



The Apothecary Apprentice

A Pocket Story

Davilyn Atwood

You Make Your Own Medicine, Bitter Sweet Novels, and The Apothecary's Atlas series, Pocket Stories, and anything published by The Apothecary Press or written by Davilyn Atwood,

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The Apothecary's Apprentice

The apothecary's shop smelled of rosemary and secrets. Jars lined the shelves from floor to ceiling, their glass bellies full of dried leaves and curled roots. Bundles of lavender and yarrow hung from the beams overhead, swaying gently in the draft that slipped beneath the door. Dust glimmered in the late-afternoon light, and every drawer in the wall of oak cupboards seemed to hum faintly with what it contained.

Amarantha paused just inside, her hand still on the latch. To the village she was simply "Amy," but here—amid these relics of earth and memory—her full name felt more fitting, as though it, too, belonged to the language of herbs. At thirty-two, she had thought herself too old to be an apprentice, too far past beginnings. Yet her heart carried a hunger for something she could not name, and so here she was, a novice in a place that smelled like another world.

"Don't stand there like a ghost," Coris called from behind the counter.

Amy startled. The apothecary was a woman of sixty, sharp-eyed and sturdy despite the years etched into her face. Her apron was dusted with chalky powders, her hair pinned loosely in a knot streaked with white. She reminded Amy of the plants themselves—rooted, weathered, but impossibly alive.

"I didn't want to interrupt," Amy said, her voice catching a little.

"An apprentice's work is interruption," Coris replied, sliding a mortar and pestle toward her. "You sweep, you spill, you ask too many questions. It's how you learn."

Amy crossed the room, her boots echoing on the worn boards. She picked up the pestle, its stone weight cool in her palm.

"Grind this," Coris instructed, setting dried chamomile blossoms before her. "Not too fast. The plant forgives bruising, but you must still show respect."

Amy began to press the pestle into the petals, the air filling with a gentle, apple-sweet fragrance. The blossoms broke apart easily, releasing a softness that clung to her fingers. Still, she pressed too quickly, spilling some of the golden dust across the counter.

Her cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry."

Coris only shrugged, a half-smile tugging at her mouth. "Chamomile forgives. Perhaps you should learn to, too."

Amy let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. It had been years since anyone had spoken to her without judgment. Years since she had forgiven herself for being left behind by the man who had once sworn to love her.

She ground more carefully this time, listening to the rhythm of stone on stone. Somewhere in the shelves, a drawer clicked softly in the draft, as if in agreement.

Coris leaned against the counter, watching her. "Every apprentice begins by sweeping the floor, Amy. But if you're listening, the dust itself will teach you."

Amy paused, her hand stalling on the pestle. She wasn't sure what the older woman meant, but she felt, deep in her bones, that she wanted to find out.

The next morning, Amy woke to the low tolling of the church bell across the square. The apothecary's shutters creaked in the early wind, and for a moment she wondered if she had dreamed the whole thing, the shelves, the jars, Coris's voice like gravel and honey. But the smell of herbs lingered in the air of her little room upstairs: lavender, sage, a trace of valerian. Real. All of it.

When she came down, Coris was already at the counter, sleeves rolled to the elbow, her mortar grinding steady and slow. She didn't look up.

"You're late," she said.

Amy glanced at the sun, still dragging itself above the roofs. "It's hardly past dawn."

"Exactly." Coris tipped the crushed herbs into a small paper cone and folded it into a neat triangle. "Plants rise with the light. So must you. Sleep past their waking, and you'll miss what they're willing to give."

Amy bit her lip, but she only nodded.

Coris pushed a bundle toward her. Stems brittle, flowers papery but fragrant. "Rosemary. Strip the leaves. Separate them into glass jars, stems one way, leaves another. Nothing wasted. Everything has its use."

Amy took the bundle, the sharp, clean scent rising into her face. She pulled at the sprigs, fingers clumsy. Stems snapped, leaves scattered. Within minutes the table was littered with her mistakes.

Her throat tightened. "I can't..."

Coris's hand shot out, quick as a hawk, catching a fallen sprig before it hit the floor. She set it back on the table, calm, unhurried. "You can. You're too proud to be clumsy. That's your problem."

Heat rushed to Amy's cheeks. She wanted to argue, to explain that she was trying, that she wasn't used to such work. But the words shriveled under Coris's steady gaze.

“Rosemary is remembrance,” Coris said, her voice softer now. “It doesn’t mind your fumbling fingers. It remembers storms, drought, frost. It endures. Why shouldn’t you?”

Amy swallowed hard, the sharp scent filling her chest. She bent again to her task, slower this time. One sprig, then another. Her hands steadied.

Hours passed in the rhythm of work, herbs stripped, jars filled, labels scratched in her uneven script. When she straightened at last, her back aching, the table gleamed with rows of glass, each jar holding a little piece of order she had made with her own hands.

A strange relief bloomed in her chest.

Coris wiped her hands on her apron and leaned against the counter, watching her. “Better.”

Amy dared a small smile. “I think I’m beginning to understand.”

The Apothecary tilted her head. “Are you? Then tell me, what did the rosemary teach you today?”

Amy blinked. “Teach me?”

“Every plant is a teacher. You’ll write it in the ledger each night, not just what it heals, but what it says. What it shows you about yourself. That’s the true work.”

Amy hesitated, then spoke slowly. “That I’m...not finished. That I can start again, even after breaking.”

Coris’s eyes softened, and for the first time, her smile reached them. “Good. That’s rosemary. Now, sweep the floor. The dust is waiting.”

The bell over the shop door gave a hollow chime just as Amy was sweeping dust into a neat pile by the counter. She straightened quickly, brushing loose hair from her face. The morning light pooled across the shelves, gilding the glass jars and making the whole place feel fragile, as though one careless step might break it.

A man stood in the doorway, shoulders stooped as if he carried something heavier than his own frame. He removed his hat with careful fingers, holding it against his chest. His hair, dark with streaks of silver, curled damply at his temples from the mist outside.

Coris looked up from where she was tying a bundle of dried lavender. “Roland.”

His name rolled softly from her tongue, as though it were one she had spoken many times before, though Amy could not remember seeing him in the shop until now.

“Coris,” he said, voice low, roughened by sleeplessness. “I... I hoped you might have something.”

Amy noticed how he did not say for what. His eyes were shadowed, hollowed at the edges, yet he carried himself with a kind of restrained dignity, the way men did who had once been strong but no longer trusted their strength.

Coris set aside the lavender. “What is troubling you?”

Roland shifted, his gaze falling to the jars, the floor, the worn grain of the counter. At last he said, “Sleep won’t come. Or if it does, it breaks too soon. I wake with my heart pounding like a hammer, though I’ve done nothing to earn it.” His mouth tightened, and in the silence that followed, Amy felt the weight of words unsaid, the names he did not speak, the loss pressed like a stone into his chest.

Coris nodded, as if she already knew. She moved without hurry, drawing down a jar of valerian root, another of chamomile, a third of linden. Into the mortar she measured careful portions, the pestle grinding in a steady circle. The sound filled the shop, earthy and patient.

Amy hovered, wanting to help, but unsure if she belonged in this moment. She could feel the man’s grief as though it radiated from him, something raw and wordless.

“Valerian to quiet the restless body,” Coris said aloud, more for Amy than for Roland. “Chamomile to soften the edges. Linden to ease the heart.” She poured the blend into a small muslin sachet, tying it closed with twine.

Then, instead of offering it at once, she looked at Roland and said, “Do you remember the story of the blackbird?”

He blinked. “The one that sang in winter?”

Coris’s eyes softened. “Yes. When the frost was deep and no bird dared lift its voice, still the blackbird sang. Not because it was unafraid, but because the song was the only thing that kept it alive.”

Roland’s hand tightened on the brim of his hat. For a moment, his throat worked as though words had risen there but could not pass.

Amy felt the prickle of tears at the corners of her eyes. She hadn’t expected the story to touch her too, but it did. She thought of her own nights, wide awake, replaying what could have been if her life had turned differently.

Coris pressed the sachet into Roland’s hands. “Steep this before bed. Drink slowly. And remember, the song need not be perfect. Only true.”

Roland bowed his head, his voice nearly a whisper. "Thank you."

He left as quietly as he had come, the door shutting softly behind him.

Amy realized she was holding her breath. She turned to Coris, who was already tying more herbs into bundles.

"Why a story?" Amy asked, the words spilling before she could stop them.

Coris glanced at her. "Because sometimes, child, medicine needs roots deeper than the body. Sleep will not come to a man whose soul refuses it. But a story can make a crack in the grief, just wide enough for rest to slip in."

Amy bent her head, the broom trembling slightly in her grip. She wasn't sure if Coris had meant the words for Roland alone.

That evening, when the shop was shuttered and the last of the day's light sank behind the hills, Amy sat with Coris at the long wooden counter. The bundles of herbs cast shadows on the walls like old hands reaching. Between them sat the ledger, its cover cracked with age, pages thick and uneven, as though they had soaked up centuries of ink and breath.

Coris dipped her quill in ink, wrote a few lines in her neat, slanting script, then slid the book toward Amy.

"Your turn," she said.

Amy stared at the empty page waiting for her. Her throat went dry. "What should I write?"

"What the plants told you today. What they showed you. What you noticed in yourself while working with them."

Amy shifted uncomfortably. "But that's not...practical. Shouldn't I record the tinctures, the dosages, the remedies?"

Coris gave a short, amused laugh. "The books are full of that already. You could read them all your life and never heal a soul. The ledger is not for recipes. It's for listening. Plants speak, if you know how to hear them. But more than that, people speak through what they need. Both belong in these pages."

Amy hesitated, then pressed the quill to the paper. Slowly, her hand began to move:

Rosemary teaches me that memory does not have to be a burden. It can be strength. My own memories ache, but perhaps they still have use, like broken stems that still give fragrance.

She stopped, embarrassed. "It sounds foolish."

Coris shook her head. "It sounds true. And truth is what heals."

Amy set the quill down, staring at the words she had written. They seemed to glow faintly in the candlelight, as if the ink itself knew it had caught something alive.

Coris leaned back, folding her arms. "Did you see the man today? Roland?"

Amy nodded, surprised at the sudden rush of warmth in her cheeks. "He looked...hollow. Like something inside him had broken."

"Grief does that," Coris said quietly. "It eats sleep, it starves the heart, it dries the bones. No herb alone can reach it." She paused, then added, "That's why you saw me tell a story."

Amy looked at her curiously. "Why that one? Why the blackbird?"

Coris's eyes softened, their gray depths distant. "Because when my husband died, I thought I'd never hear anything beautiful again. Then one morning, a blackbird sang outside my window. Thin, off-key, almost pitiful. But it was alive. And that was enough."

The silence stretched between them, heavy but not unbearable. Amy thought of her own past, the man she had once been engaged to, the way he had looked at her before turning to another. That wound had silenced her, too, though she had never thought of it that way.

"So, stories are medicine," Amy whispered.

Coris nodded. "Herbs work on the body. Stories work on the places herbs cannot reach. A good apothecary must know both. One without the other is like giving a man bread without water."

Amy traced the edge of the ledger with her finger. A spark of longing flickered within her. She wanted to learn this art, this blending of plant and story. But a shadow of doubt quickly followed. *What stories do I have left to tell?*

Coris's voice broke into her thoughts, low and steady. "Write them down, Amy. Even the broken ones. Especially the broken ones. They are the stories most needed."

Amy looked back at the page, her heart hammering softly in her chest. For the first time, she wondered if she had not come to the apothecary only to learn herbs, but to learn how to find her own voice again.

The storm started at dusk, the kind that turns a village inward. Wind shouldered the shutters, and the lane outside the apothecary ran with a thin, shining river that carried

leaves and twigs and the day's loose ends. Coris had gone out before the rain broke, cloak snapped around her like a wing, to cut fresh willow along the stream and fetch a handful of herbs she swore were sweeter if gathered in the hour before night. "I won't be long," she'd said, cane tapping the stone step. "Keep the kettle ready. Keep the door."

Amy did as she was told. She swept. She filled the kettle and set it on the iron ring over the little stove. She tidied the bundles that always came loose from their knots. But the shop felt larger with Coris gone, the quiet stretching long and thin between the walls. The ledger sat open on the counter where she had left it that afternoon, the last line of her spidery hand still damp when she'd closed the book: *Rosemary remembers what we try to throw away; perhaps that is why it stings.*

The bell over the door rang. Once, then again in a half-stumble.

Amy turned. Roland stood there with rain in his hair, his shirt clinging to his chest, his hat in one fist like something he had wrestled from the wind. He did not look at her at first; he looked past her, searching. "Is Coris..." He stopped, saw the empty space behind the counter, swallowed. "I, she said she'd be here."

"She will," Amy said quickly, coming around the counter. "She's gone to the stream. The rain caught her."

He nodded without hearing. His breath was all wrong, short and fast, though he had come only a few steps through the door. Under the shadows in his face, the skin lay too pale and too bright. He pressed his free hand to the bench as though to steady the world.

"Sit," Amy said, and then, because her voice sounded too young in her own ears, she said it again, steadier. "Please. Sit."

He sat on the stool by the counter, still holding the hat, knuckles white around its brim. The room seemed to narrow to the triangle they made: his ragged breath, the kettle beginning to tremble toward a boil, Amy's hands that would not be still.

"What happened?" she asked, softer.

Roland shook his head once, slow, like a door refusing to close. "It comes like this sometimes," he said, the words scraping. "Not every night. Not even every week. But when it comes, it feels like my body remembers the worst of it without my permission. I can do nothing to stop it. My heart..." He let the sentence trail into the rain as if finishing it would break him.

Amy's own chest tightened in sympathy. She thought of the winter her fiancé had left, the ache that had set up its little camp in her ribs and would not go. How the quiet at night had sounded like many small voices tearing cloth. She reached for the kettle hook

to lift it from the heat and almost knocked her knuckles against the iron. *Steady*, she told herself, the word Coris said to the pestle, to the knife, to the breath.

“Coris will be back soon,” she said, though the wind raised its shoulders and laughed. “Let me, let me make you something warm.”

She set a small clay pot on the counter, hands moving before her thoughts had caught up. Chamomile for softening; linden for the tight drum of the heart; a whisper of lavender for breath and memory; a few pale shavings of willow Coris had left on a board, curled like tiny moons. She measured, then hesitated. Valerian? Its root lay in the jar with the dark, familiar earth-smell of cellars. Coris always said it was strong and should be used like a story told once and not repeated. Amy touched the lid and drew her fingers back. Not yet. The storm outside did not ask for sleep so much as for comfort enough to allow it.

She poured the water. Steam lifted, smelling of apples and fields after rain. “Give it a moment,” she said, more to herself than to him. Her voice found a lower register, as if speaking to the tea called her to the right depth.

Roland set the hat on the counter with care, as if any sudden move might tip the day into the dark. His eyes kept moving, to the shelf where bottles glowed brown and green, to the drawers with their little brass pulls, to the ledger lying open like the palm of a hand. “Coris tells a story when she gives me the tea,” he said, not looking at Amy. “I don’t know why it helps. But it does.”

Amy swallowed. The kettle hissed where a drop had fallen to the stove. She could hear Coris’s voice in her head: *Herbs work on the body. Stories work where herbs cannot reach*. She felt the old tightness of unworthiness crawl up her throat. Who was she to speak into such grief? What story did she have that wouldn’t sound like a child trying on her mother’s coat?

She looked down at the ledger, the cracked spine, the dark threading of ink where Coris had written years of notes in a hand both elegant and spare. Beside it, a low cabinet sat with a ring of lighter wood around one drawer, rubbed by years of hands. She had dusted those drawers. She had polished those pulls until they gleamed like small moons. She had never asked what was inside.

Her palm itched.

“Excuse me,” she murmured, and moved to the cabinet, as if tidying. Her fingers slipped under the lip of the familiar drawer and met resistance, the smallest catch, a stubbornness she recognized. She pressed her thumb to the seam and pushed. The drawer slid, sticking at first, then giving with a sigh like a relieved breath.

Inside lay slips of paper folded and refolded until their edges had become as soft as cloth. A dried sprig of something dark (yarrow, she thought) crossed two pages at their

center like a blessing. Ink had bled through with time, leaving soft shadows of words on the backs. She lifted one, another, and the smell of old paper, dust and a sweetness like hay, rose into her face.

On the first, in Coris's hand: *Tell the story you can bear to tell, and it will make room in the listener for the one they cannot bear to tell yet.*

On the second, in a different script, blunter, more upright, a man's perhaps: *Bitter clears the blood; sweetness stays the night. Don't be afraid to give both.*

Amy's breath caught. She had never seen Coris's husband's writing, but she felt sure of it, the way one feels sure of a road because of the dust on one's boots. She looked over her shoulder. Roland had bowed his head, eyes closed, as if the simple act of sitting still in the apothecary's quiet had taken all the strength he had left.

She took the folded page with the blessing of yarrow and tucked it into the ledger like a compass. Then she went back to the pot, lifted the lid, and poured the tea into a cup Coris kept for nighttime remedies, thick-walled, heavy, a little chipped along the rim in a way that felt like a promise rather than a flaw.

"Careful," she said, offering it. Their fingers touched. His skin was cool and dry, and he held the cup like a person who had learned to brace for heat and loss both.

He sipped, eyes still closed. "It tastes..." He searched. "Kind."

Amy stood with her hands on the counter to keep them from shaking. The rain pressed its shoulder harder to the door; the hanging bundles swayed and whispered. The room felt smaller, more human. She drew in a breath, and without looking at the drawer again, she began.

"There was a willow," she said, "by the river, down where the stones flatten the water's song, so it runs like silk. It was not an old tree, though from a distance it looked as if it had always been there. It had grown from a broken branch," She paused, startled at the image she had not meant to summon, of herself standing in the lane the night her betrothal had ended, feeling like a snapped-off thing someone had stuck in the mud. She loosened her jaw and carried on, softer. "...from a piece of another tree that had come down in a storm. A farmer had pushed the branch into the bank to stop the earth washing away. He did not mean to plant anything. He only wanted to keep from losing more."

Roland's hand tightened around the cup. He did not open his eyes. Amy could see the muscle working in his cheek.

"The branch took root," she said. "It put out shy leaves. The first year, only a handful. The second, more. It grew by not asking for too much at once. It drank what the river gave. It kept what it could. It let go of the rest."

She let the words find their own pace, as Coris's pestle found its circle. "People began to think of the willow as theirs, though none of them had planted it on purpose. They stood under it when it rained. They trailed their fingers in the water and leaned their backs against its rough skin and said nothing at all. And sometimes, when there was a funeral and the line of black-coats moved under the gray, somebody would leave a ribbon on one of its low branches, just to see the color move."

Roland lifted the cup, swallowed, set it down. His mouth had softened, almost a slackness, but not the kind that comes with giving up. The kind that suggests a body remembering how to be a body.

Amy's own throat felt thick. She had not told a story in years; she had not known she still could. The drawer, the page, the blessing of yarrow lay in her memory like a warm stone. She reached for the end of the tale and found it waiting.

"One spring," she said, "a flood came, the kind that takes shoes off feet and fences off fields. The river rose and rose. The willow bent and bent with it. It bent so low people thought it had given up being a tree and had decided to become the river instead. But when the water finally went down, and the mud dried, the willow was still there. Its branches were full of small, green hands." She smiled without meaning to. "No one could say if it was stronger because it had bent, or in spite of it. But everyone agreed on one thing: wherever there was more earth lost along the bank, they planted cuttings from that willow. And the bank did not run away so easily after."

She let the silence after the story be what it wanted. The rain had softened. The kettle clicked as it cooled. Somewhere in the wall, a small sound, mouse, perhaps, or the building deciding on its bones. Amy kept her hands where he could see them, fingers open on the wood. She had learned from Coris that the body hears with the eyes too.

Roland bowed his head over the cup as if over a small, sleeping thing. "My wife," he said, finally, voice sanded down to almost nothing. "Her name was Lila. The baby... we never chose a name. The midwife told me not to, after. She said it would be easier."

Amy did not move. The room seemed to hold its breath with her.

"It was not easier," he said. The words came without adornment.

"No," Amy whispered. "It never is." She thought of the man who had chosen someone else's future over hers, the little life she had imagined and then had to bury without a grave to show for it. "But you are still here."

He lifted his eyes to hers. They were not dry, but they were no longer the glassy, drowning kind of wetness that comes before panic. "I don't know what to do with that fact," he said.

“Sometimes,” Amy said, hearing Coris’s cadence but knowing the thought was her own, “you do not do anything with it. You just let it be true. And you breathe next to it. And then, when your breath remembers how to be steady, you do the smallest, kindest thing you can think of. You stand in a doorway when it rains. You steep a cup. You listen to a story about a tree.”

He drew a long, unsteady breath and let it out on a sound that might have been a laugh or a sob. He wiped his fingers over his face, nodded once. “I can do that,” he said. He took another sip, then another. The tea had cooled to the right kind of warmth, the kind that invites rather than insists.

They sat together like that, without speaking, while the last anger of the storm banged itself out over the square. Amy watched the shadow of a hanging bundle stretch across the far wall and then slide back as the wind turned. She watched Roland’s hands ease their grip on the cup. She watched the color return to his face like a tide that owes nothing to anyone.

A sudden draft tugged the door; the bell rang once, twice. Coris stepped in with her cloak wet to the knees and her braid stringing rain down her spine. She took in the room with that single sweep of her glance that always made Amy feel both seen and dignified. Her gaze rested half a heartbeat longer on Roland, then on the cup in his hands, then on Amy’s face.

“Good,” she said simply, setting her basket on the counter. “You kept the door.”

Roland stood, a bit too quickly, then steadied. “Thank you,” he said, looking from one woman to the other, as if the thanks belonged between them. “Both of you.”

“Come tomorrow if you wish,” Coris said, untying her cloak. “We’ll make a blend that suits you better. There are new leaves along the stream. They know about floods.”

He managed the smallest smile. “I’ll come,” he said. He turned to Amy, and there was something in his eyes that had not been there before, a soft recognition, as if he had found the edge of a path in the dark and was relieved to see a fellow traveler on it. “Thank you,” he said again, quietly, to her.

After he left and the door had taken the rain’s last complaint, Coris set a hand on the counter between the ledger and the drawer with the lighter wood. She tapped once with a fingernail. “Well?”

Amy felt heat rise to her face. “I, looked in the drawer.”

“I hoped you would,” Coris said. “You can spend a lifetime waiting for permission and still die thirsty.”

"I didn't take anything," Amy said, then heard how small that sounded and lifted her chin. "I took courage."

Coris's mouth tilted. "Good. The drawer is for that."

Amy blew out a breath that seemed to have been waiting years to leave her. "I told him a story. About a willow that grew from a broken branch. It felt... clumsy. But he listened. He, changed."

Coris unwrapped her basket and laid out the willow she had cut, green and wet and smelling of river. "Clumsy is still a kind of true," she said. "The heart can hear through it." She paused and looked up, really looked, into Amy's face. "You did well."

The words landed in Amy like a small lantern being set on a shelf that had always been there but never lit. She opened the ledger with hands that no longer shook, found a blank page, and wrote:

Linden for the drum of the heart. Chamomile for the edges. Lavender for breath. Willow for the shape of sorrow when it bends and does not break.

And a story about a tree that grew because someone needed the earth to stop running away.

She set the quill down. Outside, the rain softened to a mist almost like breath. The shop breathed with it. Amy pressed her palm to the page a moment, as if to weigh it into the world, then closed the book and looked up to find Coris wrapping the willow for drying, eyes bright in the candlelight, the lines at their corners deepened by pride or age or both.

"Will he be all right?" Amy asked, surprising herself with how much the answer mattered.

"No one is all right," Coris said, not unkindly. "But he will be more all right than he was." She nodded at the ledger. "And so will you."

The bell did not ring again that night. The wind gentled its hand on the shutters. Amy banked the coals, swept the last dust into the pan, set the cup to dry. When she climbed the narrow stairs, her legs felt tired and clean, like a road after rain. She lay down, and before sleep came, she thought of the willow's low green hands, and of a life that grows by not asking for too much at once.

She slept.

The morning after the storm broke clean and cold. The village smelled of wet stone, wood smoke, and the faint iron tang of the river that had swollen against its banks all night. Amy stood at the apothecary's doorway, broom in hand, sweeping twigs and

leaves from the step. The air was brisk enough to sting her cheeks, but the sweep of the broom steadied her heart. She found herself listening to the rhythm it made against the stone, as if it were a kind of heartbeat, hers, Coris's, the shop's.

Inside, the bundles of herbs dripped faintly from where Coris had strung them to dry. Sunlight fell through the high window, striping the room into gold and shadow. Coris herself was at the back table, grinding bark in the mortar. Each turn of the pestle sounded certain, like a promise. Amy had always admired that sound, though last night she had discovered that she could find her own rhythm too, even if it was clumsy.

The bell at the door rang. Roland stepped inside. He looked different, still pale, but no longer hollow. His shoulders sat higher, as if some invisible burden had shifted enough to let his lungs rise. He held a small parcel wrapped in cloth.

"Good morning," he said, voice tentative but steadier than before.

Amy felt an unexpected warmth flicker through her chest. "Good morning," she answered, leaning the broom against the wall.

Coris didn't look up right away, but Amy noticed the way her grinding slowed, listening. Then, without lifting her eyes, she said, "You've come for the tea."

Roland nodded. "And to bring this." He set the cloth-wrapped parcel on the counter and unwrapped it carefully. Inside lay a loaf of bread, dark with seeds, its crust baked to a sheen. "It seemed...right. To bring something in return."

Amy's hands itched to touch the bread, to feel its weight, its warmth. Coris gave a small approving sound but still didn't stop her grinding. "Bread is a good thing to bring," she said. "Better than coin."

Amy glanced at Roland, who met her gaze for the first time. There was still a sadness in his eyes, but less like a hole and more like a river winding through. She remembered the way his fingers had tightened on the cup last night, the way he had breathed with her story. She hadn't meant to think of him after he left, but she had. More than once.

"Did you sleep?" she asked.

Roland hesitated, then gave a small nod. "Better. Not long, but better. I woke before dawn and walked down to the river. It was swollen, but quiet. I thought of the willow in your story." His voice softened. "It made me...stay."

Amy's throat tightened. She busied herself with unwrapping jars for blending, though her hands moved slower than usual. "I'll make you another mix. Something lighter for morning."

Roland nodded gratefully, but his eyes lingered on her, as if he could not help but measure the truth of her presence against the hollow spaces inside him.

Coris finally set down the pestle, dusting her hands against her apron. "Roland," she said, using his name with a kind of weight that made him stand straighter. "You've carried your grief alone too long. Herbs will help. Stories too. But you must allow yourself to be in the company of others. Loss teaches us solitude, but it should not make us prisoners."

Roland inclined his head, accepting the truth without defense. "I know," he said quietly. "It's just, when the silence comes, I don't know how to answer it."

Amy found herself speaking before she thought: "Sometimes you don't answer it. Sometimes you just let someone else sit inside it with you."

The words startled her, but they felt true. Roland looked at her with something like gratitude flickering at the edges of his expression, soft but unmistakable.

Coris's gaze moved between them, and though her face didn't change, Amy sensed the older woman noting something, cataloging it in that unspoken ledger she seemed to keep inside her. Then Coris moved to the shelves and began pulling jars without comment.

Amy measured herbs for the blend, her hands sure despite the flutter in her chest. Lemon balm for calming. Hawthorn for the heart. A touch of nettle for strength, to remind the body it still belonged to the earth. She worked silently, aware of Roland's presence beside her, how his breathing was steadier, how his hands no longer clutched at the counter but rested open on the wood.

When the tea was ready, she poured it into the thick cup again, the same one as last night. This time, she slid it toward him without hesitation. He lifted it, drank, and exhaled slowly.

"I remember," he said, "when my wife was carrying...before things went wrong...she used to drink nettle tea every morning. She said it made her strong." He stared into the cup, voice quieter now. "After she passed, I couldn't bear the smell of it. But this, this doesn't hurt. It feels...different. Alive again."

Amy's hand paused on the counter. She wanted to reach for him, to offer something more than herbs and story. But she held still, sensing that the space between them was delicate, like paper just before it takes ink.

Coris broke the silence, her voice brisk but not unkind. "That is because Amy mixed it for you. Every hand brings its own medicine. Remember that."

Roland looked at Amy again, and this time his eyes stayed, steady and unflinching. Something passed between them, not a promise, not yet, but the faint recognition of a path that might be walked together.

After a while, he finished the tea, thanked them both, and stood. "I'll come again," he said, more firmly now. "If that's welcome."

"It is," Coris said, turning back to her work. "But remember, healing is not only drinking what is offered. It is choosing to keep stepping into the place where you are seen."

Roland nodded, bowed his head once more, and left. The bell chimed behind him, the sound hanging in the air longer than usual.

Amy exhaled slowly, her heart unsettled but full. She touched the ledger where it lay on the counter. Without waiting for Coris's instruction, she opened to a fresh page and wrote:

This morning, nettle became a memory remade. It carried grief, but also the strength of survival. Some herbs return when we are ready to meet them differently. Perhaps people do too.

She set the quill down, and for the first time, her handwriting did not waver.

Coris watched her from the table, silent. Then she gave the smallest nod, approving not only the words, but the woman Amy was becoming.

Amy closed the ledger softly, her pulse thrumming with a strange mixture of fear and possibility. Outside, the sun broke through the clouds, catching the wet cobblestones in light like scattered silver. She thought of the willow again, its branches bending and lifting, green hands reaching for the day.

And for the first time in years, she felt herself reaching too.

The village square was alive with motion. By late morning the market had spread across cobbles still damp from the week's rain. Stalls brimmed with early apples, bundles of carrots, loaves stacked like bricks, and skeins of dyed wool that glowed in the autumn light. Chickens scurried underfoot, chased by laughing children. The air carried the sweet tang of roasted chestnuts and the heavier smoke of pitch tar heating in a cooper's barrel.

Amy trailed beside Coris, her basket swinging lightly in one hand, though her heart was heavy. She had always preferred shadows and corners. But Coris had insisted she come, not only to gather roots and seed but "to be seen," as she put it.

"They'll ask questions," Amy muttered.

“Good,” Coris replied, not breaking stride. “That means they remember you exist. Better than being a ghost.”

Amy bit her lip. She didn’t want to be a ghost, yet neither did she wish to face the steady gaze of neighbors who remembered the girl whose betrothed had left her for another. Villages carried long memories, just like rosemary. Some were blessings; others were stones.

The first to stop them was Mrs. Alder, bent-backed and sharp-eyed, clutching the hand of her grandson. “Coris, child’s cough won’t quit. Two weeks now. My daughter fears the fever will follow.”

Coris placed her hand on the boy’s crown, eyes briefly closing. “No fever yet. Good. Thyme and honey will ease it. Come by the shop this evening.”

Amy noticed the boy’s small, frightened face. Without thinking, she crouched, offering him a sprig of mint from her basket. “Chew this,” she said gently. “It tastes sharp at first, but then it turns sweet. Like a trick. It’ll make your throat feel cool.”

The boy hesitated, then took it. His wide eyes softened as the mint released its brightness. Mrs. Alder blinked, surprised, then gave Amy a curt nod of thanks. “You’re Coris’s apprentice, then?”

Amy straightened. “Yes.”

“Well,” the older woman said, “we’ll see how your hands work.”

They moved on, but Amy’s pulse raced. She had spoken too quickly, too boldly. Yet she saw the boy chewing happily, and for a moment, her doubt eased.

By midday the square grew crowded. A juggler drew laughter at one end; a fiddler’s bow carved the air at another. Then a commotion stirred near the well. A man staggered forward, clutching his chest. His face was flushed; lips pale. A murmur swept the crowd.

“It’s Old Bennett,” someone cried. “He’s taken bad!”

Before Amy could think, her feet carried her forward. Coris was still at the herb stall, her arms laden with bundles. Amy knelt beside the man, whose breath came shallow, panicked. She smelled sour ale and sweat. His wife wrung her hands nearby, nearly keening with fear.

Amy forced herself to breathe steadily. “Quiet now,” she told the man, though her voice shook. “Breathe with me.” She guided his hand to his chest, pressing firmly. She looked up at the wife. “Fetch cool water. Quickly.”

Her mind rifled through what she knew. She had nothing strong enough here for his heart, no hawthorn, no motherwort tincture. But she had mint, she had valerian root, tucked in her satchel from habit. She crushed the valerian quickly with a stone, mixing it with the mint, then held it beneath the man's nose.

"Breathe this," she urged.

At first, he resisted, gasping, but then the pungent scent forced him into slower inhalations. His eyes fluttered, his grip on her arm loosening slightly.

The wife returned with water, and Amy soaked a cloth, laying it across his forehead. She kept her voice low, steady, telling him to follow the rhythm of her words. She even began to hum softly, an old lullaby her mother had once sung when storms rattled the shutters.

The crowd hushed, leaning closer.

After long minutes, the man's breathing eased. He sagged back against the stone well, color slowly returning to his lips. Relief swept through the gathered villagers like a warm wind.

Amy's own knees shook, but she stayed until his eyes opened and fixed on his wife. He whispered, "I'm all right."

Coris appeared then, basket full, eyes narrowing slightly at the scene. Yet she said nothing to undermine Amy. Instead, she simply pressed a small vial into Amy's palm. "Give him this tonight. Hawthorn and nettle. Steeped strong."

Amy nodded, heart still thundering, but beneath it rose a steadier current, pride, not arrogance but something quieter. She had acted. She had not failed.

Roland's voice broke through the murmurs. He had been in the crowd, standing apart, but now he stepped forward. His gaze met hers across the circle of people, and there was something in it she had never seen before: recognition. Not of her clumsiness, nor her broken betrothal, nor even her mistakes with herbs, but of her strength.

Later, as the market thinned and the sky turned rose-gold, Roland walked her back toward the apothecary. Coris had gone ahead, claiming her knees were tired. Amy carried the lighter basket while Roland matched her stride.

"You were brave," he said quietly.

"I was terrified," Amy admitted.

"That's what makes it brave," he answered, and his smile, small but real, startled her heart into stumbling.

They walked in silence, the kind that no longer felt heavy, but shared. She thought of Coris's words about company in the silence. For the first time, Amy wondered if perhaps she could sit inside someone else's quiet, and let them sit in hers.

When they reached the apothecary door, Roland paused. "I'll come by again tomorrow. Not only for tea." His eyes lingered, holding hers gently, before he tipped his hat and turned away into the dusk.

Amy's pulse raced, but she did not run from it. Instead, she lifted her hand, almost in farewell, almost in promise.

Inside, Coris was waiting, her ledger open, quill ready. She looked at Amy with the faintest glimmer of pride. "Well then," she said, voice rough but warm. "It seems the village has an apprentice after all."

Amy smiled, and for once, she did not doubt it.

Epilogue

Weeks later, the ledger was heavier with ink, herbs dried in neat rows along the rafters, and the apothecary's bell chimed often with visitors who no longer looked only to Coris, but also to Amy.

One evening, as autumn turned toward winter, Amy added her own page to the ledger without prompting. She wrote:

The apprentice is never finished. She bends, she learns, she breaks, she roots again. Like rosemary, like willow. She sings even in winter.

She set down the quill, closed the book, and looked to the door. Outside, Roland's figure approached through the falling dusk, carrying bread once more.

Amy's heart lifted, not healed completely, not finished, but alive. And that was enough.

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