

IRON & FIRE by Kerrin Willis

EXCERPT

“My wife’s good brother, Morton, tells me that he came upon our Verity yesterday on the road with Goodman Harwell..”

The statement hung in the air as a challenge.

“Oh?” Verity’s mother responded, turning to look at her daughter.

Verity continued filling the trenchers one by one and handing them to Mercy for placement on the table. She had done nothing wrong, and acting as if she had would only fuel Obadiah’s self-righteous authority. When she had spooned out the last serving, she squared her shoulders and met her stepfather’s eye.

“Yes, sir. I met Goodman Harwell while I was in town, and he offered to walk me home. He felt that a young woman shouldn’t be left alone to walk through the woods after the recent attacks.” Verity waited for his response, confident that she had neutralized her stepfather’s argument. Surely he wouldn’t argue that her safety was less important than her choice of escort.

Obadiah never dropped his eyes from his stepdaughter’s gaze, but looked directly at her when he addressed her mother.

“And wife, what were you thinking sending your daughter to town alone, just days after the heathens’ attack? I am sorely disappointed in your judgment, woman.”

Verity sucked a breath in through her teeth and clenched her hands into fists at her side. “I went to the bakery, Sir. We were unable to bake this week, and I...”

“And you have a history of making poor choices, Verity . Ann, I expected better of you. You should have sent one of the boys.”

Verity’s mother cleared her throat. “Husband, the boys were hunting. We were in need of bread, and I thought nothing of sending Verity in the middle of the day-”

“YOU THOUGHT NOTHING!” Obadiah roared, slamming a closed fist down on the table so that knives and cups rattled at their places. Grace hid her face in Hannah’s skirts, and Joseph and

Mercy made a diligent study of their feet. Jon looked as if he wanted to say something but was unsure of how to do so, and Diah watched his father intently for his next move. Obadiah's fury wasn't uncommon, but they had never seen it directed at their stepmother before. Even Ann herself looked at if she had been slapped, mouth slightly agape.

"You thought nothing of your daughter being violated? Passed around the heathen fire like a common whore?"

"But I wasn't," Verity insisted. "And Goodman Harwell only offered to see me safely home."

"And what proof do I have that you haven't played the whore to him as well?"

This time it was Verity who drew back as if she had been physically slapped. She opened her mouth to respond to his accusation, but found she had no words. There was nothing she could say to answer the slander.

"The Almighty sees, Verity Parker. He knows when you have succumbed to the temptations of the devil, and his punishment will be swift! 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!' You will be damned, girl!"

At that, Verity found her voice, and it rushed forth with a torrent of fury that surprised even her.

"What care you if I am damned?" she spat. "What. Care. You. You are *not* my father!"

"Verity!" Her mother cried, reaching out a hand to stop her daughter, but it was too late. Verity advanced around the table toward Obadiah, intent on making herself heard.

"You speak of vengeance and of hellfire, but the God I pray to *loves* his people! He preaches of forgiveness and of peace, and of sharing his light with our fellow man."

"You do not deny that you have allowed yourself to be used." A smirk played at the corner of Obadiah's lips, and it took every ounce of self possession Verity had not to grab a knife from the table and cut the smile from his face.

"What good would it do if I had?" she asked. "You made up your mind that I am damned."

"Girl, since you have arrived here you have rejected my attempts to show you the true path to salvation."

Verity had had enough.

"The very acts that you are so convinced will save you are the same ones I am certain make God weep!"

Verity heard the sound of his palm connecting with her cheek before she felt the sting, and it took the briefest of seconds for her to realize that Obadiah had hit her. Shock radiated through her body. The keeping room was silent, save for the popping of the embers in the hearth fire. Verity's cheek stung from the blow and burned with humiliation and fury. She looked to her mother, but Ann was intently studying the grain of the wooden table. Hannah clenched her spoon in her hand until her knuckles turned white, and placed a reassuring arm around Grace's tiny shoulders.

"I will not tolerate disrespectful children at my table," Obadiah said in a short, clipped manner, enunciating every syllable to ensure that he was understood. "There is washing that still needs to be finished, is that right daughter?" He looked to Mercy, voice raised in question.

She nodded, eyes darting between her father and Verity.

"Go." He gestured towards the door. "And do not return until the labor has worked some respect into you."

Verity held her shoulders back and her head high as she walked, eyes straight ahead, to the door. She waited until she was in the yard and the door had closed behind her before she let loose the sob that had been building in her chest for the past several minutes.

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