



The Servant Girl's  
**Secret**  
*A Colonial Girl's Story*

Jami Borek

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chapter 1

Jacob woke up suddenly. One moment he was fast asleep and the next moment his heart was racing.

What had awakened him? He lay totally still, scarcely breathing, listening for noises in the dark. Was someone in his room? No, he realized with relief, the noises were outside, in the street below. He could hear men's voices and the snorting and neighing of horses. What were they doing in the street at this hour, long before dawn?

Jacob got up as quietly and crept to the tiny



window in his attic room. From the direction of the noises, he could tell that there were men by the Armory. It was a small red-brick building with a wall around it and a heavy door. Set apart in a grassy square, the Armory was a secure place where the town's weapons were stored.

There was no moon and it was very dark, but some of the men carried torches. He could see that some of them wore red uniforms and carried swords. There seemed to be a lot of men — ten, maybe even twenty! They were taking things from the Armory and loading them into the wagons.

The Armory was supposed to be guarded by the townspeople of Williamsburg. These men weren't townspeople, though. He didn't know exactly what was going on, but he knew that it was wrong.

He wondered what to do. Should he wake Doctor Galt? Should he yell at these men who'd come in the night to take things away?

Then Jacob heard the drums, rhythmic and loud. Someone else must have seen the men also. They were beating out an alarm to wake the town.

Soon men from the town were running down the street, angry and shouting. From every side, more and more men were joining them, awakened by the drums. By now, the men in uniforms had stopped loading

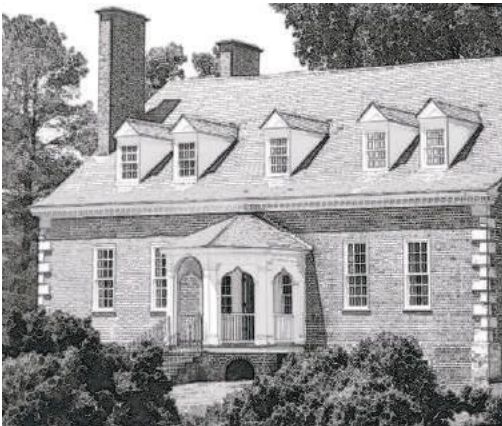
things and the wagons were on their way. The British marines — for that's who they were, Jacob realized, were armed with pistols. Now they were aiming them at the crowd. They shouted that they'd shoot anyone who tried to stop them.

Jacob watched this all with wonderment. Now he understood. There had been rumors that Lord Dunmore, the King's Governor of Virginia, was going to take the gunpowder away from the townspeople. That's why they'd been guarding the Armory. It hadn't been guarded this night, though, and the rumors were true. Lord Dunmore had taken the gunpowder away from the town.

## chapter 2

For Amanda and Amelia, it was just another morning. They lived in the countryside a few miles outside of Williamsburg, and the news hadn't yet traveled that far.

Amanda and Amelia were sisters. They'd been separated when they were very young. They'd only just found each other, not even two years ago.



When their original mother died, they were like orphans. Their father couldn't take care of them. He was a sailor who was always away at sea.

So the court had given them to other people to raise. The way it worked, they were sort of like apprentices. They were supposed to work in return for a place to stay, and learn how to make a living. When they were twenty-one, they'd be on their own. That's how the law worked.

Amelia's life had started out that way. She'd been given to Mr. and Mrs. Brown. She'd moved with them to Fredericksburg. They were nice to her, but she was like a servant. She helped them take care of their house and their store. Then, when they couldn't keep her anymore, she'd come back to Williamsburg.

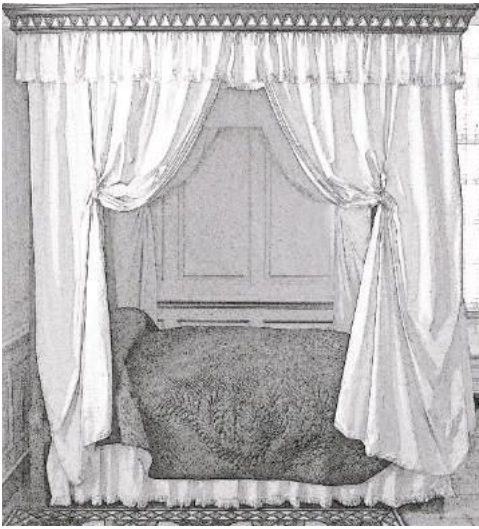
Then she'd been given to Mr. and Mrs. Pryor. Mr. Pryor was a cruel and terrible man. He was mean to everyone, and most of all he was mean to Amanda. Her life was a misery.

Amanda had a very different fate. She'd been given to Mr. and Mrs. Lambertson. They had no children and they'd always wanted a daughter. They didn't treat her like an orphan or an apprentice at all. For years, she thought that she really was their daughter.

Then she learned that she wasn't their daughter at all, and that she had another family, long before. She searched and searched to learn who and where they were. She finally found Amelia, and then she found her sailor father. He'd agreed that Mr. and Mrs. Lambertson could adopt Amanda and Amelia too.

So now they were together again, with a new mother and a second father who loved them very much. They lived in a red brick house in the countryside. It had two floors, and their bedroom was upstairs. They had a big four-poster bed, with bed curtains all around it that you could close to keep out the cold.

They didn't keep the fire going in the night, so in winter they'd close the bed curtains tightly to



stay warm. Now it was April, but a little chilly still. They were snuggled deep under their coverlet and they didn't want to get up at all.

“Wake up, you two!” their mother called up the stairs. “You'd better get dressed and eat

breakfast if you want your father to take you into Williamsburg.”

Williamsburg was the capital of Virginia. The Governor and the House of Burgesses were there, and the law courts for Virginia and also the town. Mr. Lambertson was a lawyer, so he had an office there.



When he had to meet a client or when he had a case in court, he'd ride into town. Sometimes he'd take them too, in a horse-drawn carriage that was just big enough for them all.

The girls were still lazing in bed when the wonderful scent of French toast and bacon wafted up the stairs. Amelia jumped out of bed, feeling suddenly very hungry. Amanda pulled up the coverlet and put a pillow over her head. It was so cozy in bed that she didn't want to leave it.

Amelia went over to Amanda's side of the bed and pulled off the covers.

"Get up, Amanda, get up! Didn't you hear what mother said? Don't you want to go to town today?" Amelia still found it odd to say "mother" and "father," but also wonderful. She'd wanted a family so badly, for so long.

Amanda made a face at her sister but she quickly got up too. They slipped into their shifts and stockings and helped each other lace their stays. Then they put on their wrapping gowns and headed down the stairs. They'd put on their nicest silk gowns after breakfast, to go to town.

When they got to the table, their father had already finished eating. He put down the paper he was reading, pulled out his pocket watch, and looked at it.

“When you finish your breakfast, you’d better get ready, girls. I’m leaving in an hour. I’ll meet you outside.”

# chapter 3

Mr. Lambertson dropped Amelia and Amanda off Duke of Gloucester Street, the main street in Williamsburg. Then he went on around the corner to his office. He had meetings all morning, he told them, but he was going back to the



house in the afternoon. Before they all left, he'd treat them to a meal at the Raleigh Tavern. He said to meet him there at noon exactly.

Amanda had checked her watch, to make sure it had the same time as her father's. It was a dainty little watch on a silver chain and she wore it like a necklace. She loved it, but it didn't always keep the right time. Sometimes it ran a little slow and sometimes she forgot to wind it.

"Where shall we go first?" Amanda asked, once their father had gone on. "Should we go to the millinery or to the apothecary?"

It really didn't matter very much. They had errands at both places and they had enough time. Amelia usually liked to go to the apothecary first, because Jacob was an apprentice there. He was her best and longest-time friend, ever since they'd met in Fredericksburg. Then he'd come to Williamsburg to be an apprentice for Doctor Galt. Now he was Amanda's friend too.

On the other hand, Amelia was eager to go to millinery. She needed to get some new ribbon. She'd worn her favorite hat so much and so long, that she needed to replace the ribbon that tied it on. She needed to sew on a new tie, and change the trim to match.

Amelia was debating which to choose, when they saw their friend Penney. She was hurrying along the sidewalk across the street.

“Penney!” Amanda called out, and they crossed over to Penney’s side, taking care to avoid the horses, carriages, and carts.

All three girls had known each other for a long time. Penney had worked for Mr. Pryor too. He’d told Penney she was enslaved, even though he knew she wasn’t. That’s how evil a man he was. She’d been born free but she didn’t know it. She’d only just discovered the truth. Luckily, she could prove it too. She worked for the Wythe family as a servant now. She still worked hard, but now she got paid and she was free to stay or leave.

“It’s good to see you, but I can’t talk long,” Penney greeted them. “I’m running an errand and I have to get back as fast as I can. If you can, you’ve got to go see Josephine. She needs cheering up.”

“What’s wrong?” Amelia asked, suddenly very worried. Josephine had been the cook when she worked for Mr. Pryor. She’d saved her from the worst of Mr. Pryor’s punishments many times.

“Has something happened to Josephine?” Amanda chimed in.

“I can’t go into it now,” Penney said hurriedly. “It’s a complicated story and I really have to go. Also, I don’t want to talk about it here in public. You’d better just go see her if you can. Maybe she’ll tell you.”

Penney gave a little goodbye curtsy and quickly went on her way.

The sisters just stood there, thinking of all the things that could be wrong. Was Josephine ill? Had she had an accident? They hardly dared imagine the worst thing of all — were the Robinsons going to sell her?

Josephine was enslaved, though she’d been lucky compared to some. The Robinsons were Baptists. They believed all people were equal in God’s eyes, but still there was nothing they could do about slavery. Under the law in Virginia, only the government could set someone free.

The law also said that Josephine was their property, and she was valuable on account of her skills. If they had some big debt and didn’t have the money to pay, they’d probably have to sell her. To Amanda and Amelia, it seemed so very wrong. How could people be bought and sold?

Amelia started to panic. All her old fears came back to her in a rush. Before the Lambertsons, Josephine was the closest to family that she’d ever known. What

if she was sold to someone like Mr. Pryor, someone who'd beat her? What if she was dying from some terrible disease?

Amanda saw that her sister was so terrified, she was shaking and breathing fast. She put her arm around Amelia's shoulder.

"It's no good just wondering," she consoled her. "Maybe it's not as bad as it seems. We just have to go see her and find out what's wrong."

Amelia took a deep breath and tried to steady herself.

"Yes, we have to see her, to see how she is." Her voice was still shaky. "But what if she doesn't want to tell us?"

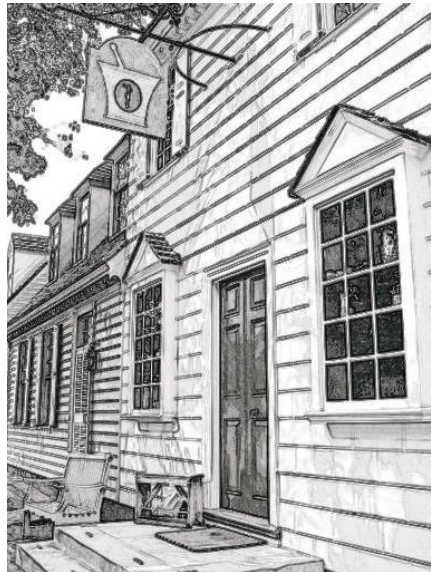
"We'll go to the apothecary first then," Amanda said firmly, setting off in that direction. "Maybe Jacob knows what's wrong."

## chapter 4

When they opened the apothecary door, Doctor Galt smiled at them in welcome. They visited the apothecary whenever they were in town.

Most often they went to see Jacob. Sometimes they had a shopping list too. Plus, even without a list and when Jacob wasn't there, they really just liked the store.

Amelia liked it because she was interested in medicine. She'd been studying diseases and





treatments. Doctor Galt helped to teach her, even when she worked for Mr. Pryor. Even though she couldn't be a doctor, because she was a girl.

“Who knows,” he'd said, “maybe you'll have a family. Then you'll know how to take care of them. Or maybe you'll have a husband who's a doctor.” Women couldn't be doctors on their own, but they could help their husbands. Sometimes, if the husband died, a widow would carry on his business by herself.

Amanda wasn't that interested in medicine. She wanted to learn about the courts and the law. They'd turned out to be so important in her life that she wanted to know more about how it all worked. Even so, the apothecary seemed magical to her. It was full of strange and wonderful things. There were medicines with exotic names, like Jesuit's bark, Peruvian Balsam, and Daffy's Magic Elixir. There were good-smelling herbs and spices, like nutmeg, vanilla, cinnamon, and rosemary. There was powder to clean your teeth, chamomile flowers for tea, and all sorts of ointments and plasters. And, to top it off, there was candy.

Sometimes, when he was in a good mood, Doctor Galt would give them little presents — maybe some sugar rock candy, or some peppermints or candied almonds, or even a little bag of lavender to help them sleep.

Today they wanted to see Jacob, of course, but they also had a shopping list from their mother.

“Good morning, Doctor Galt,” Amelia greeted him politely. “Is Jacob here?” She looked around, disappointed that she couldn’t see him. Sometimes he was busy in the back office. When he heard their voices, though, he’d usually come out front.

Doctor Galt smiled reassuringly.

“Jacob’s running an errand just now. He should be back soon. In the meantime, can I help you?”

Amelia pulled a little piece of paper from her pocket. She handed it to Doctor Galt.

“Mother gave me this list. She said she hopes that you have it all.”



Doctor Galt adjusted his glasses to look at the list more closely.

“Hmmm. Yes, I have orange peel, chamomile, and Jesuit’s bark. I’m pretty certain that I also have valerian, caraway, licorice, and Ward’s Famous

Powder for the Headache. I don't have any of the pills, not ready-made. I'll have to have Jacob make some. I'll have to see about the rhubarb and spirits of hartshorn. I'm not sure that I have that much on hand. Does your mother want things right away or can she wait until I get everything together?"

"She said she could wait for whatever you don't have, but she'd like the rest today, if you don't mind."

Doctor Galt began to put together what he had, that their mother had asked for. Some things were in blue and white porcelain containers on the shelves. Others were tucked away in one of his many drawers. As they watched him, Amanda decided not to wait for Jacob. Maybe Doctor Galt knew what was wrong with Josephine.

"We ran into Penney on the way here. She said Josephine needed cheering up. Do you know what the problem is?"

Doctor Galt stopped what he was doing and turned to them.

"Yes, very wrong, I'm sorry to say." He looked very serious. "She's accused — " he hesitated, as if the next words were hard to say. "She's accused of poisoning someone."

"Poisoning!" The girls were horrified. They looked at him in disbelief.

“Yes, poisoning,” he repeated. “You know she often gives people her herbal ointments and tonics to help them with different ailments.”

It was a statement more than a question. Of course they knew. So did everyone in town, and even in the countryside. Josephine had even helped save their mother when she was so deathly sick with pneumonia. She’d given their mother a “strengthening tonic,” as she called it, with Doctor Galt’s permission.

“Well, she was treating one of the servants at the Raleigh Tavern,” he went on. “It was one of the scullery maids in the kitchen. Betsey, I think her name was. It seems that Josephine gave her some sort of herbal tonic. Then Betsey got very sick and they called for me. It was all I could do to save her. Afterwards, she told everyone that Josephine’s tonic had poisoned her.”

“Josephine would never poison anyone!” Amelia didn’t have any doubts at all. “She’s always very careful. She won’t even give people the dangerous things.”

“That’s as may be.” Doctor Galt wasn’t so sure, but he didn’t want to argue. “The fact is, Betsey was very sick from something, and people believe her story. Some say Josephine just made a deadly mistake, and some say she deliberately poisoned the girl. As you must know from your studies,” he added, looking at

Amelia, “even so-called ‘safe’ ingredients can be deadly if taken improperly. The girl swears that she only took what Josephine gave her.”

Amelia was about to protest once again, but just then Jacob came back from his errand. Seeing their faces, he knew immediately what they were talking about.

“Tell him that it can’t be Josephine’s fault!” Amelia said to him immediately. “There must be something more to the story.”

“I really can’t say what happened,” Jacob answered hesitantly. “The maid wasn’t in such good shape when we saw her. I always thought Josephine knew what she was doing, but everyone makes mistakes.”

Jacob’s hesitation made Amelia angry.

“Not Josephine!” she insisted. “Josephine would never make a mistake like that. She’d never poison someone on purpose, either. She never even poisoned Mr. Pryor, when she cooked for him. And he deserved it if anyone did.”

Amelia looked to Amanda for support this time, and her sister did better than Jacob.

“Amelia’s right,” she agreed right away. “She’s been doing this for years and years and years. There’s never been a problem before. Something’s wrong with this maid Betsey’s story. It can’t have been what she said.”

Doctor Galt looked unhappy. He really didn't know what to make of things. He'd thought Josephine was careful too, but how did he know?

"I hope you're right," he told them, "but whether it's true or not, people believe it. It's all over town. They're even talking about charging Josephine with attempted murder. You know she's not supposed to be treating people, being enslaved. Under the law, the consequences could be very serious for her. I could even get in trouble myself, for letting her give things to my patients."

Amelia's and Amanda's eyes met. Each knew exactly what the other was thinking. Then they looked at Jacob. It was a challenge, and after a moment, he nodded too.

Nothing was said, but they all knew what they had to do. Josephine didn't poison the maid. There must be some other explanation. They had to find out what it was.