

Chapter One

He was naked except for one gray sock on his right foot and a red bandana precariously spread over his private parts. She felt her face flame. Verity didn't know his name or where he came from, but with her father away almost all the way to Prescott, she had little choice but to treat the stranger. She was pretty much the "doctor on call" even though she had never finished medical school. But this was beyond anything she'd done as her father's assistant. He usually shielded her from such displays.

Mark Milner, the town livery owner, hauled the man's legs, while Jeb Hays, the farrier, carried the fellow's arms. The bandana breezed off and Verity had to tell herself not to panic. She'd seen baby boys; she knew what their parts looked like. A grown man was more than a sight to behold, however, a sight for which she was unprepared.

"Close your eyes, Miss Verity," Mr. Milner said sharply.

"Nonsense." Her voice quaked—not the certain and commanding tone she hoped for. And her gaze couldn't move from it. Her face was hot, and the rest of her tingled.

"It ain't right, seeing as you're an unmarried female," Mr. Hays said firmly as he helped put the man up on the exam table. After the stranger was settled there, Hays took the hat off his own head and put it over the man's privates. "That'll have ter do, I guess."

The man was breathing, but blood congealed at the corner of his mouth, a shiner practically covered the upper right quarter of his face, and his chin wore a few nasty looking scrapes. His left thigh was swollen and bruised and a horse shoe print shone livid as a calf's liver on the leg. He was a young man, possibly only a few years older than she, maybe thirty, with short brown hair with lighter streaks. As she checked his pupils, finding unfocused piercing blue eyes, she responded to the older man's comment. "It's not as if I haven't seen naked men before, Mr. Hays."

"You have?" Milner asked. "I can't hardly believe it."

"I don't believe it," Mr. Hays stated without hesitation.

Verity hesitated. "Well..."

Hays poked Milner in the ribs with a pointed elbow. "See? It's a tall tale, just like always."

Sighing, Verity leaned down to put her ear to the unconscious fellow's chest—her father had taken their only stethoscope with him out of town. "Well, I've seen naked men in books— anatomy books."

"Tain't the same," Mr. Milner pronounced. "You need to mend your lyin' ways, Miss Verity. Your pa will take a switch to you, and I wouldn't blame him."

"Hush," she said, listening to her patient's steady heartbeat. A moment later, she took his wrist to feel for his pulse. It was strong and healthy.

"Is he dead?" Milner asked, his thick blond eyebrows beetling.

"Course he ain't, you dern fool. He's breathin' ain't he?" Mr. Hays responded.

Milner huffed indignantly.

The stranger had long legs with thick thighs and blocky, horse-hardened calves. His feet were dusty, but not really dirty. She removed his gray sock, making sure his foot wasn't injured. He was a tall man, with broad shoulders. There was a modest mat of dark chest hair which was crisp and fuzzy against her ear.

While he remained unconscious, she had the men help her turn him this way and that, looking for more wounds. There were scrapes and bruises and he had a knot the size of an egg on the back of his head, but nothing as bad as the contused thigh. He sported a ragged scar on his left upper arm, however, it was clear that the well-toned muscle underneath the old injury had not been affected.

"Where did you find him? And why doesn't he have clothes? Was he awake when you found him?" she asked the two men as she prodded his bruised thigh.

"He was on the trail north of town, buck naked in the middle of the road. Sprawled out like a filleted trout," Hays told her. "Looked like he'd been there a while. See how he's all tanned like a seven-day old buffalo hide?"

"He looks like he was in a fight, but I think perhaps he was stepped on by a horse. That would explain the horseshoe shape on his leg." She felt the thick muscle a bit more. "I think the bone might be broken."

The scruffy farrier snorted. "Probably some stage robber, got caught high-tailing it away."

She frowned. "No identification nearby?"

Milner shook his head. "Nothin' but scuff marks in the dirt. There was more than one man for him to fight, if I don't miss my guess."

"Well, they sure picked him clean," she said.

"Sure did, Miss Verity," the livery man agreed.

"I need to splint this leg until Father returns and can determine if it's broken." She nodded toward Milner. "We only had one ready-made splint, and that went to Mr. Comstock when he sprained his knee. Hmm." What could be used as a splint? Then an idea struck her. "Can you find me some wood? Maybe some lath? Maybe six or eight boards."

"Sure, Miss Verity. The widow Snowden jest had a room added on. There ought to be some there."

"That's a good idea. Please fetch some." She caught Mr. Hays's gaze. "And, can you go to the town ice house and get me a chunk?"

"How big?"

"Oh, maybe three pounds?"

Hays grabbed his hat, colored, then put it back. "I'll jest leave that here for the time-bein'."

Both men left her alone with her patient. Verity wondered who he was, and what his story might be. How had he gotten so beat up and left for dead? She stared at the hat over his privates. She hadn't really gotten a good look before. Well, not a closeup look. She shouldn't look now. But the temptation was nearly overwhelming. There she was with the handsome stranger; he was unconscious and unlikely to know she'd peeked. No one would know.

As she lifted the hat an inch, the man moaned softly. The hat made a small plop as it fell down over his crotch once again. Verity, feeling her face go hot, wondered if he was coming awake. "Hello?" He made no other sound, nor did he move.

"Well, so much for that," she muttered. She'd best get a sheet to cover him.

When the men returned with their items, the man was decently covered except for his face and his wounded leg. The hat remained where Mr. Hays left it—her sense of adventure had departed. Of course, the sheet-covered hat shape over his unmentionables looked ridiculous.

"Can I get my—" started Mr. Hays.

"Yes!" she said before he could finish.

There was a smaller mound left under the sheet when the hat moved to Mr. Hays's sweat-matted salt and pepper scruffy hair. Verity took a deep breath and drew herself up to her full five feet two inches, squaring her shoulders. With a sotto voce vow to remain professional and detached, she got busy.

Once she sorted out the supplies, she fashioned a splint from the lath, doubling and tripling it where needed. She bent the stranger's knee slightly and completed the full-length splint, wrapping it all with bandages. Her helpers manipulated the patient until the splint was finished. As they watched over him, Verity got out cloths to hold chunks of the ice, and applied them to the stranger's bruised leg and the back of his head.

It was awkward treating him while he was buck naked, but her father's clothes would be far too small. One older man was about the right size, though. "Mr. Hays, might I prevail upon you to loan this person some clothes? Maybe a nightshirt, or some..." She blushed. "Something?"

He frowned and rubbed his straggly, gray-speckled beard. "I don't much like loaning my things to a possible bandit, Miss Verity."

"It's hard to treat him in his current condition, Mr. Hays. As you pointed out, it's not very proper this way."

He considered for a moment more. "No, t'aint proper. I'll see what I c'n do."

"Thank you, sir. You are most kind," she said, offering a small smile.

He snorted, his cheeks getting pink above his beard. "It's only decent, considerin'." He pushed his hat down on his head decisively, and left Verity and Mr. Milner alone, watching the steady breathing of the unconscious man.

After a few uncomfortable minutes had passed, Mr. Hays returned with a grayed, worn, knee-length man's woolen nightshirt.

Upon the two older men's insistence, she left the room while they dressed him. While they were at it, Verity readied the guest room. He could hardly convalesce in the Virtue hotel without attendance. And she was not in a position to pay anyone to care for him. It would have to be done in her father's house, in the room by the stairs, adjacent to the treatment room.

Verity showed Mr. Milner and Mr. Hays where the stretcher was, and they used it to take the stranger to the small room. As they passed through the dim hallway between the stairs and the guest room, Verity's grandmother stepped down the stairs.

"Verity? What's going on?"

"Nothing, Granny. We have a patient who needs to stay with us a while. Do not trouble yourself."

Patience Sutton continued down the stairs, her old-fashioned, blue bombazine, gown rustling as she walked. She gave the unconscious man a good look. "Why, if it isn't Mr. Sutton!" She hurried over to the side of the stretcher.

The men stopped with their burden and Verity glanced up sharply. "Granny? Are you confused?" Granny had been having memory spells lately. She sometimes forgot Verity's name, or where she'd put her embroidery, or why she was sitting in the parlor with a book in her hands.

"Confused? Of course not. I know my own husband when I see him." Granny took the patient's hand. "Darling? Darling? Whatever is wrong? Talk to me, Tom. It's Patience. Please wake up."

A rock settled into Verity's stomach. Granny was having one of her spells again. As if Verity didn't have enough to do. Well, she loved her grandmother dearly. A little indulgence might be in order until the event passed.

"He's injured, Granny," Verity told her. "But he'll be all right soon enough. I thought we should put him in the guest room, since he's unable to walk right now and it would be hard for Mr. Milner and Mr. Hays to take him upstairs."

Granny nodded. "Of course. That's very wise, Verity dear." She released the man's hand. "I'll make some tea. He always likes tea in the afternoon."

"Mrs. Perkins!" Verity called as Mr. Hays and Mr. Milner took the stretcher into the guest room. The housekeeper came running.

The heavy-set, middle-aged woman puffed a little from hurrying. "Yes, Miss Verity?"

"Please help Granny with the tea. I'll be in the guest room with our guest."

"Guest?"

"It's a long story," she said as she turned away. "Tea, if you please."

"Yes, ma'am."

The guest room was shadowy, the corners dark. It was cool and smelled like beeswax. The sun was setting, drawing odd pictures on the walls, defining the window panes. The men put the patient on the bed and Verity covered him with a quilt then lit a lamp.

"Thank you, Mr. Hays, Mr. Milner. I truly appreciate your help. I'm sure our patient will thank you himself once he awakens. You probably saved his life."

"Weren't nothin'," Mr. Milner said, though he stood up rather more proudly.

"When will your father be back?" Mr. Hays asked.

"I don't exactly know. He said a few days. There was some sort of fire at the Lazy C, and people were injured."

Mr. Hays nodded. "I heard 'bout that. Terrible affair. Well, if you find yourself needin' more help with this varmint, you can call upon me." He nudged Mr. Milner in the ribs, startling the man from his study of the sleeping patient.

"Right! Me, too."

"Thank you both."

They adjusted their hats and left quietly, leaving Verity alone with the wounded man again.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "Granny thinks you're her husband, you know. You are very naughty to cause such a stir." Nothing but even breathing responded. "I suppose I'll call you Mr. Smith, since I have to call you something."

She adjusted the ice compresses and made sure his leg was well-positioned, then went to fetch some tea and a book. It could be a long night, waiting for Mr. Smith to awaken.

* * *

The light was bright against his eyelids. The scent of fresh greenery curled up his nose and a faint breeze wafted over his warm forehead. His left leg hurt like hell and felt stiff. It was elevated higher than the right. As he heard a tinkling sound like a teaspoon in a cup, he slowly opened his eyes. His vision swam for a moment, then focused.

He was in a small room, quaintly decorated with walnut furniture and framed, painted landscapes on the walls. It was brightly lit from the open windows on the outer wall. A woman sat at his bedside, reading a journal, and sipping a beverage from a teacup.

She was exquisite. Her red hair was drawn up in a chignon, leaving curls artfully arranged on the sides. Small oval spectacles sat firmly on the bridge of her nose. Rather than making her look like a bookworm, they gave her face a more sophisticated appearance. Her skin was porcelain pale, but her cheeks were dusted with the color of roses, attesting to her good health. She wore a pinstriped dress of green, with a long white apron on top.

"Miss..." he choked out. His voice was rough, his throat raw. What was wrong with him?

"Oh!" She rose and ran to him. "Oh, Mr. Smith! You've awakened." She took his wrist and felt for his pulse. "How are you feeling?"

"I hurt like hell."

Her cheeks got pinker. "Of course you do. You've been severely injured. How did it happen?"

"Water," he said, his voice gravelly. He didn't want to try to answer her questions, because, truth was, he didn't remember. It was a complete mystery to him how he'd gotten where he was, why, and when.

"Of course." She poured a half-glass of water from a pitcher, and cradled his head so he could take a few sips. "Is that better?"

He swallowed, feeling his throat burn and then get better as the cooling liquid trickled down. "Better."

"Good." She put the glass aside. "Oh, Mr. Smith, you had us so worried."

"How long have I been here?"

"Three days and nights. Today is Wednesday."

So, whatever had happened to him, had happened on Sunday. He closed his eyes tightly, hoping to remember, but nothing came. "Where am I?"

"Why, you're at the home of Dr. Denby Bucknell, my father, in the town of Virtue, located in the Arizona Territory."

"Nice meeting you, Miss Bucknell," he said, trying to smile. The expression made his head ache worse, so it was quickly extinguished.

"And you, Mr. Smith." She sat back down in the chair, pulling it closer to his bedside. "'Mr. Smith' is what we've been calling you because we don't know your real name. What is your proper name?"

"I...I am..." He closed his eyes again, trying to wrest the information from his aching brain. Nothing came except a faint tingling. The memory was so close, so very close, and yet it escaped him. "I'm sorry, Miss, but I don't know."

Miss Bucknell offered her small hand. "Then we shall continue to call you Mr. Smith. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, although I'm afraid it isn't under the best of circumstances."

He shook her hand and wondered at the weakness he felt all over. Her hand was soft and smooth, tiny, like the rest of her, though she had some pretty pleasant curves under her apron.

"Why am I here?"

"You don't remember what happened to you?"

He shook his head and then winced at the pain.

"Puzzling. Well, two of our townsmen found you south of town. It looked like you'd been waylaid by robbers. You had nothing. No identification, no personal items. You were..." She blushed. "Unclothed."

Naked and penniless. No way to know who he really was. Clearly, he'd been beaten. "What's wrong with me? My leg is killing me."

"My father says you likely have a badly bruised femur—that's your thigh bone. And you got bashed on the head or fell on your head. That may be why you don't recall the incident. What is the last thing you do recall?"

He squirmed on the bed, and tried to sit up. There was a distinct disadvantage to not being upright, and he didn't like it. It made him feel frail and helpless, two things he was not used to feeling. Seeing him struggle, Miss Bucknell came to his aid, and between the two of them, they got him sitting upright in the bed, his back against pillows propped on the headboard. Shooting pains sparked up and down his leg, but he tried not to grimace. He'd be damned if he'd be a sissy.

"Let me go fetch my father. He'll want to take a look at you, now that you're awake. You just rest a moment."

"Okay."

She hurried out of the room, leaving him to ponder his circumstances. He'd have to think of himself as Smith for the time being. It was damned frustrating not to be able to recall something as simple as your own name. If only he could remember what had happened to him, why he was...where was he? He vaguely remembered riding on a trail.

"Daisy!"

The doctor came in at that moment, his daughter trailing close behind. "Daisy? Who is Daisy?" The older man came over to the bedside and felt for a pulse. As he lowered his arm, he introduced himself. "I'm Denby Bucknell, the doctor for this town. My daughter says you don't recall your name, or much of anything. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"No memory of where you were hurt, how you were hurt, where you came from? Nothing?"

"Things are a little fuzzy up here right now," he answered, tapping a forefinger on his temple.

"Hmm." Dr. Bucknell bent and peered into his eyes. "Follow my finger." He moved his pointer from right to left a few inches back and forth. "I think you have a mild concussion. That could account for the memory loss. You don't recall what happened to you?"

"No, sir."

"Very unfortunate. How does your leg feel?"

"Painful. How long will I be laid up like this?"

"Perhaps a week, and then we'll get you up on crutches. You won't be able to walk on it for two weeks or so, and you might limp for a while."

"Damn!"

The doctor cleared his throat.

"Oh, sorry, Miss Bucknell. I forgot my manners."

Her blue eyes twinkled as she smiled. "You are forgiven, Mr. Smith."

"Are you sure it's that bad, Doctor?"

"I'm sure, young man. I'll start asking around town to see if anyone here was expecting you. Perhaps we can find your family, and you can rest with them more comfortably during your convalescence."

"Yes. That would be good."

"Now who is Daisy? Is that your wife?" Miss Bucknell asked.

Remembering brought on a painful grin. "No, Daisy is my horse."

"Are you sure? Because if you have a wife named Daisy, we might be able to find her for you. I'm sure she'd want to know your whereabouts."

"No, I'm not married." He paused. Was he? "At least, I don't think so. And I'm sure Daisy is my horse. He's a roan, about seventeen hands high, with a black mane and tail."

"He?" she asked, wide-eyed. "You named your male horse Daisy?"

Yeah, why did his gelding horse have that name? Then he remembered. "There was a little girl. She named my horse for me. I told her he needed a boy's name, but she insisted. It just stuck."

Dr. Bucknell smiled at that, then asked, "Was the girl your daughter, maybe? We really must find your family, Mr. Smith."

Wracking his brain only made his head hurt worse. "I'm sorry. I've told you all I know."

"How distressing," Miss Bucknell said softly.

"You'll remember eventually, young man," the doctor told him. "In the meantime, you're under Verity's care, with some care from Mrs. Perkins, the widow who is our housekeeper. Some things wouldn't be appropriate for Verity but my daughter is a good nurse. When you're ready, we have crutches for you."

A wave of fatigue washed over him. This interview had been taxing, and now all he wanted to do was sleep. "Thank you."

Dr. Bucknell patted his arm. "Rest now."

His eyes drifted closed as the older man left the room. He heard, rather than saw, Miss Bucknell take her seat in the chair again, her gown rustling as she sat. Verity was her name. Truth. It seemed to fit her well.