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Chapter One

*But come at once;
For the close night doth play the runaway,
And we are stay'd for . . . (II, vi)*

It was just dawn when Victoria Allen awoke to violent pounding on her door.

"Tory! Tory! Wake up!"

As she reluctantly opened her eyes, the door flew open. Then all was confusion: Unfamiliar white ruffles overhead instead of the flowered canopy of her own four-poster bed. The sky vivid as flames with the sunrise through the open window. Someone shaking her, insisting that she listen—a fire, the horses, your grandfather—

"What?" Instantly Tory was awake. "Grandall? The horses? What's happened?"

Cissy Fairfield let go of her niece's shoulder and explained again, breathlessly. Her normally round, rosy face was pale beneath her lace cap. "There's been a fire at Belmont, Tory. Your grandfather's hurt. They've sent the carriage for you. You must dress right away, dear, and be off!"

Already Tory was out of bed and half into her dressing gown. "Not the carriage, Aunt Cissy, it's too slow. Have you got a fast horse I can borrow?"

"But, my dear Tory—!"

Her niece stopped her firmly. "This is no time to worry about what people may think! I can ride as well as any man in Monroe County, and I do not intend to sit in that carriage like a lady while Grandall may be dying!"

Since Tory was slipping into her green velvet riding habit, Cissy Fairfield realized that—as usual—her headstrong niece was not to be diverted.

"Very well," she yielded. "I'll send back your things with the carriage."

Aunt Cissy's crinolines rustled as her plump figure bustled toward the door. Tory caught her arm and planted an impulsive kiss on her cheek. "Bless you, dear!"

"Oh, Tory!" There were tears in her blue eyes. "I do hope he's all right!"

"So do I," Tory echoed fervently. She wrapped up her long chestnut hair into an efficient knot, anchoring it at the back of her neck with whatever hairpins she could find. "Please say good-bye to everyone for me, Aunt Cissy, and tell them I'm sorry to rush off like this."

"And we had planned such a nice visit!" The sociable Mrs. Fairfield sighed for all the lost afternoons of making and receiving calls around the neighboring Virginia countryside. "But never mind that now. I'll be off and see to your horse."

Two hours later, Tory turned her tired mount into the narrow winding road that led to Belmont. He was strong; thank goodness, thought Tory, they had the sense to give me one of our own horses! But she had ridden him hard. When she got home, the groom would have to walk him for half an hour—

Tory shook her head impatiently. For once it was not appropriate to worry about her horse. Uppermost in her frantic mind was the meager news old Toby had brought with the carriage: Fire in the second barn, the night lit up with flames, everyone rushing to get the terrified horses out. Then someone had noticed that Randall Ballard hadn't emerged from the barn. One of the men found him slumped against the wall of a box stall and dragged him to safety just ahead of the fire.

Young Jeb had been dispatched for the doctor, and Toby with the carriage to fetch Tory—

"What about Charles?" Tory had asked in spite of herself.

"Oh, Miz Sally, she send Jesse to Charlottesville double-quick to bring Marse Charles back home. He be to Belmont by tomorrow night."

Tory breathed a small sigh of relief. Charles was coming home! He would take charge, and everything would come out all right.

For to Tory, her handsome cousin Charles had always seemed nearly as capable as Grandall himself. Charles had fixed her favorite doll when its arm fell off; he had taught her how to bait a hook and catch and clean a fish. By twenty, he had won such a reputation as a marksman, a scholar, and a dancing partner that his uncle John Fairfield had invited him along on a diplomatic mission to England. There it was reported that Charles's blond good looks and gracious Virginia manners had charmed even Prince George.

Back at Belmont, however, Charles grew restless. Within weeks he had shocked the family by arranging to leave again, this time to study law in Charlottesville.

And now Charles was on his way home . . .

As Tory's weary horse came into a clearing, there at last stood the neat brick and white buildings of Belmont on the hilltop beyond the trees.

A sob caught in Tory's throat. She urged her horse on, fiercely, up the road toward home.

"It's Miz Tory!"

Ben spotted his young mistress first as she passed the stableyard. "Miz Tory's home!" By the time Tory rode up to the tall white pillars of the main house, half a dozen servants had gathered to greet her.

"You, Jeb! Take Miz Tory's horse, he's plumb winded. You, Junie! Go fetch Miz Sally!" Ben's commands sent them running.

"Ben—my grandfather—?" Tory's voice broke before she could finish.

"He gon' be fine, Missy, don't you fret. Doctor up there with him now."

But Tory could hear the concern beneath his reassuring words.

"Victoria!" Sally Ballard appeared in the wide front doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. "Oh, thank the Lord! But, my dear child—where is the carriage? Surely you didn't—"

Tory hushed her with a hug. "Grandall's all right?" she asked urgently. "Dr. Randolph's here? What does he say?"

"Oh, no, it's not Dr. Randolph. He's off visiting his daughter in Richmond, of all things, at a time like this!" Mrs. Sally bristled with indignation as she hustled Tory inside. "This doctor is a friend of his. He'll be down shortly."

"I'll just go up, then, and—"

"My dear girl, you will not! Land sakes! The way you look, you'd frighten the daylights out of him!" For Tory's hastily coiled hair had come loose, and fell in tangled waves over her shoulders. Her green eyes were bright with worry, and her lower lip bled where she had bitten it.

Glancing at her niece's dusty riding habit, Sally Ballard shook her head. All these years of effort, and still not a shred of decorum! Tory Allen might have the young men of Monroe County swooning in her wake, but she had considerable settling down to do before she'd make one of them a proper wife.

"Marcy is heating some water for you, Victoria. You go straight upstairs and find yourself a clean dress."

Aunt Sally's bustling mother-hen manner, and her gray curls bobbing out from under her white cap, reminded Tory of the other aunt she had left so hurriedly. "Aunt Cissy sends you her love."

"Poor dear Cissy! She must have been fit to be tied, with old Toby clattering in before the chickens were up. Are they all well at Fairfields?"

Tory related bits of news as they crossed the polished oak floor to the stairs. Despite her anxiety about Grandall, the tension of her long ride was starting to dissipate. It felt so good to be

home! Not even the pall cast by her grandfather's accident could hide the welcoming warmth of this house he had built more than fifty years ago.

Soon Tory was slipping on a clean dress in her own room. Catching sight of herself in a mirror, she was startled to see how calm, even poised she looked. Marcy had pinned her chestnut hair securely in a chignon; her cornflower blue dress, discreetly cut to show no more than a hint of her full breasts and round hips, made her look older than her seventeen years. And so serious! she thought with wry amusement. Hardly the same girl who two nights ago was fluttering her fan and declaring she wished the boys would stop turning her head with their extravagant compliments!

Tory moved to the window, where she could look out over the green fields and white rail fences of Belmont. The horses were grazing as peacefully as ever. Only the smoking black rubble of the second barn gave a clue to last night's disaster. All the horses had been saved, Aunt Sally had said. But the barn would have to be rebuilt from the ground up.

So many years, so much care Grandall had put into Belmont! What must it be like for him now, lying helpless in bed, wondering about his horses?

Tory crossed abruptly to the door. "This won't do, Marcy," she told her maid. "I can't wait for the doctor to finish. I must go and see him now."

Marcy nodded her curly black head knowingly. "He'll be wantin' to see you, too, Miz Tory. You best go."

Tory's heart pounded as she walked down the hall. How would he look? Was he badly burned? Perhaps he wouldn't even recognize her!

She tortured herself with such grim visions until she had to stop outside her grandfather's room and compose herself. Then, taking a breath so deep that the seams of her frock nearly gave way, she opened the door.

That startled fellow would be the doctor. And there was Henry, standing by the bed in case anything was needed. Tory managed a quick smile at him, and his worried face smoothed as he nodded in reply.

Randall Ballard lay motionless, his skin as pale as tallow. But he looks so small! thought Tory in dismay. How can that be Grandall, the best horseman in four counties, the master of Belmont?

It came to her with a shock that she had never seen her grandfather in bed before. Always he had risen before anyone else, and stayed on his feet—or his horse—long after everyone else had tired. Now he might have been a sack of oats, so limp and formless he seemed under his quilt . . .

Tory pressed her knuckles against her mouth. No! she told herself fiercely. You're not to cry! He'd be most annoyed if you cried!

"You must be Victoria," murmured the doctor. "Are you all right?"

Tory nodded.

"Here, sit down. And don't let his appearance alarm you. Under the circumstances, Mr. Ballard is doing well, really quite well indeed."

The soothing flow of his voice calmed her. Tory sat stiffly on a wooden chair near the foot of the bed. "Is he," she managed at last, "is he—awake?"

"He's sleeping now," said the doctor. "Rest is what he wants."

He closed his leather bag. "He won't need us for a while. Shall we go downstairs?"

Tory followed him like a sleepwalker. "Your aunt promised me a cup of tea," he was saying. "That might do you good as well, Miss Ballard."

"My name's Allen," Tory corrected him automatically.

"Forgive me. I thought— Aren't you Mr. Ballard's granddaughter?"

"Not exactly," answered Tory with a wan smile. It was always hard explaining the family tangle to outsiders. "My father was Grandall's—Mr. Ballard's—partner. They started Belmont together. Grandall treated my father like an adopted son; and when my parents died, and Grandall became my guardian, he encouraged me to think of him as my grandfather."

They had reached the dining room. Sally Ballard sat at the foot of the mahogany table, her normally cheerful face anxious. She rose when she saw the doctor. "How is he?"

The doctor repeated the same assurances he had given Tory. "It's too early to be certain," he concluded. "But he has survived the worst of it, the fire itself."

Mrs. Sally sank back into her chair. Then, as stacked cups and saucers caught her eye, she realized that she had completely forgotten her role as hostess—a cardinal sin, to a Virginian. "Doctor, please forgive my ill manners," she fluttered. "Do sit down! Will you have tea? Lulie's fixing you some ham and eggs and biscuits right at this moment."

Gradually, the gentle rigors of entertaining a guest for breakfast imposed order on an emotion-fraught occasion. The muted chink of china and silver, Mrs. Sally's graceful movements as she poured the tea, dark hands setting down plates or clearing them away, drew attention from the helpless figure upstairs in bed to the practical business of eating and drinking.

Still, Tory had to struggle to carry her share of the conversation. Not until Grandall himself welcomed her would she feel truly at home.

Nor was her grandfather's the only familiar face she missed. Somewhere in the brightening morning another horse was galloping hard, bearing its anxious rider south from Charlottesville. Charles Ballard was on his way home to Belmont.