

Chapter 1

Over the Wall

Chesham, Northamptonshire, June third, 1645

I will not die. Not today, not like this.

The six horsemen on my heels and the pistol balls that sing through the air around my head give lie to my intention. I know I have been hit, but there will be time later for pain. Now I just have to survive.

We told the household I had been summoned to Oxford. I had not planned on running into a patrol of the enemy. Several of the scoundrels were local men who recognized me. They shot my horse from under me as I turned to flee and now I am on foot.

As I cut across the fields on the outskirts of the Chesham village, I can see the cottage ahead. Behind me I hear the thunder of hooves.

Alice screams in my head, "*The wall, Nathaniel. You must go over the wall.*"

I must put my trust in witches and pray that Alice is right.

* * * *

Chesham Northamptonshire June 3rd 1995

He came hurtling over the garden wall into my neat little garden, breaking the bright foxgloves and dahlias I had labored over for so long. His shoulders tensed and he crouched low, resting his head against the wall, his chest heaving from the exertion of running.

I jumped off the dilapidated garden lounger, pulling the ear pieces of my Walkman from my ears in my haste.

"You idiot. What the hell are you doing? Get off my garden bed."

The man jumped to his feet, swiveling to face me. He looked down at the trampled flower bed and obligingly stepped out of it.

To a person who does not spend their lives around military re-enactors, that he appeared to be dressed in period costume with a sword at his hip might seem a little alarming. My brother, Alan, is an enthusiastic participant in the local military re-enactment group and the presence of seventeenth century warriors in my garden is not as

unusual as one might think. The village of Chesham had been the site of some minor skirmish during the English Civil War and Alan and his re-enactors were frequently called on to perform some duty at the bridge, generally followed by a visit to the village pub with me trailing along behind them.

As the intruder and I faced each other across my immaculate lawn, it occurred to me, despite the dirt streaking his clean shaven face and sweat darkened auburn hair, this man was a definite improvement to Alan's usual hirsute and overweight companions.

"Are you a friend of Alan's?" I enquired, my anger dissipating. When he didn't respond I continued, "Look, I've nothing against the Civil War Association, or whatever it is you belong to, but this is private property."

The man glanced toward the lane and returned his gaze to me, looking up and down my body in an appraising manner. His right eyebrow arched and a smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. He took a breath and executed the sort of courtly bow I would expect of someone dressed as a seventeenth century cavalier. Alan's friends did it all the time.

"Mistress, I crave your pardon. I did not wish to intrude in such an unseemly manner. Please... if you wish to cover yourself..." He waved a hand at my person and turned away, poking at the crushed dahlias with his booted foot as if he thought he could resurrect them.

I glanced down at my crop top and shorts, and saw nothing untoward in my choice of dress for a quiet afternoon sunbathing in my own garden on a rare, beautiful, English summer day. I wondered if I should make a sprint for the front gate and summon help from my elderly, deaf neighbor.

"Look, whoever you are," I said. "This is my house and my garden. You're trespassing. Please leave..." I pointed to the neat, green painted gate.

He looked in the direction I indicated and inclined his head. "As you wish, mistress. I apologize for the intrusion."

He took a couple of steps and grimaced, his right hand going to his left sleeve. For the first time I saw the sleeve of his jacket had been ripped and a dark stain marred the blue cloth of his jacket. He looked down at his arm as if noticing it for the first time and the color drained from his face.

I knew that look. Even as I sprang to his assistance, he crumpled at the knees, falling face down on the grass.

My instinct as a doctor overcame my reservations and I knelt beside him. As I turned him over into the coma position, he groaned and his eyes flickered open.

“You’re hurt,” I said, stating the obvious.

He sat up, running a hand through his thick, dark hair. “It’s only a scratch. I have no wish to trouble you, mistress, but if I could perhaps have something to drink? Then I will leave you in peace.”

I gestured to the kitchen door. “Come inside. I’ll get you some water and have a look at that arm. The weapons you guys wield must be full of rust.”

As he rose to his feet, his knees threatened to buckle again so I took his good arm and we made slow progress into the kitchen.

Inside my bright, newly renovated kitchen he stopped and took a step backwards.

“What manner of a place is this?”

I looked around the room. Despite its expensive, modern fit out, it should have been immediately recognizable.

“My kitchen,” I said, with an uncertain quaver to my voice.

“Kitchen? It’s like no kitchen I’ve ever seen. Where is your fire?”

“In the lounge room. Now sit down.”

My guest slumped into the chair at the table. He looked completely out of place in the modern surroundings, his clothes heavy and cumbersome for the warm day.

I fetched my bag of medical supplies from the bathroom and returned to the kitchen, to find him sitting rigidly upright with his eyes screwed shut.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

He opened one eye and gave me a crooked smile. “Are you a witch?”

I laughed. “Witch? Hardly. Although Alan did suggest if I ever wanted to join the association he thought I would make the perfect witch. Do you know Alan Shepherd?”

He frowned and shook his head. “I think not.”

“Strange. I thought you all knew each other. He’s with...let me think, what do they call themselves? Mortlock’s Regiment.”

The gray-green eyes widened. “A scurvy roundhead!”

I shrugged. With a professor of seventeenth century history in the family, the distinction between scurvy roundheads and cavaliers was not lost on me.

“Quite possibly. It seems to be all about running around with dangerous weapons and drinking mates. Now let’s get that jacket off.”

Easier said than done. Re-enactors pride themselves on authenticity. To get to the jacket, we first had to remove the sword hanging from its baldric and untie the heavy silken scarf he wore around his waist. Then the dark blue woolen jacket had to be unlaced. Years of working in hospitals had made me quite adept at removing clothing from comatose patients and I had him down to shirt sleeves without hurting the injured arm.

“There. That must feel better. Fancy wearing all that kit on a day like today. You must be truly mad. Now the shirt.”

He regarded me through narrowed eyes. “Do you know what you are doing?”

“I’m a doctor,” I replied.

“A doctor? But you’re a woman.”

“Last time I looked. Do you want me to look at that arm or not?”

The left sleeve of his shirt was stiff with dried blood but the material had not yet adhered to the wound. I removed the shirt without resorting to scissors, revealing a rather attractive, well muscled chest.

The man grimaced as he raised his left arm to inspect the damage.

I clucked my tongue and turned my attention from the fine pectoral muscles to the arm, inspecting the deep, nasty gash in the firm biceps. This guy worked out. Apart from a grim tightening of his lips, my patient did not flinch as I cleaned around the wound.

“What did this?”

He held my gaze with his for a long moment before saying through gritted teeth, “It’s of no matter.”

It had been a long time since I had done a stint in ER, and my patients are normally under the age of eighteen, but I had served my time in an inner city London hospital and I recognized a bullet wound when I saw one.

Something with a high velocity had winged him.

I met his gaze and felt him willing me not to comment further. To be honest, I

didn't want the hassle of reporting a gunshot wound and all the attendant paperwork. I would patch him up and send him on his way. The less I knew, the better.

"I don't think I'll ever understand you re-enactors. I've been to a few of Alan's musters and quite honestly it amazes me that more people don't get seriously hurt." I paused in cleaning the wound and looked up. "I only saw Alan last night and he didn't mention anything about a muster today. Where are the rest of your lot?"

He frowned. "The rest of...my lot? Safely in their quarters, I would hope."

"Oh, so you're not playing around here then?"

"No..." he replied with deliberate slowness as if talking to an imbecile.

"This cut should be stitched. When did you last have a tetanus shot?" I asked.

His eyes widened. "I have never shot a *tetanus* in my life!" He paused, frowning. "I'm not even sure I've seen one. Are they dangerous?"

I had to bite my lip to stop from laughing. "An injection, you dolt. When did you have your last tetanus injection?"

His brow furrowed. "I don't think I have ever had an...injection."

I straightened and crossed my arms. "Look, you don't have to keep up this facade with me. You live in the twentieth century and it would be easier for both of us if you stopped the pretence and gave me straight answers."

My visitor glanced at me and ran his hand through his hair. He shook his head, looking around the room with genuine confusion in his eyes.

"Mistress, I crave your pardon. The...twentieth century?"

When I worked in ER, I encountered people from all walks of life-- the drug addicted, the delusional, the paranoid...but this man seemed different. His clear gray-green eyes betrayed puzzlement, but not fear.

"Perhaps if you start by telling me your name?" I ventured.

His fingers drummed on the tabletop. "Nathaniel Preston of Heatherhill Hall."

"Heatherhill Hall?"

His eyes brightened. "Aye. That is my home. You know of it?"

"I've visited it a couple of times. It's only a few miles from here."

He frowned. "I am sure I would recall your visit." For the first time a smile caught at the corner of his lips. "Particularly if you habitually wear such fetching outfits."

I ignored the last comment. "Do you live in one of the cottages on the estate?"

"Of course not. I live in the Hall. My family has owned the manor of Heatherhill for centuries."

"They may well have done, but, unless you have some sort of caretaker's flat, you can't possibly live there, Mr. Preston. It's been in the hands of the National Trust for years."

He raised his hand and rubbed his eyes, and his shoulders slumped. "Mistress, you truly talk in riddles. Who, or what, is the National Trust?"

I sighed. The pretence had begun to get wearying. He really must have had quite a knock on the head if he actually imagined he belonged in the seventeenth century.

"Are you going to let me look at your head?" I asked.

His hand hit the table and I jumped. "Mistress, my head is quite clear. I have taken no hit to it. Now if I could trouble you to bind my arm, I will be gone."

"Your arm needs to be stitched and I do not have any local anesthetic."

"Do what you must, but hurry. Those scurvy roundheads will no doubt return in search of me, and I have no wish to get you into trouble."

Scurvy roundheads indeed. I rose to my feet and squinted at the wound. "Do you want me to suture this now?"

"I do not require you to do anything, mistress." He sounded exasperated. "Stitch it or not, it is all one to me."

"I should take you to hospital."

"Hospital? No. I am not dying. If it is too great a trouble for you, I assure you my grandmother has skill enough to see to it." He got to his feet and turned for the door, and then as if remembering something, he turned back, a lopsided smile on his face. "If you could lend me your horse, I would be grateful. It is a long ride home. You have my word that I will return it anon."

"My horse? I don't own a horse. Look, Nathaniel, you've lost a bit of blood, if you like I can give you a ride home."

"But you said you had no horse?"

"In the car." I could not help the exasperation that crept into my voice. His continuing delusion had really begun to concern me. "Nathaniel, look at me. What year

do you think this is?"

"The year of our lord 1645."

"1645?" I stared at him. "Nathaniel, it is 1995."

He narrowed his eyes. "No, you jest." He sank onto the kitchen chair, his eyes glassy.

"I do not jest. Now stay there. I'm going to ring my brother. Perhaps he can talk some sense into you."

Keeping a wary eye on my visitor, I reached for the phone and carried it into the living room while I waited for Alan to pick up.

"Hey, Jess." Alan greeted me cheerfully.

"Alan, are you busy?"

"I'm correcting papers, nothing I can't put off. Is this important?"

"I have a man in my kitchen who thinks he is living in 1645," I whispered.

"Sounds like a case for the psychs, not me."

"Please come over, Alan. There is something about him...sorry I can't explain--"

"Is he threatening you?" Alan's tone was alarmed.

"No, not at all. He's just a little...confused."

My brother clucked in annoyance. "All right, I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

I washed my hands in the bathroom and returned to the kitchen. Nathaniel Preston slumped over the table, his head resting on his good right arm, an air of defeat and exhaustion in the line of his shoulders. He straightened as I rustled the packages in my medical bag and selected a sterilized packet with needle and thread.

I pulled on surgical gloves and looked across at him as I tore open the packet. "This will hurt," I said.

He raised tired, defeated eyes to meet mine. "Do what you must, mistress. I've had worse hurts than this."

"Jessica. My name is Jessica Shepherd."

"Mistress Shepherd." He managed a faint smile, his face pale beneath the tan.

"Did you say you were a woman doctor?"

"Yes. Although I'm a pediatrician," I said.

He frowned. "Pediatrician?"

“I specialize in children’s health.” I held up the needle.

He closed his eyes. “A doctor for children,” he said quietly, more to himself than to me.

The muscles in Nathaniel’s jaw tightened as I sutured the wound but to his credit he did not flinch. I followed up with tetanus and penicillin injections, which he bore without complaint.

“Well, I will hand it to you, Nathaniel Preston, you’re pretty tough.”

He let out a deep breath. “I’ve been hurt before.”

“So I see.” My gaze dropped to the jagged scar below his ribs. “I didn’t realize the Civil War Association was quite that authentic.”

“What is this Civil War Association of which you speak?”

I looked into his puzzled eyes and shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. You can talk about it with Alan.”

He spread his fingers on the table and looked down at them. “Mistress Shepherd, is what you say true? Is this the year 1995?”

I nodded. “1995.”

He straightened his arm and grimaced. Recognizing the pinched look around his eyes and mouth, I stood up. “Nathaniel. That arm must be hurting like hell. I will give you something for the pain.”

I went to the tap in the kitchen and turned it on. Behind me, the chair scraped, and Nathaniel joined me at the basin. He ran his hand under the flow of water and as I turned the tap off, he shook his head and said with what sounded like wonder in his voice, “Do that again.”

I complied. He put his hand on the tap, turning it on and off. Before I could stop him, he’d turned the hot water tap on hard. Scalding water shot from the tap and he drew his hand back. “Incredible,” he marveled, shaking his hand with a grimace. “Hot water on command. Do you have a servant to heat it for you?”

“No,” I replied, instinctively grabbing his hand and holding it under the cold water. “I am all out of servants. The gas board does it quite adequately. Let me look at that hand.” He held out his hand but apart from being a little red, there didn’t appear to be any damage.

I looked up at him. “Do you really need me to tell you the red dot means hot water?”

“Red dot...hot water...I will remember,” he mumbled.

He took the pain killers and a glass of water I held out for him, weighing the little pills in his hand. “What do I do with these?”

“Swallow them.”

The mesmerizing gray-green eyes narrowed. “Is this poison?”

I shook my head. “I promise it’s not poison and it will take the pain away.”

He swallowed the pills, washing them down with the water, making a face at the bitter aftertaste.

He straightened and picked up my right hand. “Thank you for your care of me, Mistress Shepherd.”

Before I could react, he kissed my hand. I withdrew it as if I had been scalded. The touch of his lips on my skin had been no more than a butterfly touch, but it sent a lightning bolt through me as if it had ignited a touch paper that could not be extinguished.

His eyes met mine, holding my gaze. “Jessica Shepherd, are you a good doctor?”

“I believe so.”

He took a breath and leaned against the draining board, running a hand over his eyes.

“Forgive me,” he said. “Just a little dizzy.”

“You’re still looking rather pale. I think you should rest for a little before you go home. Would you like a bath?”

He frowned. “A bath? Why? I had a bath last month.”

I wrinkled my nose. While not entirely unpleasant, a long run in heavy clothes on a hot day left a lingering scent of unwashed male. “Without wishing to be offensive, Nathaniel, I would prefer if you did have a bath before lying down on my spare bed. Follow me.”

I threw open the door to the bathroom. “I will run the bath and that is...” I indicated the toilet, groping for a word he might recognize in his confused state, “...the privy.” I demonstrated its flushing properties. “Now, towels are here and in the bottle is soap for your hair. You can use this dressing gown.”

I pulled out the large, white, fluffy toweling gown left by Mark, and no doubt borrowed from one of the many expensive hotels Mark frequented on his holidays.

My guest seemed more interested in the toilet. He kept pressing the flush button.

“Give it a chance to refill,” I said with infinite patience. “There, your bath is run. I’ll leave you to it.” As I closed the door on him, I added, “and try not to get the bandage wet.” I had used a waterproof dressing but knowing men, thought it worth pointing out.

He swept me a low bow. “Mistress Shepherd, I am indebted to you.”

“I will put some supper on while you have a bath.”

It had been a long time since I had cooked anything more than baked beans on toast and I rather enjoyed the challenge of throwing together a simple meal of spaghetti bolognese.

Alan knocked at the kitchen window, nearly causing me to slice my finger.

“So where is your mystery man?” he asked as I let him in.

“Having a bath.”

“It’s a bit of a risk inviting strange men into your house, Jess. Why didn’t you call the police?”

That was a question I couldn’t answer. “I don’t feel threatened by him and there’s something about his story that... I don’t know--promise me you won’t laugh--has a ring of truth to it.”

Alan picked up Nathaniel’s torn and stained jacket and shirt from the back the kitchen chair.

He let out a low whistle and I looked up from chopping onions, my eyes streaming. “Do you know the best way to get blood out of linen?” I sniffed.

Alan turned to me, holding the shirt in his hand. “Jess. This stuff is genuine.”

“What do you mean ‘genuine’?”

“The cloth, the hand stitching, the lace. It’s all authentic seventeenth century.”

“Nonsense. If it was genuine it would be antique, hardly the stuff to wear while you go scrabbling over someone’s wall or playing your silly war games, come to that.”

“Jessie, I’m telling you, I know all the makers of reproduction clothing, and there is no way they would ever get this degree of accuracy just in the choice of fabric. Look at the blackwork embroidery on the shirt...unless it was purloined from some museum...”

He frowned and screwed his nose. "But even then it couldn't possibly be in such good condition, bloodstains aside."

"What do you know about blackwork embroidery?" I scoffed.

"More than you," he countered and turned his attention to the sword, drawing it from its scabbard. He turned the blade over, weighing it in his hand. "Lovely."

"A Wilkinson sword?" I grinned at the avaricious glint in his eye.

"Hardly. Jess, this is a genuine seventeenth century sword." His eyes widened, and he gave a low whistle. "And if I'm not mistaken, that is genuine seventeenth century blood."

I glanced at the darkening substance on the sword and recoiled. "Oh my God, he's killed someone. I'm harboring a mad serial killer."

"Or he is exactly who he says he is," Alan responded, his expression grave.

"What does he call himself?"

I wiped my nose with a tissue and turned to face my brother. "Nathaniel Preston of Heatherhill Hall."

"There was a Colonel Nathaniel Preston living at Heatherhill Hall at the time of the Civil War," Alan said.

I laughed, unconvinced. "Are you telling me there is a chance my friend in the bathroom is who he says he is?"

Alan shrugged. "*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*" he quoted.

"Oh, come on, Alan. You're telling me that while I'm minding my own business in my back garden in June, 1995, a man from the seventeenth century comes over my garden wall?"

"I'm not saying it's logical. I'm just saying strange things can happen."

I wiped my hands on a tea towel and thrust the onions into the pan. "Look, Alan, he's one of your re-enactors who has got himself spaced out on something chemical and thinks he is genuinely from 1645. You were right first time, he probably needs a psych assessment but hey, that's just my professional opinion. Feel free to ignore me."

"So who is he?"

"As I told Mistress Shepherd, my name is Nathaniel Preston." The voice came from the door.

We both started and turned to the doorway, where Nathaniel Preston stood clad only in Mark's purloined dressing gown. I wondered how much of the conversation he had heard.

From the worried look on his face, most of it.

"I assure you both, I am not a..." he looked straight at me, "...mad killer, Mistress Shepherd, or whatever it was you called me. When I awoke this morning it was the third day of June in the year of our lord, 1645. After I broke my fast I set off for Oxford to meet with the king's advisors. It was my misfortune to come upon a forward patrol of Fairfax's men. It is only by God's grace that I made good my escape, but not before I had scored several hits." He indicated the sword. "The hurt to my arm was a pistol ball. You may choose to believe me or not. I do not wish to bother you further but I need my clothes." He pointed at his shirt, still clutched in Alan's hand. "Then I will be gone."

"Where to?" I blurted out, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Home," he said, but his voice had lost its certainty.

"Your clothes need cleaning and mending, Nathaniel. I have some other clothes here." I indicated a neat pile of clothing on the chair, more forgotten items from Mark I'd dredged from the back of the wardrobe where I'd thrown them. "They may be a little big for you but they'll do for now."

He picked up the t-shirt from the top of the pile, and turned it around frowning. "Mistress, I'm no fool but I would appreciate it if you could explain what this is and how I wear it?"

I looked at Alan but Alan wore a button-through shirt. "Just pull it over your head, and the tracksuit pants..." I mimed, "...you just pull on."

"And these?" Nathaniel held up the jockey shorts.

I turned to the pan on the stove to hide my laughter. If this was no more than playacting, he was very good.

Mercifully, Alan took charge. "Mr. Preston, Nathaniel. I'm Jessie's brother, Alan. How about you come with me and we will work this out."

I heard the wariness in his voice as he said, "Mistress Shepherd said you are with Mortlock's Regiment? Can I trust you?"

Alan cleared his throat. "In the circumstances, Colonel Preston, you can consider

me a friend.”

Nathaniel straightened. “You called me Colonel Preston.” “That is your title, isn’t it?”

Nathaniel glanced at me. “Yes, but I’ve not mentioned it.”

“Like I said.” Alan put a hand on the man’s uninjured shoulder. “Consider me a friend.”