

The Dollmaker's Daughter

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Dedication

This one is for Caleb
"All you gotta do is..."

1

FEBRUARY 1776
MILLER'S ORDINARY, JUST OUTSIDE OF
WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA COLONY

"Well, Miss Archer, it has been a long time," The grinning innkeeper bellowed loud enough to be heard in the yard. He rubbed his meaty hands together.

Amity cast quick glance into the main parlor. A cold rivulet slipped from her sodden cloak into her shoe. Yes, all the guests had taken note of his announcement of Amity's arrival. All went back to what they were doing when she caught their eye, except a tableful of men in hunting shirts dyed the same shade of indigo. They did not avert their gazes when she noticed them; rather she had the distinct impression she that they were assessing her as one might look over a new dog. An involuntary shiver ran down her shoulders.

Lucy, her maid, took a step closer.

Amity suppressed the chill, straightened her back, and turned to her host.

"Is your father with the carriage?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Burwell. My father was detained and will arrive tomorrow."

A puzzled look passed through his features before his smile returned. "Well, your rooms are ready." He waved a large hand toward a slender girl. "Mary, show Miss Archer to her room."

Amity said her thanks and followed Mary up a windowless flight of stairs to the second floor. Lucy followed them.

One dormer of six window lights cast watery shadows across a wooden framed bed. A cheery fire in the grate forced gloom into the corners of the small room.

"Mary, who are those men in the blue shirts in the chamber?"

Mary's blue eyes widened. "Shirtmen. They are riflemen come from Norfolk to protect us from the British."

Amity stiffened. "*They* are not here, are they?"

"The British? No, ma'am. The shirtmen just burned what was left of Norfolk. I heard them say they was waiting for orders."

"Thank you, Mary." Amity handed the girl a coin.

Mary bobbed a curtsey and left the room.

Amity shrugged out of her wet cloak to let the warmth melt her near frozen limbs. What she needed was a hot cup of coffee.

Lucy took Amity's cloak, a look of alarm in her large brown eyes. "Miss Amity, I don't like the looks them shirtmen was giving you down there. No one would mess with you if Mr. Reed was here."

Amity rolled her eyes. "We don't need Mr. Reed right now, what we need is a hot cup of coffee and

something to eat."

Lucy huffed and turned to hang the cloak on a peg next to the door. She placed her own on the next peg.

A pang of guilt slashed through Amity. "I don't like the looks of those men either, hopefully they will leave soon. With my father and I here there cannot be room enough for all of them to stay."

Lucy's posture relaxed.

"And I am not leaving the ordinary. We will stay right here until Father comes. Except we have to go down to get something to eat. I could not possibly wait for them to carry up a tray. Are you not famished?"

Lucy nodded her agreement.

Amity's guilt assuaged, which left her empty stomach in charge.

They'd left immediately after breakfast. Twenty miles of frozen rain and mud ruts wore a body out. She needed to eat.

"Don'tcho be down there too long, Miss Amity."

"I will not. You go get something from the kitchen."

Amity peered out into the hallway before she stepped out of the room. Surely, no one would dare mess with her in a respectable establishment like Mr. Burwell's. While she'd shuddered at the innkeeper's announcement of her presence when she'd first arrived, it was precisely because she was known that she should feel safe. In fact, his little announcement might prove to be Providence at work.

Despite minor trepidation, giddiness shook her feet. So this was what it felt like to be out on one's own.

Throughout her twenty-five years, a sibling was always an elbow's distance away. She'd never spent the night alone away from home. Amity placed one gloved hand on the wall to keep from flying down the narrow staircase. Except for a thin rope of guilt yanking her back she could get quite used to this feeling of unfettered access to her wishes. The desire to wander and the guilt twined around each other deep in her soul. She couldn't explain the rambling temper. The guilt was more easily defined.

Her parents were good people. They'd always been kind and generous, some claimed overindulgent, with her and her siblings. How could she leave them to follow her own desires when the result would be stomach-aching worry over her? The inability to resolve the issue had left her stagnant. Waiting for she didn't know what.

Mr. Burwell met her at the foot of the stairs and showed her to a private parlor directly off the main room. Before long, a steaming cup of coffee and a plate of ham, fresh bread, and butter filled the table. Voices from the public chamber buzzed in the background.

This one night near Williamsburg on her own was almost too tempting. Her first opportunity to experience real life as it came. To fill her books with real happenings and real places instead of imaginings based on Lady Peabody's adventures in the courts of Europe and beyond. How far was it to the mountains? She had some money. The King's Highway would carry her a good bit of the distance in a carriage. Horseback from there. Assuming she could get a horse

outside of Alexandria.

"Serve's 'em right. Tories the lot." A loud male voice floated into her reverie. "Burning's too good for 'em" The following general murmur seemed to agree with the outspoken man.

By her counting, it was the third time Norfolk had been burned. The first two happened before her brother, Field's, wedding on the sixth of January. Not that she'd been able to attend. Too dangerous to travel her mother said. According to her father, they were all to stay home for the duration of the war. Except for him, of course, he would travel to participate in the Committee. She stopped short of a thankful prayer for the commotion that had caused him to delay his departure. If the chariot had not been fully loaded, she may have had to wait for him to settle the disturbance with his foreman.

Well, it just showed that older people were over cautious. She'd made it almost to Williamsburg without any trouble whatsoever. She wasn't a schoolgirl after all; she'd recently turned twenty-five. And just when was she allowed to consider herself a woman?

"He just finished what he started, is all." A craggy voice rose above the others.

Amity craned her neck to see the speaker. What she saw was a sooty wall. Surely, it would be acceptable to step a little closer. She rose from her seat. If she were to improve her stories, she needed to see. Mr. Burwell would ensure her safety. She took step into the room and caught sight of a familiar shape

approaching the door. *What is he doing here?*

Amity slid back out of the main chamber and into the far corner of her chair once Simon Morgan entered the ordinary. Her heart thudded against full lungs.

He glanced about the room before taking a seat facing away from where she sat in the deep shadow of age-darkened pine walls.

He could ruin everything. Well, she wasn't really running to the mountains anyway. Her mother would worry. Her father would blame himself. No. She would meet up with her father tomorrow and together they would travel to Auntie Clementine's exactly as planned.

But that didn't mean she had to endure Simon's company. If his usual ability to disregard the world while focusing on the book before him wasn't impaired by the laughter and conversation filling the tavern, she should be able to slip past him and make it up the stairs unnoticed.

Simon once again surveyed the full room after Mary took his order.

Amity willed herself to be invisible.

No doubt, her parents hoped she'd meet a suitable man in Williamsburg and settle down, but it wouldn't happen. She'd loved before and it came to naught. No. She would chronicle her travels. Once she gained a certain age, it wouldn't be scandalous. And why should it be? Master Phillips had made it clear that Virginia's manners were far less than he'd found in England. And so it should be. America would be a new nation free of nonsensical dictates. Amity would be an

independent lady. A travel writer like Lady Peabody.

Amity pulled back once more when the door banged open to admit another young man. Boots scraped across the floor as he made his way to the bar. He ordered peach brandy.

From her seat, Amity could only glimpse his profile. Different from any man she'd ever seen, she couldn't take her eyes off him. He was tall, fine boned, dark hair pulled back in a queue, a hawk nose. He appeared loosely put together, not unlike Simon. Although Simon's looseness disarmed people, made them feel welcome. This man's fluidity recalled a cornered viper she'd seen in the barn at home—appropriating the space around him should he need to strike, or perhaps escape. A dark gaze captured her own.

Heat raced up her throat. Amity looked away quickly. When she dared to look up again he'd turned his back to her. "Good."

He seemed to be watching Simon and his dinner companion. Amity settled back into her chair. Perhaps she should stay a little bit longer. To say Simon misread people was an understatement. While it was an admirable quality to have never met a stranger, it was not always wise.

2

The smell of Norfolk burning stained the inside of Simon's nose. Throughout the wet ride toward Williamsburg, he couldn't escape the acrid fumes of the last of the buildings sacrificed in the name of independence. It was the right thing to do, but he couldn't help wondering what would happen to the people and the businesses they'd forged, some nearly a hundred years old.

Every part of his world swirled in turmoil. Hester insisted on staying with their aunt and uncle in Kemp's Landing instead of coming home with him to Maple Bridge where she would be safer. He couldn't find a way to like it, but Hester was a grown woman with a mind of her own. He couldn't control her any more than he could control Woodford and Howe's efforts to protect Norfolk.

Drizzle drowned the glow of twilight from the window where Simon stared at the steam rising from his cup of chocolate in Miller's Ordinary. The innkeeper's daughter placed a candle on the table next to his open book. The girl took the time to smile at him while she brought flame to wick. Simon nodded his thanks and looked down at the open page. He'd been on the same page for three days.

Images of his friend's wedding played across his mind. A jubilant Field couldn't keep his gaze off his new wife, Delany, resplendent in a silver gown. Field had been jubilant. And seeing Field always reminded Simon of Amity. Their features were similar, the same brown hair that glowed red in the sun, but Amity's eyes were the color of a storm on the bay. Would Amity be jubilant on her wedding day? Sharing secret smiles with her husband that she thought no one else would see? He hoped he'd never see it.

"Mind if I join ye?" A full tankard sloshed on to the table. Simon snatched his book from the running puddle. Above him stood a barrel-chested man. Blue eyes glowed from a weather-wrinkled face.

"Captain John McCabe." The man reached a dirty hand across the table.

A welcome diversion for thoughts sliding in the wrong direction, Simon shook the man's hand warmly. The next hour passed quickly as Simon listened to the story of Captain McCabe's latest voyage across the Atlantic.

"Our Tom was a sorry lad. Coming home after his education," the captain leaned in, "he told me how he'd found how to get anything he ever wanted, so he was coming home."

"Everything he ever wanted?" Simon hoped his smile didn't drip with the cynicism he felt, the memory of soft storm-colored eyes twinkled at him.

"Sure. That's what he told me and then he showed me this." The Captain pulled from his pocket a medallion of clear green stone. It spun like a coin and

came to rest across from Simon. Could this be a gemstone? It was the largest he'd ever seen, spanning nearly three of his fingers. The room was too dim to make out the carving in the center. The candlelight reflected off its polished surface like dark window glass.

A little arc of excitement sparked to life in a remote memory of Simon's brain and shivered down his spine. "Is this what I think it is? May I?"

McCabe shrugged.

Simon reached for the stone. Cool and smooth to the touch, the hatch-like carvings were barely perceptible under his thumb though they did not appear worn.

"What do you think it is?"

"I'm not sure, but there are legends about ancient stones."

"This couldn't be one of them stones. My cousin Tom didn't travel in them kinda circles. It's nothing but a piece of junk he picked up somewhere," he laughed, "but Tom'd believe just about anything you told him. Some scoundrel told him a fanciful tale, and he believed it. Gave all his money, poor sod."

A cool disappointment breezed through Simon. "You're probably right. I mean what are the odds that a regular person would come across something like that when people have been looking for it for centuries?" Even as he said it, the possibility niggled. Excitement deepened.

The captain took a long swig from his cup. "And regular he was and no mistake. And all the money he

had would have been a couple of pounds. Now I've got to take his things to his mother. It's a visit I would avoid if it were possible. You have family?"

"My mother and father passed away a few years ago."

"No wife?"

"I have a sister."

The captain grimaced. "Maybe I should give you this stone. Our Tom believed it would do him some good, maybe it *will* do for ye."

Simon reluctantly laid the stone back in the center of the table. "You should keep it or give it to his mother. Perhaps it will bring you all you ever wanted."

"I've got what I want, lad." A knowing smile wrinkled his face. "My wife is waiting for me at home with four boys. And what Tom's mother will want no rock can do."

Simon nodded his agreement. No stone would give him what he wanted either. Although if it were the right stone it could add significantly to his knowledge of electricity. There was nothing to be lost in giving it a try. "I'll buy your dinner in exchange for the stone."

McCabe smiled, "You, too?"

"I don't think it will get me everything I want, but I do think it would make an interesting scientific experiment."

"Whatever you say, me lad." McCabe stood on unsteady legs and tossed the stone to Simon. "I'll be on me way."

Simon nodded to the Captain. Smooth and cool to

the touch, the stone slipped into his pocket without a catch. He closed his book, turned toward the stairwell and his room. From his right, in a corner of the room a shout of “huzzah” and the clink of raised goblets grabbed his notice. Near the bar, a young man knocked sideways through the thinning crowd as he pushed his way out of the Ordinary. When Simon looked forward again, he found a pair of stormy eyes. “What are you doing here?” He put his hand in his pocket. Was the stone warm? No, it wasn’t possible. Was it? No, it must be warming due to the heat of embarrassment.

“...tomorrow.” She smiled at him though her gaze showed turbulence.

“I’m sorry.” He stumbled. “I missed what you said.”

Her smile changed to one of an indulgent nanny. “I said I am awaiting the arrival of my father tomorrow morning. We are going to Williamsburg for the Committee.”

Suddenly his mind gained clear focus. He took note of the soldiers in the corner. He took her elbow and led her toward the stairs. “You mean you are here alone?”

“Of course not.”

His tension eased a smidge.

“Lucy is here.”

Tension resumed its upward climb.

“My father arrives in the morning. Honestly Simon, there is nothing to worry about. Why are you here?”

“Let me see you to your room.”

Exasperation wearied her countenance. "It's hardly necessary. I can find my way myself. In fact, I was just on my way."

"Well that is convenient, because I am headed in the same direction." He smiled at her.

She grimaced.

He waved her up the stairs. "After you, Miss Archer."

She huffed up the stairs.

Simon couldn't stifle his grin.

"I'm grown woman, Simon Morgan."

Yes. He could see that in the sway of her hips as she took each step with precision. "Perhaps I will see you and your father in the morning. I hope you sleep well." He knew better than to grin in her face, but he couldn't help it. Hat in hand, he waited in the hallway until she closed her door. To her credit, she closed the door quietly. Hester would have slammed it, and where she was be hanged. Simon stepped into his own room.

Stuffed into the room with a canopied bed was a small ladder-backed chair and a little writing table. Leaving the door ajar, Simon placed his book on the table, adjusted the chair to face the doorway, and lit the candle. After retrieving his ink and turning to a fresh page in his notebook, he proceeded to write down everything he could remember about how he came to be in possession of what could be the Horeb Stone.

Simon looked up when Amity's light went out under the crack at the bottom of her door. His own candle sputtered. He retrieved another candle from his

pouch. For the first time in days, he was able to concentrate on work he'd placed before himself. Amity had haunted his thoughts since her brother's wedding. Knowing she was safe in the next room dreaming, as long as he didn't think about what those dreams might be, freed him to wonder about the artifact placed before him on the table.

Held up to the candle the odd reflectiveness receded. Clear green water. The kind of water one could breathe under in a dream. Light reflected off the lines of the center carving. Obviously, an ancient language of lines and crossed lines, Hebrew? He ran his thumb over the center carving. More indented than carved and no wear appeared on the edges.

Halfway into his second candle and his list of everything he could remember of the properties of the stone, a horse arrived in the yard. Simon placed his rifle on his lap and resumed writing. Whispers downstairs floated incomplete to his ear. Simon placed the quill in the ink pot. Boots scraped on the stairs. Simon positioned the rifle on the table toward the opening in the door.

Reed Archer, Amity's father, came into view.

Simon moved the rifle to his lap.

Reed pointed to the door behind him.

Simon nodded.

Reed nodded back.

Simon closed his door and went to bed.

3

Simon stood up at his table to greet Amity and her father when they walked into the chamber for breakfast.

"Reed, you're down early this morning. I thought you wouldn't be down for some hours yet," Simon said.

Amity stifled a roll of her eyes. She'd hoped he'd be gone by now.

"Good to see you, Simon." The men shook hands. "No, I've got to get to the committee in Williamsburg today."

"Please, have a seat." Simon gestured to the table moving aside the gazette he'd been reading.

After placing their request for coffee and the diet, Amity's Papa sat back in his chair, thumbs crooked in the pockets of his waistcoat. "I have received a note from the Glassock's. They have removed from Williamsburg for the duration. It seems Mrs. Glassock is from Norfolk, and the burning scared her witless. Not that she was abundant in wits to begin with, but she is a kind woman, and Hugh could have done much worse. At any rate, they are not here, and so we are absent a companion for Amity while I am here."

Simon turned to address her. "You must be

disappointed.”

“Yes. Well, as I have only just heard it myself, I have not had sufficient time to work up any emotion at all. And I have Auntie Clementine.”

“Yes, but she is hardly good company for a young girl.” Papa interjected.

“I’m hardly a girl, Papa.”

“Well, you are not a man.” He chuckled and sought to draw Simon into his joke.

Simon smiled, but his gaze darted to Amity. Was he trying to gauge her reaction? That was new. In times past, she couldn’t get his attention without placing herself in mortal danger.

“Amity has romantic notions about the mountains.”

Amity took a deep breath, let it out, and then smiled at the two men. It was no use arguing that one. It never went past an announcement that she was soft-headed like all those of her sex. She hated to think what he would have been like if her formidable mother had not shattered his illusions of the frailty of the female mind and creativity.

Too bad that Robertine Glassock couldn’t attend her on this trip. Robbie knew all the good places to go to hear about traveling to the mountains. She’d ascertained a route from here, but how to get there? There were so many things to think and plan and no Robbie to help her.

“Do you wish to go west, Amity?” Simon looked intrigued as though he’d recently discovered she had a brain between her ears.

"She's heard enough discouraging tales of Indians and what they do to settlers up there." Papa turned his pointed gaze to her. "It's no place for a girl."

"Have you read of the missions up there?" Amity countered. "Women labor beside their husbands. It's important work."

"Husband. That's the key." He pounded his finger on the table. "Once you marry you can travel the world. Right now, I have to protect you."

"Not everyone is meant to marry, Papa. There are single ladies at the mission. They live together in a separate house. You will have Simon thinking that women are good for nothing but decoration."

"I sincerely doubt that anyone married to your mother would think anything of the kind."

"Or my sister." Simon grinned, and a mischievous twinkle lit his eyes. "I promise you; I think much more of women than that."

Amity was glad to hear it. Perhaps, some day he would make someone a good husband. A woman who could capture his attention, at least one that wouldn't mind if he forgot about her now and then.

"What brings you to Williamsburg, Morgan?"

"A letter from John Parchment." Earnestness replaced the twinkle. "The Virginian Society of the Promotion of Usefull Knowledge is hosting a demonstration of electricity at Charleton's coffee shop."

"Surely they cannot plan to continue meeting in the middle of a war?"

"I hear they are suspended, but Ritter is coming to