

WHEN THE LOVE OF HER LIFE
RETURNS WITH A LOAD OF
SMUGGLED FIREARMS, SHE MUST
DISCOVER A NEW WAY TO
HAPPINESS.

The
Shopkeeper's
Widow

IZZY JAMES

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The Shopkeeper's Widow
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Dedication

This one is for Bean, whose encouragement came when
I needed it.
I love ya, man.
Iz

Prologue

March 1767

Archer Hall, Northumberland County, Virginia

"Dandelion." Field Archer twisted the stem of the blow-ball between his fingers. "From the French, *dent de lion*. Literally, 'lion's tooth.'"

Delany Button hopped up from where she'd sat making a daisy chain of dandelions to face him in the field dotted with yellow blooms. Her breath caught in her throat when he looked into her eyes. This was how it would be when she walked in holding his arm following the minister on her wedding day.

She would wear a gown of silver silk. He wouldn't be able to take his eyes off her then. Papa said she had Mama's coloring and that silver was just the thing for her auburn hair and gray eyes. Fifteen was still a bit young for marriage, but she'd heard of a girl, just last week, who married at fourteen.

He blew the seed-ball.

She breathed in the warmth of his breath. Filaments landed on her eyelashes causing her to snap her eyes shut. She drifted them open to see him turn and blow the rest into the field around them.

"Ingenious," he said. "The seeds fly on the wind. They land, take root in the soil..." Field continued to

expound on the virtues of dandelions as they walked toward the house. He loved farming. He could talk for hours about the plants they grew and why they grew them.

And when she came for her biannual visits, Delany was always glad to listen. She hadn't heard the rest of today's lesson for the vision of what it would be like to be in his arms.

Perhaps tonight, at the party, she would find out. Mrs. Archer said there would be dancing and that she might attend. Field's sister, Amity, had loaned her a gown of real pink silk.

~*~

The transformed dining room gleamed. Tables had been removed, chairs lined the walls. Dozens of candles filled the room with the soft light of romance. Cool breezes from the Potomac salted the magnolia-spiced air, sailing in through large open windows on both ends of the hall, mingling with the scent of freshly polished wooden floors.

Delany shivered. A dance. Real silk. Dreams really did come true.

Dancers assembled in the center eager to begin.

Others chatted merrily in groups.

Across the room, Field stood with his friend, Simon Morgan, smiling and laughing. Belonging.

Sweaty palms skidded down the cool pink silk when she attempted to smooth her skirts. She could almost forget she was indentured. Her father had promised that these few years would set them up for life. Once their time was finished, he would be a gentleman farmer, and she would be his daughter.

Three whole years before she was free.

Would Field want to marry her then?

"Come on, silly." Amity pulled her by the elbow into the room. The two skirted the dancers to find empty chairs on the wall near the end of the line. Amity took the seat that gave her the best view of Simon Morgan which left Delany with her back to Field.

The band finished; the dancers dispersed to the sidelines. New couples formed and headed back toward the center.

"I see your sister and her friend are free." Simon's low voice carried under the giggling din.

Delany's heart skipped in anticipation.

Amity's smile radiated expectation.

"You go right ahead," Field rejoined. "Her 'friend,' as you call her, is just a servant. She's indentured to the merchant, Fleet, from Norfolk. I assume Mama allowed her to come for her improvement."

Delany's stomach clenched.

Within an instant, Simon Morgan stood in front of Amity, offering her his hand. Dizzy and frozen in place, Delany watched Amity place her hand in his and glide toward the dancers as the chords of the next dance began. She took deep breath and rose from her seat. She took careful steps not to disturb any of the real guests and made her way softly to her room.

1

Circular Letter from the Earl of Dartmouth to the Governours of the Colonies

Whitehall, October 19, 1774

Sir:

His Majesty having thought fit by his Order in Council this day to prohibit the exportation from Great Britain of Gunpowder, or any sort of Arms or Ammunition, I herewith enclose to you a copy of the order; and it is His Majesty's command that you do take the most effectual measures for arresting, detaining, and securing any Gunpowder, or any sort of Arms or Ammunition which may be attempted to be imported into the Province under your Government, unless the master of the ship having such Military Stores on board shall produce a license from his Majesty or the Privy Council for the exportation of the same from some of the Ports of this Kingdom.

I am, Sir, your most obedient humble servant,

DARTMOUTH

The Shopkeeper's Widow

30 September 1775

Borough of Norfolk, Virginia

With a startled swipe of her arm, Delany Fleet brushed Noah's animals to the floor. Still grasping the tiny wooden giraffe from the set she'd been arranging, she hurried toward the door of her shop and the sound of the drum.

Outside, fifteen British soldiers marched up the narrow, mud-caked street. Bayonets glinted in the early afternoon sun. Redcoats crisp against white lapels. Black boots marched in cadence with the drum.

Her heart thumped with the beat. Behind them, in the harbor, the fourteen-gun sloop-of-war, *Otter*, leveled its barrels at the borough.

People streamed out of their shops and houses to witness the spectacle.

Delany had grown accustomed to the sight of soldiers making a nuisance of themselves around Norfolk, but this formal display of British military strength took her breath away. It was Lord Dunmore's latest ploy to control the "rebellious" Virginia colony. If only all this unrest would go away. She'd worked too hard to lose everything in a game of politics in which she had no part.

The soldiers marched two abreast, a wall of hewed stone. The men towered above her own sixty-inch height, faces wiped of all expression.

Their power stirred in her rebellious emotions she thought dead with her late husband, Tom. The spell broke when her nephew, Ben, arrived at her side. She pulled him close. At thirteen, Ben itched to join the militia. This display wouldn't help matters. Forgetting the open shop, she and Ben followed the crowd as the

column made a turn onto Main Street and arrived at the *Virginia Gazette*.

The drum stopped.

The wall broke into parts and entered the small building. The sounds of wood scraping and splintering, men yelling, and boxes crashing to the floor burst into the street. The crowd, with backward glances at the wharf, resisted only in murmurs.

Delany stood mesmerized. A white-hot spot of indignation began to build in the very core of her being. *How would John feed his family? Who would be next?*

"The shop!" Delany's heart nearly stopped when she remembered the unlocked door, "Ben, run. I left the shop open." People from all over the world washed up on Norfolk's shores. The neighbors wouldn't rob her, but who knew all their neighbors in a seaport?

Ben took off running.

Short, scruffy Josiah Dean beat the drum to assemble and call the militia to action.

Delany searched the crowd for signs of the militia. No one answered the call. *Where were they?*

A hundred people watched as the wall reformed. This time they did not march as their arms were full of John's property: press types, ink pots, paper, and components of the press itself. Frank Cumming and Joseph Smith, bookbinder and journeyman, stumbled in their midst when pushed and prodded by armed guards.

Delany headed back toward her shop and Ben, continuously searching the crowd for any sign of resistance.

Josiah's drum continued to call.

The soldiers climbed into the skiff waiting to take

them back to the ship. Once aboard, they shouted huzzah three times and rowed away from the borough.

A shiver of anger shook Delany as she re-entered Fleet's Toy and Curiosities Shop. A quick glance at the shelves and windows assured her of no disturbance save her own scattering of Noah's animals.

"Did the militia come?" Ben pressed against the window glass as the dispersing crowd passed by.

"No. Frightened by the *Otter's* guns, no doubt. That was Josiah Dean you heard on the drum."

"They better not come here." He mimicked shooting his rifle. "I'll kill them."

"No. You. Won't. And if you keep talking like that, I'll have to take you back to your papa."

His arms flopped down to his sides. "Aunt Delany, we can't just let them come in here." Ben looked around the shop. "Papa would want me to defend you."

"Benjamin Fleet." She gave him the stern look that always shut him up. "Enough."

He turned back to the window.

"Have you finished your sums?"

Without answering, he left the window and headed to his desk in the back room.

Swallowing her anger, she bent down to pick up Noah's animals. Inspecting each for damage, she replaced them gently on the display shelf. It had taken her days to persuade Ann Archer to let her sell the toys. She smiled at the memory of the gentle lady.

This was her shop. Her future depended on the income she earned from the toys and other items she carefully chose to stock. Soon, she would have enough saved to leave Norfolk's muddy, congested streets for the country. If only Lord Dunmore would hold off for

another year. The house on her new farm in Northumberland County would be finished, and she would be safe. Her own land. A home that was truly her own, where she'd never been a servant. A place that no one could take from her. A place from which no one could take her. Now that was something that would make Papa proud.

The door opened, and Sarah Harrison entered. A few minutes later, Nanny Settle arrived, followed by Lucy Spitler. All three members of the prayer group assembled at the table in the back room. Delany picked up her Bible from under the counter and joined them.

Once seated, with Ben stationed by the doorway, Sarah opened with a short prayer and read from Matthew chapter eighteen. Afterward each had an opportunity to pray. Nanny Settle prayed for John Holt's family. Lucy Spitler prayed for Norfolk and the colony. Sarah Harrison prayed for the soldiers. Ben prayed for the militia to be "brave and fight like men." Silence stretched thin as they waited for Delany.

Sarah was right; they needed to pray for both sides. It was never clear to her which side the Lord was on, and as He was the Lord of individuals, she had resolved to keep as neutral as possible. That had changed yesterday when a musket had been fired into Norfolk from another of Lord Dunmore's four sloops-of-war, the *King Fisher*. Lord Dunmore had declared it an accident.

Today was not an accident.

Delany seethed.

"Delany, do you wish to pray?" Sarah prompted.

"No," Delany whispered.

Sarah ended with a final prayer for wisdom.

Ben hopped up and bolted out the back door with

the final "Amen".

Three women, their eyes filled with concern, faced her.

"Delany, are you feeling well?" Sarah asked.

"I am so angry I don't know how to pray." Delany stood. "How dare they come here and steal John's press?"

"I've been on edge since that musket ball flew yesterday." Nanny clutched the gloves in her lap.

"I heard it hit Calvert's warehouse," Lucy added. Her blue eyes grew large as she looked around the table.

"It fell short and landed in the water," Delany replied. "But that is not the point—"

Sarah, her voice calm, interrupted. "The good news is that no one was injured."

"Yes," Delany continued, "but I've got to do something. I can't just sit here and let them take everything." The militia at Kemp's Landing was the only option. She would go to Kemp's Landing. Lord knew what she could do to help.

"Mr. Spitler says we are to remove to North Carolina immediately upon my return this afternoon. Our effects are already loaded onto the wagons." Lucy stood up and prepared to leave.

Nanny reached out and took Lucy's hands in her own. "Mr. Settle says we will leave also. That shot yesterday was enough for him. He says his wigs will be as welcome in North Carolina as they are here."

"Perhaps we will know each other there?" Lucy trembled. Tears were close behind.

Sarah reached out, and they all joined hands for the last time. "All will be well. We can pray from wherever we are, and we will write to each other."

If the mail gets through. Delany left it unsaid, but they all knew the realities of the current occupation of Norfolk by its royal governor.

"Yes," they chorused together as they tearfully agreed. The ladies walked to the front of the shop, and Nanny and Lucy left together.

Delany still held the door latch when Sarah turned to face her.

"That just leaves us."

"Same time tomorrow?"

Sarah smiled. "Yes."

Delany swung back into her shop looking for something to punch and rushed right into Field Archer's chest. At once surrounded by strong arms and a strong need to bathe, Delany forgot to breathe.

"Aunt Delany," Ben laughed, "Mr. Archer is here to see you."

"So I see, Ben." She looked up into his twinkling brown eyes and stepped back a proper distance. Of course his height had not changed, but he had filled out. His chest was broad and solid. She pulled her hands back to her chest before she let them slide over to his shoulders. It was Field Archer. He was right here in her shop.

"Mrs. Fleet." His baritone strummed a girlish cord of humiliation that she thought long gone.

Before she could respond, the door opened again.

"Well, Mrs. Fleet, that'll show them, won't it?" John Crawley's fat face was slick with glee. His small black eyes gave her the usual once over that made her feel exposed. She squelched a shudder and moved behind the counter.

Field turned his back to them and moved toward the toy shelves.

"The association will back down now." Crawley wiped his hands down the front of his brown frock coat. "It won't be long before we can get our ships out of here. We are saved, Mrs. Fleet."

"What does his lordship want with a printing press?"

"To silence the dirty-shirts." He hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his coat. "No voice. No followers."

"It remains to be seen, Mr. Crawley, what the militia will do."

"We just saw what those yellow-bellies will do." He bent forward over the counter, enough that she could smell his luncheon ale. "It will all be over soon, and we can get back to business."

"Was there something you needed, Mr. Crawley?" Delany stepped back from the counter and took a glance at Field hoping for an interruption. Seeing only his back, she gazed at the shelf beneath. A new box of wax inserts for missing teeth caught her eye. "Some plumpers for Mrs. Crawley, perhaps?"

The red in Crawley's face deepened to crimson. "No, thank you." He checked his tone. "My mother is in need of nothing at the moment." This time when he leaned in, the gleam in his eye hinted of impropriety.

Delany leaned back.

"Were you frightened?" He rocked back on his heels, looked over his shoulder at Field, rested his elbows on the counter, and breathed a rotten cloud. "I will protect you."

Over my dead body. "Thank you, Mr. Crawley, for your offer, but I can take care of myself." She came out from behind the counter. "Now if there is nothing else, I really shouldn't keep my customers waiting."

After a last glance at her, and then Field, he exited. Delany wiped the counter of his greasy imprint.

~*~

When the doorbells tinkled, indicating the departure of Mr. Crawley, Field turned toward Mrs. Fleet. The insinuation in Mr. Crawley's declaration of protection gave Field pause. Perhaps his mother had been wrong to send him here.

To be fair, he had kept his back to them to give the man some privacy in his transaction. Any man looking to buy plumpers for his mother would be glad of some privacy. And the glass in which he'd watched their reflections didn't tell a reliable tale. If he read her correctly, she was as repulsed by Crawley as he was infatuated with her. Field thought he saw her look to him for help, but reflections in wavy glass could be distorted. The look in her eye might have been a warning to Crawley to be more guarded in his speech. He needed to watch the next interaction between them to determine their relationship. He couldn't risk his cargo on reminiscences of his mother.

"Mr. Archer, what a surprise to see you here," she said as she tidied her auburn hair with one hand. "Today of all days."

"I just arrived from London."

"Bet you didn't think you would be stepping into this mess."

"Well, I was surprised at the storm damage." He smiled. He had no intention of bringing up the printer and all it meant after the display he'd just seen. "Your place here seems to have been spared." He nodded toward the eighteen-light windows on either side of

the door.

Delany Fleet hadn't changed much since he had seen her four years ago at Archer Hall. Certainly, her lavender silk damask gown was of finer material than previously worn on visits to his family home. She wore her own hair piled up on top of her head in the latest fashion with sprigs of curls left out to softly frame her face. Fleet's must be doing well. Certainly, she was doing well for a former servant.

"Yes. I thank God for it." Her voice came out as a sighed release of energy. She raised her silvery eyes to look directly into his. "Is there something I can get for you, Mr. Archer?"

"My mother sent you this." He reached into his pocket and handed her a small parcel wrapped in cloth.

2

Delany accepted the parcel and carefully placed it on the countertop. Wonder displaced the anger and frustration she'd struggled with all day. She untied the ribbon and peeled back the cloth. Inside lay a tiny dress of pink silk and lace.

"My mother was very specific in the shade and style of cut."

"So kind." Mist clouded her eyes. "And so like Mrs. Archer. It's perfect."

"Is one of my mother's creations lying around improperly attired?" He smiled at her again and lounged against the counter.

She smiled back. Field was taller than the odious Crawley, and his effect on her was startling. Instead of threatened, she felt warmed and comforted as if a long-lost friend had come to rescue her from trouble. It had been a strange day. The last person in the colony she would ever consider a friend was Field Archer.

"This is not for one of your mother's dolls. It's for something completely different." The pink silk was so delicate she feared to stain it with her work-dirty fingers. Later, when she was alone, she would take out the doll her mother had made when Delany was four years old and try it on, but she knew it would fit. When God sent a present, it was always exactly right. "Thank

you for bringing it to me." She looked up again and found the old playfulness in his warm brown eyes. He hadn't forgotten her after all. At least five years her senior, he had been present on every trip the Fleets had taken to Archer Hall to bring Mrs. Archer the latest in toy innovation.

Delany spent the summer of her fifteenth year dreaming of him. At twenty-seven, she was long over Field Archer and had no desire to go back. It was time she followed her own dreams. She re-wrapped the parcel and placed it in the work basket she always carried home from the shop.

"You are most welcome. Perhaps it will help pave the way for the next question I have to ask you." He stepped back from the counter and looked at the floor. "I have just been to the King's Arms, and because of storm damage, Mrs. Pearse doesn't have room for me to stay. May I stay here until I leave for home? It should only be a couple of days."

No.

He is Ann Archer's oldest son. No one since her father had been as kind to her as Ann Archer. Kemp's Landing would just have to wait.

The back door slapped shut, and Ben came through to the store. Following him was a man Delany had not seen before.

"This is my man, Robert," Field said before she could ask.

"Yes, I can provide a room for you." Delany said. "But not here. You will have to come to my house where there is a proper bed and a proper bath, and you can be properly fed."

"I don't wish to burden you, Mrs. Fleet."

"Mr. Archer, your mother is dear to me. It is no