

Chapter Two

“Bella! Wake up, Bella!”

Feeling something shaking her shoulder, Arabella slowly opened her eyes. The room was dimly aglow with early dawn light as Arabella groggily pushed herself up onto her elbows. She looked around to see her younger brother, Tommy, kneeling next to her bed.

“Why on earth are you bothering me at this ungodly hour?” she questioned through a yawn.

“I have found a gentleman. You must come now. I think he is almost dead.” Tommy’s tone was urgent as he began to pull her arm again.

“You found a what?” Arabella’s eyes flew wide open as she tried to comprehend what Tommy was saying to her.

“A half-dead gentleman. You must hurry,” he urged, pulling harder on her arm as she resisted.

“Tommy, wait. Stop pulling my arm and allow me to put on my robe.” She sat up and waved him away.

Standing with his back to her in the doorway, Tommy explained: “Something woke me up. I thought it was the storm again, but I kept hearing what sounded like snorting and whinnying outside my window. I got up and went outside and around to the back garden. There stood a huge black horse with a man slumped over the saddle. I led the horse around to the front and tied it to the post. I cannot get the man off by myself. I don’t think he’s dead yet.”

“Good heavens!” Bella was fully awake now, as she

quickly followed Tommy out of her room, down the stairs, and to the front door.

Holding high a hastily lit lantern, Bella stepped out of the house into the freezing wet dawn. To her complete astonishment, there indeed stood a huge horse with a dark mass draped over its back.

“Good heavens!” She stepped closer to the horse, her slippered feet sinking into the mud. In the yellow light of her lantern, she could see that the animal was lathered with sweat.

“Would you stop saying ‘Good heavens’ and help me figure out how to get him off this horse?”

Bella set the lantern on the front steps, deciding not to chastise the twelve-year-old for his disrespectful manner. Quickly assessing the situation, Bella said to her dark-haired brother, “It’s too bad this storm has prevented Papa from returning from the Park tonight. I just hope we are strong enough to get him down by ourselves. He seems awfully large.”

“The man or the horse?” Tommy asked.

“Both,” she said, moving close to the big animal. Bella gathered her resolve and assessed the situation. “Let’s remove his feet from the stirrups first. Then you take one arm and I the other and we’ll ease him off. I hope this beast stays still.”

The black horse did stand docile, out of exhaustion or trust, Bella could not tell. It was no easy feat to hold the man steady as they pulled him sideways off the horse, especially since it was difficult to keep their footing on the rain-soaked ground.

Once they got the unconscious man down, Bella knelt next to him and felt his neck for a pulse. Though it was weak, he was definitely alive. Sighing with relief, Bella struggled against her wet bedclothes to rise from the sodden earth. It had begun to rain again.

“Whatever is wrong with him will not be helped by being out in this weather,” Bella told her equally soaked brother.

Tommy nodded. “How are we going to get him inside, Bella?” he asked, wiping rain from his face.

“We certainly can’t carry him in.” After thinking a moment, she said, “We must roll him onto a blanket and drag

him into the house. Tommy, go get the blanket from my bed.”

Tommy nodded and went quickly into the house to do her bidding.

“I wonder what in the world happened to him,” Tommy questioned aloud upon returning to the drive with the blanket.

“God only knows,” his sister replied, as they began to roll the man carefully onto the blanket.

Several hours later, Arabella placed her hands flat on the narrow bed and pushed herself wearily to her feet. A worried frown creased her brow as she gazed down at the pale, prone man.

Blessedly, the bleeding from the ugly wound marring his left shoulder had almost stopped. Very gently she reached down and placed her hand on the bandage she had created out of an old but still perfectly usable nightgown.

Still frowning, Arabella pulled a sputtering candle stub closer to the unconscious man. She wanted to make sure that there was no blood seeping from beneath the torn strips of cloth.

Sighing with tired relief, Arabella lifted the heavy braid off of her shoulder and watched the large man’s chest rise and fall in a shallow rhythm. Somewhere in the back of her mind it registered that the rain had stopped beating against the house, and the quiet lay heavy on the morning.

Arabella’s eyes traveled from the man’s chest to his face. Though she had worked frantically for hours on this most unlikely patient, she had, as yet, not really looked at his face.

Padding softly to the corner of the room in her stockinged feet, she took hold of a small rocking chair and dragged it next to the bed. Pulling her shawl closer around her neck, she seated herself, rocked forward, and looked for the first time at this mysterious stranger who was still so close to death.

His hair was dark, she noted, very glossy with a hint of a wave. Her weary eyes traveled to his brows, which were also dark and slightly arched over closed lids with long curling lashes. Beatrice, her cousin and best friend, would

be green with envy over such lashes, she thought, as she continued her perusal of his features.

Tilting her head, she continued to examine his face. She decided she liked the shape of his aquiline nose, and wondered if his square jaw indicated a stubborn nature, as some people claimed.

Who was he? she wondered for the hundredth time this morning. Reaching down next to her chair, Arabella gathered up the pile of clothing she and Tommy had removed from the man earlier.

Hesitating, she made no other move for a few moments. She knew she was being much too particular under the circumstances, but she felt as if she would be grossly invading his privacy to go through his clothing.

Shaking off such nonsense, she examined the white shirt with the bloodstained hole. Her fingers caressed the soft material. Never had she felt such exquisite fabric. Stitches in the seams were so tiny and perfectly even. Arabella, not being much of a seamstress, was impressed with the expert workmanship.

A faint, woody, spicy scent reached her nose. She lifted the shirt to her face and inhaled. An unidentifiable, yet somehow intoxicating smell filled her senses.

She refused to allow her thoughts to dwell on the horrible possibility that this nameless man could die any moment in her bed.

When she had watched the man long enough to assure herself that he was not immediately going to expire, Arabella resumed her inspection of his clothing.

His leather breeches revealed nothing. Setting those aside, she pulled his heavy jacket onto her lap. It was dark green and made of the finest wool she had ever seen. Even her uncle David wore nothing so exquisite, she mused, and he was an earl. Again that indefinable, spicy, smoky scent permeated the material.

Her slender fingers went over the jacket swiftly, stopping as they encountered something solid in the inside pocket.

Pulling a leather pouch from the jacket, Arabella placed the envelope-shaped case on her lap. She could see that the butter-soft leather was expertly tooled, and she noted that

it bulged slightly. Picking the pouch up, Arabella turned it over and saw that something was embossed on the flap.

Lifting the pouch closer to the dripping nub of the candle, she saw that there was some sort of crest tooled in gold on the soft leather. Casting a curious frown at the unconscious man, Arabella examined the pouch closer.

She saw that it was a coat of arms. There was an embossed shield in the middle flanked by a mythical beast on one side and a falcon on the other. Entwined with the animals and shield was a depiction of ivy and ribbon intricately tooled with the words *Virtute et Armis*.

Bella was able to translate the motto easily: *By Valor and Arms*.

Taking a deep breath, Arabella lifted the flap and emptied the contents of the pouch onto her lap. The candlelit silence of the room was shattered by Arabella's shocked gasp. Glistening in her lap was a pile of coins and notes.

Arabella stared at the treasure for a stunned moment. In her estimation she held a small fortune. Shaking her head in bemusement, she put the money back into the pouch and returned it to the jacket pocket.

The waistcoat was next. She was about to set it on the jacket when something crunched under her fingers. She pulled two pieces of paper from the small front pocket.

Ah! These might reveal the identity of her mystery man. A small anticipatory smile touched her tired features.

Unfolding the first note, she saw it was written in a small, delicate hand on fine vellum.

*I can no longer deny my feelings! I am yours!
I will be in the atrium at midnight! Come to me, my
love!*

That was all. Arabella glanced again to the prone man, raising one delicately arched brow in surprise. "What an indiscriminate use of exclamation points," she said aloud before turning to the next note.

*My love, what was once between us can never be buried.
You are the only man who has ever claimed my heart.*

Can you ever forget the nights I have spent in your arms? I will be waiting for you at half past midnight in the atrium.

“Good Lord.” Arabella felt her cheeks growing warm from a blush. What a sticky situation that could be, she thought looking askance at the prone Lothario in her bed. The handwriting in this missive was definitely not the same as that in the first letter.

But again, this letter was as little help as the first in identifying the mystery man. Hesitantly she refolded the letters, still blushing at what she had read. Shaking her head at the continuing mystery, Bella put the notes back in the pocket.

Holding his clothing close to her breast, she stood up and moved to the small chest at the foot of the bed. Kneeling with her bundle, she carefully folded each item and placed it inside.

Closing the lid, she turned to the large, heavy coat with its six layers of capes at the shoulders. Surely this article of clothing had helped save the man’s life, she deduced. It was so dense that it must have slowed the lead ball’s force.

Her hands shook now at the horrible memory of the previous few hours. She had never faced so perilous a task as to remove a slug from someone’s flesh. Yet she had known that it would be much better for the man if the piece of lead could be removed quickly.

Arabella had always been one to do what needed to be done. Ever since her mother’s death, she had had to be the practical one in her family.

So, with a fervent prayer and items from her sewing bag, Arabella had set out to carefully remove the lead ball from the gaping wound in the unconscious man’s shoulder. She had instructed Tommy to hold the stranger’s arm securely, and she’d been thankful the prone man had only flinched reflexively once or twice at her probing. Arabella had held her breath, the large darning needle poised above his bloody shoulder as he moved restlessly. Arabella knew that it would have been difficult for Tommy to have tried to restrain him if he had suddenly regained his senses or begun to thrash about.

But luckily he had remained unaware, and the slug had been fairly easy to dislodge, to Arabella's weak-kneed relief.

"Good show, Bella," Tommy had said as she placed the piece of lead in an old chipped cup.

The wound had still been bleeding steadily even after she had cleaned it and carefully sewn it up, so she had spent a considerable time pressing a pad of cloth against it, hoping to stem the flow of blood.

The bleeding had stopped long enough for her to make a bandage from her old gown. She had almost cried in exhausted frustration when the bleeding started again as she attempted to bandage his wound. She was neither weak nor petite, but it had been an exhausting struggle to lift the stranger's large body enough to wrap the strips of muslin around his shoulder and across his chest to keep the arm from moving. If only her papa had not been detained overnight at Penninghurst Park because of the dreadful storm, they would have fared much better, she had thought.

Now she stood looking down at the very pale stranger, holding his heavy coat with the many capes, and hoping as she had never hoped for anything that she had done enough to save him.

The damp, early-morning chill seemed to permeate the room. Arabella hugged the coat closer and suddenly felt something hard amongst its folds. Looking down, she fumbled with the coat until she found a pocket. Her fingers pulled something cold, small, and hard from an interior pocket of the garment.

It was a gold watch. Sitting down again, she examined the watch closely, turning it repeatedly in her hands until it was warm, looking for anything that would give another clue to the stranger's identity. In exquisite detail, the same coat of arms that was on the leather pouch was engraved on the back of the timepiece. Her thumb found the catch, and she opened the front piece. It was almost nine o'clock, she noted. On the inside of the front piece, intertwined in beautiful scrollwork, were the initials A.W.

A. She mused over the letter as, again, she looked at the aristocratic features of the very still man in her bed. Allen? Adam? Albert? She hoped he would soon be able to as-

suage her curiosity about his name. And about many other things too, she thought as she closed the watch and put it back in the coat pocket. Such as, What in the world was a man like him doing in Mabry Green in the middle of the night with a lead ball in his shoulder?