk," he said, holding the horse's reins, not wanting Leah's thin little body near his on the horse.

Leah had never felt so alive in her life. She was with the man she loved. Here and now was what she'd dreamed of since she was a child. With one hand on the coin in her pocket, she slid her other arm through Wesley's.

He looked down at her and, whether it was a trick of the moonlight or the concealing darkness, she looked downright pretty. The bruise and scratches, now hidden, had kept him from noticing her full lips and that her eyes were large, seductive. He gave the groan of a man lost and started walking with her.

Leah's heart was pounding rapidly by the time they left sight of the tavern. Her conscience, dulled by three mugs of beer, was telling her that Bess was right and she had no business here. Yet a part of her was saying that here was her one and only chance for love and she was going to take it. Later, when Wesley was in a faraway place and she was still toiling for her family, she could remember tonight. Perhaps he'd kiss her again.

With her thoughts in her eyes she looked up at him, and Wesley, with no thoughts at all, bent his head and kissed her.

She melted against him, her body feeling delicate and breakable in his work-hardened arms, but she kept her lips closed in a childish way. He drew back, his eyes twinkling. The girl was a mixture of accomplished whore and virginal innocence. With her eyes still closed, she moved her lips against his, put her mouth on his again, and Wesley nudged her lips open. He had a thought that she was a quick learner but soon no more thoughts crossed his mind.

The girl gave herself to him as if she'd been hungering for him, and Wesley responded with months of pent-up desire, his head pushing hers back, his hand burying in the gummy mass of her hair and turning her to better reach her lips. He withdrew, his eyes glazed, his breath coming hard. Her hair had come untied and hung to her waist; her lips were reddened.

"You're beautiful," he whispered and went for her mouth again as his hands tore at her dress top.

"No!" Leah said, suddenly frightened. A kiss was what she'd dreamed of, a kiss and no more, but as his hands sought her bare flesh, and even as she told him no, she knew she'd never actually deny him. "Wesley," she whispered as her hands ceased to fight him. "My own Wesley."

"Yes, love," he said distractedly, his mouth traveling down her throat.

The fabric of the coarse dress was old and tore away easily. Within seconds Leah was standing nude in the moonlight. Her thin body showed every bone, every muscle. The only sign of her womanliness was her full

breasts, proud and perfect.

With great care Wesley lifted her in his arms, then lay her on his cloak, which had fallen from his shoulders.

Leah, not knowing what to do, how to return the pleasure she was feeling, lay still as he ran his hands over her and unfastened his clothes at the same time.

When he entered her, she screamed in pain. Wesley lay still a moment, touched her hair, kissed her cheek.

Leah opened tear-filled eyes to look up at him, and a wave of great love came over her. This was her Wesley, the man she had always loved, would die loving. "Yes," she whispered, "yes."

Wesley continued quickly and only at the end did Leah feel even a tinge of pleasure. And when he finished with a hard thrust, he grabbed her shoulders and whispered "Kimberly" in her ear.

It was several moments before Leah understood exactly what had happened to her. *Kimberly*, he'd said.

He rolled off her, tired for the moment, his eyes half-closed, while Leah stood and pulled on the shreds of her old dress.

"Good girl," Wes said drowsily as he reached into the pocket of the pants he hadn't fully removed. "For your trouble." He flipped a gold coin toward her and it landed at her feet. "We keep meeting, you'll have a trunk full of those things."

Stunned, Leah watched him stand, fasten his pants, and pick up his cloak and hat. Reaching out, he touched her chin. "You, little girl, are going to get me in trouble." He drew back. "I hope *some* of you was clean." With that, he mounted his horse and rode away.

It was some time before Leah could move. What an absolute, total fool she'd made of herself, she thought more in amazement than anything else. She felt as if she were a child who'd just learned there were no fairy godmothers. All these years she'd been able to resist the horror of her life because at the end of the rainbow was the great god Wesley. But in the end he was just a man who'd taken what was freely offered to him.

"Free!" she exclaimed, stooping to grab the coin at her feet. Holding it for a moment, feeling how cold it was, she thought of all the food and clothes she could buy with the money and what it had cost her to obtain the coin. With a laugh at her years of childish dreams, she did what may have been the first totally impractical act of her life: she drew her arm back and threw the coin as far as she could, down toward the blackness that was the river, and when she heard a splash, she smiled.

"Not all the Simmons are whores!" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

Feeling better, willing herself not to cry, since she'd learned long ago that tears were useless, she started toward the place she called home. Her body ached and she moved slowly, knowing she'd never make it back before daylight and that there'd be a beating waiting for her. The loss of her dream made her feet heavy and she dreaded more than ever the fife ahead of her.

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