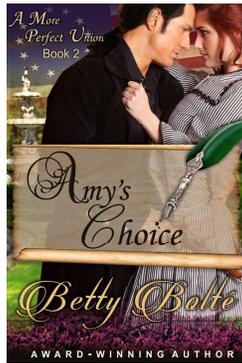


Excerpt from
Amy's Choice
A More Perfect Union, Book 2
By
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Chapter 1

Charles Town, South Carolina—1782

Lightning rent the charcoal clouds boiling overhead, illuminating the river dock and churning water. Rain from the sudden storm pelted the surrounding landscape, shimmering in the eerie darkness.

"Hurry!" Benjamin Hanson grunted as he renewed his grip on the thick hemp bowline, glad for the leather gloves protecting his hands. The furled sail hugged the lurching mast. They'd been forced to row in lieu of using the sail due to the strong adverse winds and current. His shoulders ached from the unaccustomed activity. With feet braced on the dock, he grimly waited for Frank Thomson's signal to tie off the rocking batteau, its steep plank sides scarred in testament to frequent trips to and from Captain Sullivan's plantation. Joshua Sullivan owned a small fleet of batteaux for shipping exports such as rice and indigo to the northern states and to overseas markets in France and Barbados. Frank had borrowed the boat to make this unplanned visit to Captain Davis to resolve some mysterious issue regarding his wife and a precious gem. But what a day to be out on the river.

Rain stung his face while thunder rumbled above. His sodden greatcoat clung to him, hampering his movements with the cold weight of the drenched wool. Hauling with all his strength, he struggled to keep the batteau from drifting too far out from the wooden dock while Frank wrestled nearby with the long knotty rope needed to secure the small boat to the safety of the pier. The rope groaned as it rubbed around the post, Benjamin's grasp slipping bit by bit, the waves tugging and pushing the boat. Frank yanked ineffectually on the other soaked rope, grunting curses as he frantically tried to disentangle it so they could tie off the long cargo boat. Of all the days to sail, this was the most idiotic and yet necessary. "Is it secure?"

"Nearly have it! I can't believe anyone would leave the lines in such a mess. If I ever determine who did, they'll be horsewhipped." Frank worked to unknot the heavy hemp. With a loud curse, he tugged harder and the rope uncoiled. Quickly he made a long loop and tossed it expertly over the post, pulling the batteau into the dock and securing it. "Finally."

Benjamin grunted again and tied off the rope to the pier using a sturdy seaman's knot. "About time, too. The storm grows stronger by the second. You certainly had a time with that rope. Feeling a bit weak today?"

"Perhaps somewhat after my encounter with a bullet this morning." Frank grinned at him, his Monmouth hat cascading rain on all sides, adding to his soaked greatcoat. He pressed his right hand to his left shoulder then shrugged as if to relieve discomfort. "A mere graze, nothing to worry over. Come, we have work to do."

"I'm relieved Major Bradley could not aim well, my friend." Benjamin stretched his shoulders and nodded, water pouring from the corners of his beaver-felt tricorne hat. When Frank shared his early morning clandestine duel with the loyalist officer over his disparaging remarks about Frank's lady, he wanted to slap his friend back to his senses. A duel? Fortunately, he only suffered a graze by the bullet. Of course, if Frank had his way the lady in question would soon be his wife. "Duelling is not your best idea but I understand wishing to defend your lady's reputation."

"Emily did seem much relieved by my survival, though she questioned the need for this errand. At least she didn't press for details." Frank strode down the slippery path beside Benjamin. "Mayhap my risking life and limb for her honor will persuade her to be more amenable to my advances."

"I'm certain you'll win her hand in the end. But the sudden change in the weather since this morning leaves us cold and damp. Captain Davis better have his finest brandy out after insisting on our presence this day. Bloody hell, only a few hours earlier I was warm and dry, and now this. What right does he have to summon us?"

Frank shrugged before leading the way up the slippery and unevenly spaced rock steps climbing the bank to the muddy street above. "Some nonsense about the Scottish gem causing problems. We'll soon see."

"It's only a bit of smoky crystal." How much trouble could a piece of rock cause?

The crystal represented the bond between the local Scots in the frontier lands to the west and the Scots from across the Atlantic, a bond the South Carolina state governor trusted would help calm the tensions between the frontier folks and the folks along the coast. But it was Benjamin's job to keep it hidden and protected until the British ended the besiegement of Charles Town. So he'd stashed it among the items reserved for when they reopened the natural museum after America's independence became fact instead of hope. Nobody would find it in the out of the way warehouse. After all, only he, Frank, and Captain Thomson knew of its existence in the state.

Brown water ran in rivers along the road they walked, oozing over the toes of his leather boots. The lanterns they carried did little to illuminate the path before them. A gash of lightning snaked through the darkened sky over the wide river they'd just navigated hindered by four-foot waves. Regardless of Benjamin's normally strong constitution, even he felt nauseated from the crossing. He didn't spend much time on the water, truth be told, enjoying the seat of a saddle and a powerful stallion beneath him more than the rocking motion of a boat.

In the distance he could see the "cottage," though it loomed larger and more imposing than a typical home. This was a mansion by the river, built to withstand the severe weather common in the southern colonies as well as to dominate the shore. Whitewashed walls glowed against the steely afternoon sky, with dark green shutters hugging each window. Evergreen bushes glistened beside the front door, crushed shells forming a shimmering sidewalk in the rain. Burning in every window, candles made a welcome beacon.

Reaching the haven of the front porch, Frank lifted and dropped the brass lion door knocker while Benjamin shook off the last of the rain. Smoke from the chimney hung around the house, nearly choking him. The door creaked opened, and Captain Manheim Davis filled the frame. His graying beard was neatly trimmed, accentuating jade-green eyes peering from a web of laugh lines circling them. Constant exposure to the sun while aboard ship left his skin deeply tanned and leathery.

"Come in, come in!" Captain Davis motioned them inside without further greeting, for which Benjamin was grateful. His skin felt clammy beneath the weight of his soaked clothes. The crackle of the blazing fireplace tempted him, but manners insisted he stay with Frank and Davis. Still, the sound of the fire warmed him as he waited impatiently for the exchange of pleasantries.

"Such a terrible day for you to make the trip, but it couldn't be helped. Not at all." Davis summoned his servant to take the wet coats and hang them by the kitchen fire to dry.

The dark-skinned, elderly man nodded mutely before leaving the men alone in the drawing room. Benjamin tugged his embroidered waistcoat into place over his white shirt and tried to rearrange the cravat to its proper position, cringing at the cool dampness of the material. Then he warmed his hands by the fire, thankful for the heat thawing his ice-cold frame. He'd opted for dark wool trousers rather than his typical tan breeches to ward off the chill and damp air as well as to be less conspicuous around the docks.

Davis poured three brandies, handing the crystal glasses round when he finished.

"Here, this will warm you from the inside." He chuckled as he selected the high-backed chair near the fireplace as his seat for the impromptu meeting. The chair groaned as the heavysset man relaxed against the chair's intricately carved back.

"How's the little woman, Davis?" Frank stretched his long legs in front of him as he sipped his drink. Like Benjamin, he had opted for dark trousers, which contrasted with the creamy shirt and cravat peeking from his gold waistcoat decorated with ornate fleur-de-lis designs. His black leather boots gleamed in the firelight. "You were concerned for her welfare last we parted."

"She's faring well, thank you. Nothing more than a cold, thank the Lord."

"I'm glad it was not the fever, then." He tapped his glass to Davis's and smiled. "May she live a long life."

"'Tis what I work so hard for, to provide for her well-being."

Benjamin frowned at the two men. He had not come all this way in such foul weather to discuss the man's wife. He'd been dry and warm in his room, contemplating the best way to ask Amy Abernathy to marry him when he saw her this evening at Captain Sullivan's Allhallow's Eve dinner party. He'd be surprised if Frank didn't have something similar in mind, after fighting over Emily. Benjamin had missed Amy every day he'd been forced to be away from the coastal area of South Carolina. He'd barely returned to town, secured lodgings from Captain Sullivan where nobody would ask which side he fought on, and settled in. Then came the unwelcome, urgent summons from Captain Davis to brave the onslaught of cold November rain to sit soaked and chatting about Mrs. Davis? Bah. He sipped the liquor, allowing warmth to spread down his throat and throughout his body before responding. "So what is the problem with the gem?"

Davis grinned and crossed his arms loosely over his chest. "Ah, I see you're one to aim for the heart of the matter. Good, very good. I like that in a man." Davis beamed at him, his face almost audibly creaking as it dipped into laugh lines. He opened the wood and glass container, half filled with tobacco, which rested on the small table beside his chair. "Actually, the problem concerns my wife."

Benjamin tapped one hand on his leg rather than voice his thoughts. Women should be required to live by the old adage for children: to be seen and not heard. Well, maybe with the exception of Amy, since her lyrical voice most likely could calm wild animals. Her dulcet tones soothed him at any rate. "How so?"

Selecting a long-stemmed clay pipe from the assortment on the table, Davis addressed Benjamin. "When I married Caroline, it never occurred to me she would be as curious as a cat." He paused to tamp tobacco into the curved bowl of his pipe.

"Wives have no say in men's business, sir," Benjamin said tightly. "Surely you can control her curiosity."

Davis chuckled as he lit a taper and applied it to the dried leaves in the pipe. "Spoken like a true bachelor. Let me get the little silver box for you, nevertheless."

Benjamin stilled as he realized what the captain had said. The box was here? "How come you to have the box here, sir? We secured it at the museum warehouse. Frank?"

Frank regarded Davis with his head tilted to one side. "Captain, what is this about?"

"Aye, the good Captain Sullivan did not tell you, I see. That is not surprising, given the nature of the event. I'll be right back." Davis rose, gripping his long clay pipe in one hand as he strode quickly from the room.

Benjamin glared at Frank. "What is going on here?"

"I don't know any more than you do at this point, friend." Frank took a large swallow of brandy. "Be patient. He'll tell us in his own good time."

"I have little patience for games." Benjamin sat on the edge of the overstuffed sofa, uncomfortable in his wet clothes and far from amused with the delay. He sullenly watched the fire, the brandy working its warm magic on his cold body. "I have no patience for tales, either."

"Don't let Amy hear you say that." Frank crossed his ankles.

Before Benjamin could inquire into Frank's meaning, he heard the thump of Davis's footsteps as he returned, carrying the small square box, engraved all around with flowers. He carefully set it on the low table in the center of the room. "Best you take that with you now. Captain Sullivan left it here for you to take charge of it, protect it."

"So I thought," Benjamin said. "Why do you have this? I don't understand why Captain Sullivan would give it to you. We'll see him this evening, so why did he not give it to us then?"

"Aye, he found some chaps hanging around the warehouse door, and grew concerned." Davis pulled on his pipe, releasing a white plume of vapor into the air. "When it was safe, he retrieved the gem and brought it out here knowing it would be less conspicuous for the exchange to happen away from town, not where others may ask too many questions. He should've told you. Can't explain why he didn't."

"I'll take that up with him. At least now we have it back in our possession." Frank glanced at Benjamin, brows drawn together in thought.

Benjamin nodded, hands clenched into fists. He could punch Captain Sullivan for this breach of faith, but, in the event, that served no purpose. "I'll not let it out of my control again. You can bet on that."

"I'm sure you'll guard it with your life," Davis said around the stem of his pipe.

"You haven't told us what the problem is with it." Benjamin moved to the table and picked up the specially made box. He rotated it first one way, then the other, peering at the intricate carvings. He traced the design, admiring the fine artwork covering the box, then pulled the lid off.

A small heart pendant, shaped from Scotland's sacred smoky quartz, nestled on a bed of red satin. He could picture Amy wearing it around her

graceful neck, though of course that could never happen, even if such a treasure were for sale. The value of the gem far exceeded Benjamin's annual income. The legend, so he heard, claimed the small rock held the power to remove uncertainty. And if two lovers held it in joined hands, their love would never fail. He scoffed under his breath at that bit of whimsy. As if a piece of stone could have such mythical powers. Stories told to children and women, no doubt. Picking it up, he fingered the smooth stone, its swirls of color seeming to shift like wood-fire smoke on a crisp winter morning. Odd. He must be more tired than he'd thought. But he would manage to keep it safe, and then one day after this bloody war ended he'd see if Amy would agree to marry him. He was certain of that.

"Governor Matthews warned against opening the box." Frank straightened in his chair. "Close that thing before trouble follows."

"We've enough trouble as is." Davis sat in his chair and stretched his legs in front of him. Puffing on his pipe, he considered Benjamin. "I fear my wife's curiosity will be her downfall."

Benjamin replaced the lid and put the box on the table, feeling an odd sensation begin in his hand. "Women should not handle this gem. Ladies tend to fall prey to danger, leading to serious personal harm or death, when they possess the stone."

"Aye, I've heard that as well." Frank studied Davis. "She wants to see it, does she?"

Davis nodded, his eyes serious. "That would be a disaster, most certainly. Captain Sullivan would have my neck if the gem were to fall into the wrong hands."

Benjamin peered at Davis, gripping his hips under his waistcoat which flared open to reveal dark trousers. "You know about it?"

Davis shook his head vigorously. "No, sir, and I don't want to know. It's better that way."

"According to the legend, *if* you believe in those things," Benjamin said slowly, "the gem is very powerful in the right hands, and more importantly if anything were to happen to it, the understanding and friendship we share with Scotland would be at risk."

"All the more reason to keep it locked away." Davis puffed, and a ring of smoke drifted lazily toward the ceiling, expanding until it disappeared. "That knowledge could be used by the wrong person, and then where would we be?"

Resuming his perch on the edge of the sofa, Benjamin sipped his brandy, thinking. A place where no one would look or, if they did, could not locate the small box. That's what they needed. A safe place only he knew, and he could watch over the heart pendant. He locked eyes with Frank. "I know where to put it."

Frank shifted in his seat, pulling his legs under him as he sat up straight. "Good. Where?"

"I'll tell you later. We'll keep it between us."

Understanding dawned in Frank's eyes. In order to truly keep the treasure safe, they would not reveal to Davis or Captain Sullivan the new location. Only the two of them needed to know of its hiding place.

Benjamin paced to the hearth and turned when Davis rose from his chair and followed him across the room to the mantel. "Do not tell anyone we visited you or about this box, agreed?"

"Agreed, surely." Davis tapped the bowl of his pipe against the fireplace stones. "I've said as much to my wife before you arrived, if she wants to live well, that is."

Nodding, Benjamin gripped Davis's shoulder. "You've done the right thing, my good man. 'Tis wise to remove the temptation before your wife's safety is compromised."

Davis slowly refilled his pipe and lit it. Silence settled over the men, the only sound in the room the crackle and hiss of wood burning. Finally Davis peered through the pipe smoke at Benjamin.

"You lads should beware of your lady folk also discovering the box." Davis tightened his lips before allowing a grin to ease their firmness. "Women are curious creatures."

"Aye, they are. Your caution is noted. We must head back now that the winds are dying down." Frank stood and shook hands with Davis.

Benjamin strode to the table and lifted the box. His clothes had barely begun to dry, and now they braved the storm, heading for home again. "We'll need some way to shield this from the rain."

Davis rose and retrieved a small oilcloth sack from a shelf and handed it to Benjamin. "It arrived in this."

Slipping the tiny silver box into the sack, Benjamin's hand tingled again, only more intensely. Startled, he dropped the box the rest of the way in. Examining his hand revealed nothing, yet the tingle persisted.

"Something amiss?" Frank asked.

"No, all's well." Benjamin rubbed his hand against his pant leg.

"Good, because we must make ourselves presentable for dinner at Emily's this evening. After all, Miss Abernathy will be there."

"Aye, so let's go before the weather worsens. I've waited too long to see Miss Amy as it is." Benjamin slipped the little sack with its precious gem inside his coat pocket and followed Frank from the warmth of the mansion.