

Murder at Jamestown

Chapter Nine: First Love

Jamestowne Colony, 1619

When the ship had arrived, Olaudah had been one of three dozen aboard, men and women from his native land who had been carried across the vast water to this place. In many ways, it was not so different from home. The same biting insects, the same relentless heat, the same red soil that stained the soles of the feet and held water to drown the crops.

In other ways, nothing could be more different. Surrounded by men whose skin shone in the dark like ghosts, he had been terrified every moment aboard the ship, wondering if he were in reality aboard a vessel to the afterlife, whether he was already dead and being carried away from everything he had ever known. The wretched stench of the men had assured him that they, at least, were very real indeed.

Olaudah had endured the stench and the tight quarters and the seasickness. He had been the only one, however, who avoided the chains.

Unlike the others, who had been captured aboard the vessel by the Portugese sailors who ran her, Olaudah had brokered his own passage, and indentured himself for the chance at a new life. It was a dangerous and terrifying proposition. It was a risk. He had no other option. Had he remained home, he would have been buried to the neck and left for jackals, as would any other murderer in his village.

For that was who Olaudah was, a murderer. He knew in his core it wasn't simply something that had happened on impulse or because he had been enraged. He knew that the blackness that had guided his hand across the other man's throat had grown and festered inside him for many months before he had sharpened the blade. And he knew that had they not discovered him, in the act, his hands sticky with the life force of the boy who had once been his friend, that his blade would have taken other souls as well.

For this, Olaudah had been thankful. For much of the journey, when he wasn't vomiting from the motion of the vessel or praying for food no matter how rancid, he had been dully aware that finding himself tied to the tree behind the chief's hut, his chains made from

lengths of rope braided out of the verging forest that surrounded their home, had been a great gift. It had stopped him from killing again, and it had awakened a desire inside him to pursue a life of his own rather than taking them.

And it had shown him that never, ever for the remainder of his time on this earth, did he want his hands to be bound.

After they had passed their judgment and all the elders had returned to their beds to await the dawn, when the pit would be dug and Olaudah lowered into it to be buried and abandoned outside of the village boundaries, he had gnawed at the bindings around his wrists, then used his feet to push against the trunk of the tree, slowly slowly loosening their grip and allowing him to wrestle his hands away.

Before the sun arose, he was running, hands empty but unbound, heading the only direction he knew would hold any hope for him: toward the sea. He had traveled there once as a young boy, with his grandfather in search of medicines, and he knew that where the vast ocean met the shore there would always be large ships that carried the ghostly men to their land and away again, and that he might beg them to take him along.

When he had arrived, he hid himself behind bundles of yams on the docks, watching as others were loaded aboard. In chains.

Following some dim light in his memory, Olaudah turned back and retraced his steps, arriving at last upon a narrow alley behind a waterfront pub. There had been a man, a ghost man, who had given papers to his grandfather once, papers that meant nothing to Olaudah but seemed to mean a great deal to the ghosts. And from the stories his grandfather had told him of men who had left their village in the past, these papers might allow him to travel across the ocean, without the chains.

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Walking down the gangplank to the riverfront shore months later, Olaudah had kept careful track of those papers. He had needed them on the voyage, more than once having to fight to prevent their theft while he slept. Had it not been for the hopes of the purser that whomever purchased Olaudah's indenture might throw an extra shilling his way, the black man doubted not that he would have died on that voyage, and his papers sold and sold again to another desperate soul.

As it was, once his feet hit the soil along the marshy banks, he was treated similarly to all the enslaved men with whom he had made the passage. The difference was that the others were paraded naked and bound, to be bid on for amounts of gold that were beyond Olaudah's comprehension. He, on the other hand, would fetch a far lower price--

because his labor was for a short time only, and not guaranteed.

Olaudah watched the ghost men as he waited to be brought to the front of the crowd. He saw many of them weakened and pale, paler even than their usual icy flesh. He knew it was disease, and that the same disease made these black-skinned passengers so valuable here: Oludah had been sick as a child, with the fever and the chills these men clearly experienced, but not to the same degree. Now, as a grown man, he was no longer susceptible to the illness, but he knew that when a man who had never had it as a boy became ill, so much the worse for him. One in ten survived, and just from raking his eyes over the crowd, Oludah was certain that these shaking, coughing souls did no work in the fields here.

Without his able hands, they would not be able to feed themselves.

As he was led to the front of the line, Oludah began to wonder if it would be one of these sickened men who would purchase his contract today, if he would spend the next years of his life serving a man who might die and pass him off to a stranger or sell his papers again to pay debt. So it was with some degree of relief that he saw a tall man with a straight back make his way around the edge of the crowd, as if uncertain he was in the right place. He didn't skulk, but neither did he

walk with pride. He was a beaten and bowed man, and at first Oludah had believed him much older than his face revealed him to be, simply from the stoop of his shoulders. There was something familiar about the way this man carried himself.

More than that. There was something familiar about the way the ghost man looked out from under his straw hat at the encumbered humans for sale with distaste, mixed with need. Oludah recognized a conflicted heart. He carried the same inside his own chest.

An hour later, his contract purchased and the gold exchanged, Oludah set out on foot alongside Jeremiah. Neither man could be certain what lay ahead, but for Oludah, every step was one stride further from bondage, and he was not looking back.

Jamestown, Present Day

Stella sat with her shoulders slumped, her face turned down toward her lap and her hair covering her cheek. Her skin was ashen and her fingers twisted one another in her lap, but her tears were dry and she breathed evenly. Kitty waited for the girl to answer her question.

"I mean...I don't know..." Stella was saying.

Kitty glanced at Bryan, who seemed to be doing his level best to look somewhere, really just anywhere in the room other than at either of the two women. His cheeks were highlighted with small round red blotches and he seemed to be sweating slightly.

Kitty twisted her mouth wryly and knew from Bryan's discomfort that she was going to be on her own interrogating Stella.

Almost on cue, an enormous tear rolled down Stella's cheek and fell off her chin, with a nearly audible PLOP as it landed in her lap. The young woman made no sound, and did nothing to hide her weeping, but carried on quietly, and simply sniffled slightly.

So...not exactly an interrogation, thought Kitty to herself. More of a therapy session.

She sighed inwardly.

"Listen, Stella," Kitty told the girl. "It wasn't a secret, your feelings for him..."

She was trying to be delicate, but honestly, they were all so tired. How much delicacy was she capable of producing at this time of night? They had discovered Hank's body over an hour ago, all the other crew members were presumably asleep down the hall, and the police would be called soon. Kitty felt a strong surge of urgency, and Stella's sensibilities were making this entire process more challenging and time-consuming than Kitty really preferred.

The stereotype about scientists is that they're unemotional, disconnected, facts-only people who don't invest in feelings. Kitty knew that for archaeologists, this wasn't the case. It was, in fact, a rarity to find an archaeologist who wasn't outgoing, sociable, witty, fun-loving. It was the Bryans of the world who were unusual in this field of study, rather than the Brandons.

Archaeologists, on the whole, tended to be outdoorsy types who loved a good beer and sitting around a campfire with a guitar and a good story. They were better organized than the average hiker-or-camper, but they were gregarious and mostly very chill. That was one of the things that had drawn Kitty to the profession to begin with, the mixture of academic learning plus the demand for rigorous record-keeping, balanced by the familial congeniality of a crew who lived and slept outdoors for weeks at a time. Archaeology is a social science, literally and figuratively, and Kitty felt it fitted her like a second skin.

Except in cases where there was a dead body propped against a wall down the corridor and police who were coming along in a short while who might be led to arrest the wrong person unless Kitty could somehow get this girl to start talking.

Stella sniffled again, and Kitty took a deep breath in before blowing it out through her nose. This only served to make Stella cry harder, and Kitty found that suddenly, she was irritable and on edge.

Laid-back or not, this archaeologist was done being gentle.

“Stella, stop. Stop crying.” Kitty’s voice was more than stern, it bordered on harsh. Bryan jumped when he heard it and stared at her. Stella froze and looked meekly up from under her hair to take in Kitty’s face, which was both irritated and maternal.

“You cared for Hank, right?” Kitty pressed.

Stella nodded wetly.

“Then I need you to talk. Because right now his body is in a copy room down the hall, and we don’t know who hurt him. Don’t you want to find out who hurt him, Stella?”

Stella gave a deep, long sniff and nodded, this time more firmly. She brushed her hair out of her face and wiped her cheeks.

Kitty sat back a little in her chair and tried to marshal her thoughts. She knew that Hank had been placed behind the copier, that much was obvious. And she knew that not only was he clutching the scrap of paper with the magnolia logo on it, but also that he’d been scattered with flower petals--the rue flowers beneath his body, and the pansies scattered over it.

Pansies. The flower that represents remembrance, regret, and first love.

Kitty was sure she’d never met anyone who could be a poster child for first love more easily than Stella. She’d also never met anyone

else who cried quite so much, unless she counted Bryan, who for the moment seemed so uncomfortable that he had forgotten to cry at all.

“When did you first...develop feelings for Hank?” Kitty asked the girl. The words felt odd on her tongue, almost as if she were a therapist play-acting as a police detective. Or maybe the other way around.

“Um...I mean, kinda as soon as I got here?” Stella squeaked.

Bryan twisted his mouth wryly, in his version of a scoff and looked briefly at Kitty before looking away.

“Love at first sight?” Kitty said, not as gently as she’d intended.

Stella bristled. “It’s not like that. Don’t make fun of me, I don’t have to help you at all.”

Kitty blinked twice, surprised by the backbone Stella was showing. Or was it defensiveness?

She softened her tone. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t making fun of you.”

Stella nodded but crossed her arms over her chest all the same. She didn’t look at Kitty but rather over the older woman’s shoulder and toward the windows. Nothing to see out there, Kitty thought, knowing that the depth of the blackness in the park outside would mean that the overhead light was reflected back into the room with bright intensity. At best, Stella would only see her own reflection.

“What was it that you liked about him?” Kitty continued. She wasn’t entirely sure what she ought to be asking. It seemed expedient

to get Stella talking about Hank, about happier memories, and then follow from there. Honestly, she was a researcher, but this was way out of her range of experience. Give her a trowel and a meter-square pit anyday.

She held her breath and waited to see if she had any clue how to handle this situation.

“We were checking in with the receptionist,” Stella began, and Kitty relaxed slightly. She could see Stella’s shoulders lower just a bit, and knew the girl was sharing a warm memory.

Stella went on, “He got there ahead of me, but we had to wait on the paperwork, you know, so we had all the waivers or whatever?”

She looked back toward Bryan slightly, and he nodded and shrugged. Paperwork is the backbone of human existence, and Bryan knew that as well as Kitty.

“So when they finally came back and had these clipboards and stuff for us, he let me go first.”

Kitty frowned. “Go where first?”

“I just mean, he didn’t jump up and grab one first, even though he was ahead of me. He handed me the clipboard and let me take it first. It was just really nice of him,” Stella finished lamely.

Kitty resisted the urge to scoff, and studiously avoided making eye contact with Bryan. If simple human decency was enough to make

Stella fall in love at first sight with Hank, then maybe she was as naive as everyone else seemed to believe her to be.

“Um, OK, wow. Yeah,” Kitty told her. “That’s...pretty great. And after that?”

Stella blushed. “I mean, it was just normal stuff, and everything. We worked together. He was always polite and really kind to me, he never made me cry the way Brandon always does.”

At this Kitty could see Stella’s lip begin to quiver, and pushed on to head her off before she cried again.

“Brandon was mean to Hank, too, wasn’t he?”

Stella nodded, and her quivering lip transformed into a bitter snarl. “He’s awful, not just to Hank, to everyone. I don’t understand how anyone could ever, ever like him.”

Stella’s vitriol was unexpected and brutal, perhaps more so because it came so close on the heels of her tears.

Kitty asked, “Did Brandon ever do anything to Hank that made you think he liked him any less than anyone else?”

Stella was looking over Kitty’s shoulder again and it took her a moment to focus her eyes on the other woman’s face. She frowned slightly as she took in Kitty’s words.

“What do you mean? Do you think Brandon...”

Kitty shook her head. “No, no, I’m not saying Brandon DID

anything, just wondering out loud, you know. Did the two of them have it out for each other, that kind of thing.”

Stella tilted her head to one side, looking down at her lap again, and seemed to mull it over. Then, she nodded slowly.

“There was one time,” she told Kitty. “They had been assigned to work together in the pit.”

Kitty glanced at Bryan and saw him nod to confirm that he knew the story Stella was about to tell, and then blush at his own memory of it. He gave another shrug but said nothing.

“This was before I got here?” Kitty asked.

“That’s right, it was pretty soon after field school had started, so none of us really knew one another very well yet?” Stella continued. “And Hank was in charge of doing the excavating that day, and Brandon was mapping and taking notes. So Hank is down in the pit, and Brandon is up above.”

Kitty nodded. This was a common arrangement in excavations, because by dividing the labor in this way, record-keeping was continuous with excavation, making the notes and details far more accurate than if an archaeologist did the digging first and then relied on her memory to go back and record notes and observations later. For most archaeologists, of course, the time spent in the pit was the goal, so it would be equally common for the individual outside the pit to be disap-

pointed at what they might see as missing out on all the fun.

“And since Brandon got left out, you know, he was in a super pissy mood,” Stella told her. “I mean, we didn’t all know him very well yet then, so I don’t think any of us expected it. We all were trying to make friends, but Brandon didn’t care about that. Actually, now that I think of it, that’s the day we realized that Brandon wasn’t going to be friends with any of us.”

“How do you mean?” Kitty prompted her.

Stella bit her lip and seemed to ruminate a bit before answering the question. Kitty wasn’t sure if she was continuing her story, or if the prompt had sent Stella off in a new direction with her explanation.

“I mean, it’s just that Hank was nice to EVERYONE, all the time. Right? He was patient and courteous and considerate. He’d open doors for you, or he’d let you go ahead of him in line to order food when we all went out to lunch.”

Stella’s face was all but rapturous at this point.

“He was always so gentle when he talked to me, he never snapped or lost his temper. And he was funny, did you know he was funny?”

Her face was alight with passion as she asked Kitty this.

Kitty shook her head. She wanted Stella to keep talking.

“He told the best jokes, and they were never mean, they were

never at anyone's expense. And he paid attention, you know, not just to what you said you liked or didn't like, the way he remembered that I love Greek olives but not the other kind, but also the way he'd notice if you had smacked your elbow against the door and were favoring it. He'd ask about it without you having to tell him, that kind of thing."

"He was a really nice guy," Kitty said, somewhat lamely, given Stella's glowing description.

But Stella took no offense. Instead, she took this as encouragement.

"Exactly! So anyway, that day, it was so weird, because we didn't all know each other very well yet, but we already could tell that Hank was basically, you know, a totally decent human being. So when we heard him getting mad, it kinda jumped out at us."

"What was he mad about?" Kitty asked.

Stella shook her head, her cheeks pink again but this time with remembered anger.

"Brandon," she said in a clipped tone.

Kitty raised an eyebrow in question.

Stella continued, "He's outside the unit, right? So he's supposed to be taking notes and sketching in artifacts on the graph, so we can write the report later. But instead, he...he..."

Stella appeared to be choked up over this.

Kitty waited.

"He was kicking dirt into the unit, on top of Hank," Stella exploded.

Even Kitty was shocked. "Do you mean to say that he was damaging the walls of the unit and knocking the soil down into it while Hank was working?"

This would have been exceptionally poor technique. One of the important things about maintaining reliable results from an excavation was that the integrity of the excavation units--the meter-square pits dug on the site--must be maintained at all times. A collapse of a unit, while not always avoidable, was deeply frowned upon and seen as a lack of skill on the part of the archaeologist.

Had Brandon, in fact, been knocking the soil down on top of Hank, it would not just be poor sportsmanship because he wanted to be in the unit rather than taking notes. It would be sabotage of another researcher and bad science to boot. It was shocking behavior and would have been enough to get him at the very least a stern reprimand, if not dismissed from the field school altogether.

"That's not what he was doing," Bryan interrupted.

He must have sensed that Kitty was wondering at that exact moment why Bryan hadn't disciplined Brandon for that kind of behavior. Was Bryan that afraid of this tall rich kid that he would ignore

sabotage?

“Are you sure?” Kitty asked him, perhaps more sharply than she intended. She wanted to like Brandon, despite his solid case of entitlement. He was smart and insightful. He could be a good scientist and a useful researcher. She didn’t want to believe him capable of destroying valuable data. More than that, though, she didn’t want to believe that Bryan had dropped the ball and failed to fulfill his duty as the leader of the project.

Bryan nodded, glumly. “I actually....”

He sighed heavily. “I saw it happen,” he admitted.

Kitty grimaced.

Bryan continued, “It wasn’t the walls he was knocking into the unit. It was loose soil from around the site.”

Kitty’s eyes widened. “Bryan!”

“I know, I know! It’s hardly better at all, I know.”

Kitty shook her head. “But he was just here, talking about how important archaeology is to him! Why would he risk compromising the site?”

Bryan made a placatory gesture with his hands. “Kitty, I didn’t want to overreact, so you don’t get to, either. You know just as well as I do that a little extra soil won’t compromise anything. He was being a jerk, but it wasn’t bad science.”

Stella wheeled on him and her eyes flashed as they bore into Bryan’s face. “He was being more than a jerk, he was targeting Hank and for nothing! Nothing!”

Her vehemence gave off actual heat, which Kitty could feel from where she sat. Her eyes opened wide and she looked at Bryan for some kind of clarification into what had brought on this new explosive outburst.

“Stella,” Bryan said in a soothing voice, “I know you think you have all the facts, but you just don’t.”

“I don’t need them!” She fairly shouted at him. “I know Hank!” There was a brief dead silence.

“I knew Hank,” Stella whispered before lapsing into silent tears again.

Kitty sighed once more.

“When was the last time you saw him?” She asked Stella.

Stella sniffed and said, “Um...it was...”

She sighed. “It was after we all came back from the site. We were putting away our equipment in here, and Hank was back in the storage room.”

Stella indicated the door in the far end of the lab, which was currently closed.

“He put the screens away,” Stella continued, and Kitty noted

that the screens were stacked and leaning against the wall outside the storage room door. “And then he did something weird.”

Stella made a weird face, and had Kitty’s entire attention.

Kitty waited, and she could see Bryan doing the same, both of them leaning in closer in anticipation.

“Yeah, he like leaned over, and he grabbed something?” Stella said, sounding uncertain.

“He did grab something? Or didn’t he?” Bryan interjected with impatience.

Stella nodded. “I mean, he did. I’m not totally sure what it was, just a piece of paper. But it was weird, because he got it off the floor in there, and then he looked mad.”

“Mad?” Kitty asked.

“Really mad,” Stella confirmed, nodding. “The kind of mad he was that day with Brandon, so I’m guessing it had something to do with him. Who else could have made Hank angry like that?”

Stella’s face was searching Kitty and Bryan in turn, looking for some kind of hope or explanation, Kitty wasn’t sure which. But she had no answer to give.

The piece of paper must have been the one with the magnolia logo on it. But Stella had said...

“Stella, was it a WHOLE piece of paper? Like, a sheet of paper? Or just a little scrap or something?” Kitty asked, not wanting to give too much away but needing the details to begin seeing the pattern.

Stella answered promptly: “A sheet of paper. The whole thing. I remember because he folded it up after, so he could fit it in his pocket.”

Kitty nodded and looked at Bryan.

“Why?” Stella asked, suspicious. “Does that help or something?”

Kitty just smiled at her, a motherly smile meant to keep the girl calm. “I’m not sure. But do you think you could head back to the grad carrel and send Ruth down to talk to us? Maybe she can help make sense of everything.”

Stella nodded, wiped her nose on her sleeve, and headed toward the door, but not until after she cast one final look over Kitty’s shoulder, forcing the other woman to turn around and see what she was looking at. Just a reflection of the room, clear and bright, in the darkened windows. Nothing to see outside.