

CRY OF THE INNOCENT by Julie Bates

EXCERPT

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1774

Muffled pounding jolted Faith awake. A few coals glowed from the fire but offered little illumination to the pitch-blackness surrounding the bed. Nearby her son, Andrew slept soundly in a trundle bed undisturbed by the excited barks of dogs outside in the streets of Williamsburg. Her heart jumped as she looked over to the door separating her bedroom from the main hall of the tavern and saw light coming in from the cracks between the door and its frame. A voice hissed outside.

“Mistress, you need to wake up.”

Olivia’s voice held the rich cadence of someone who had been born far from the English colonies. Faith suspected she had come from somewhere in the West Indies, but she had never asked. Given how long it had taken to build trust, she trod carefully.

There was no reason for Olivia to be outside the door. Given the hour, she and her husband, Titus, should be stirring the fires and fixing breakfast before their guests rose with the dawn. Faith’s feet hit the floor, and she gasped at the cold. Grabbing a coverlet for decency, she stumbled to the door, where her head hit the top of the doorframe. Pain struck like a hammer.

Opening the door a little, Faith stared at the other woman. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s a dead man in the private room.” Olivia’s breath came out in silvery puffs that peppered the air. Flour lightly dusted her hands and apron which indicated a sudden interruption from work.

“Are you sure?” Together they had dealt with a number of drunks in the year since the tavern had opened. Seven months since her husband Jon had died, leaving Faith in charge.

“I’m sure. Titus found him when he went to stir the fires before breakfast.”

Cold sweat broke out on Faith's face as her stomach tied itself in knots. Titus was not one to panic. If he was correct, they had to act fast. Such an incident would only cause trouble.

Outside a rooster crowed warning that dawn paused for no one. Soon her guests would come downstairs for breakfast, and the streets would fill with merchants, slaves and others needing to do business in the capitol. Taking a breath, Faith forced an illusion of calm into her voice.

"Our guests will still expect breakfast. Take care of them. Make use of the boys if you need to. Tell Titus not to let anyone near the private room. I am on my way." She turned back into her room, stopping by Andrew's bed when she heard him move restlessly.

"What is it?" He began to stir out of his nest of blankets.

"Go back to sleep. It's early yet."

Hurriedly, she threw a skirt and bodice over her shift and stuffed her hair into a mob cap. Grabbing a heavy, woolen shawl, she slipped out down the steps to the backyard. The private room was separated from the main tavern by a narrow alley. It had its own front and back entrance, which made it perfect for meetings and extra work to provide meals and drinks. Side doors opened into the alley, which made delivering food and drink convenient although the walls of both buildings kept the narrow aperture cast in shadows.

Olivia watched her from the doorway of the kitchen, which stood apart from the tavern to lessen the risk of fire. Her son, Joshua, slept upstairs. Faith's gaze circled the long backyard from where it ended at the path that separated it from the tenement next door to the small barn where animals were just beginning to stir. Something about the quiet made her feel jumpy, as if strange and unfriendly eyes watched. Mist rising from the dew added a ghostly air to the scene. Unnerved, she hurried to the door of the private room. She pulled her shawl closer to combat shivers induced by more than the cold.

The breath left Faith's body as she took in the scene. However, running from trouble was a luxury no worker could afford. A weak fire from the hearth illuminated a man lying on the floor. The fine pewter of an upended tankard nearby glimmered faintly through the shadows. The room reeked of liquor. Perhaps he had simply passed out. In her few months as mistress of Clarke Tavern, she had handled men worse for drink.

Drunk was preferable to dead. Faith cleared her throat, which was suddenly too dry.

“Please be drunk,” she prayed as she came closer hoping for some indication of life. Reflected light gleamed off the brass buttons of his coat and made threads from his silk stockings gleam like ice. Fine lace covered his belly as the drift of his shirt hung out and onto the floor.

“My lord?” Faith inched forward, frowning. She now remembered who had demanded the use of her private room last night. Phineas Bullard acted like an odious bully sober. God only knew how he would behave drunk.

“Master Bullard!” she yelled, not bothering to be gentle.

The reek of wine made her queasy. She glanced about in disgust. It would take hours to make the room decent again. A bottle of port lay on its side, dripping off the table while a nearly empty wine bottle lay on the floor. The tavern had very little of that in stock, too little to marinate the floor in it. Finally, fury at the man’s sloth overtook her.

Before reason returned, she grabbed his shoulder and shook it “Get up!”

As she aimed her toe to kick him, Faith stepped into something sticky.

Bending over to examine him more closely, her nostrils filled with the sickly scent of blood and other foul bodily substances. She gagged and backed away. The rising sun streaked in the door, allowing her to see what had not been clear before.

Blood soaked his breeches and collar down to the floorboards; his fine linen shirt savagely sliced into rags, revealing the damage beneath. Drying blood caked his throat and belly. Bullard’s wide open eyes and slack jaw implied the spectacle of his demise shocked him as well. Shaking him had rucked up his shirt exposing what she would have given anything not to see.

As the sun’s rays lit the room fully for the first time, horror overwhelmed her. Life had left him long ago.

“God have mercy.” Faith ran out the door, unable to view the nightmare any longer. Stomach revolting, she retched behind the branches of a bush. Her eyes watered as her stomach clenched into knots and set off another round.

“Miss Faith? Miss Faith!”

She shrieked and whirled around. Titus stood a few steps away. She drew in a relieved breath although she could not stop shaking.

Never had she been so glad to see a familiar face.

Wood chips were scattered in his clothes from where he had been chopping wood for the fires. The fresh scent of pine comforted her assaulted nose. His solid presence as well as the axe he carried, comforted her shattered nerves. Titus would be a formidable detriment to any physical threat.

“Are you ill?”

Faith swallowed nausea and pushed tendrils of hair back up into her cap. She gestured at the open doorway. The thought of what lay inside caused her gorge to rise again. Her nose and throat burned as she struggled to speak. “I will be alright. We need a physician, quickly.”

Titus shook his head. “He’s dead ma’am. No doctor can help him now. Let me get you back to the kitchen. The boys can get the sheriff. Best I stay here until I have had time to look around.” His voice roughened, “He has not been dead long, Miss Faith. Body is not all that cold. We had best not to take any chances. I will feed the chickens for the boys today, and they can go on to school. They should be safe enough in the street.”

Titus walked quietly beside her as they passed the smoke house. A breeze stirred the dead leaves from the nearby street. The big man said nothing as they walked past the barn where the horses shifted about in their stalls. Faith jumped but settled when the big man said, “They’re just waiting for breakfast.” His glance seemed to stop briefly at the small barn where the cow and a few horses resided then continued on their circuit.

Her head whirled as she considered the consequences of what she had seen. Bullard could be an insufferable bully, but she did not want him dead in her tavern. Once the sheriff came, news would spread. The authorities would want answers, and she had none. Given the current strife in the colonies, it was all too easy to find oneself unintentionally wearing a noose.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to put that idea out of her head.

The sun ascended the horizon, lighting the sky, as her feet crossed the threshold of the kitchen. Titus left her there and returned outside. Busy with breakfast preparations, Faith was grateful that Olivia did not mention that her mistress looked terrible and smelled worse. She poured herself a small amount of short beer and rinsed out her mouth. Stepping outside, she spat into the grass away from the walkway before returning to speak.

“Someone killed Phineas Bullard last night. The boys need to get the sheriff. Faith paused to gather her spinning thoughts grateful that Olivia was too busy to turn about and see her.

Her breath came too fast and shallow making her dizzy. She needed to gain control of her wits. Sitting at a nearby bench, she leaned over putting her head in her hands.

This was no time to panic. Too much was at stake. She forced herself to inhale and exhale. Gradually, her head cleared. There was no time to panic. Regardless of how she felt, life continued and with it, the work that survival entailed.

From her seat Faith could see inside the open door of the outdoor kitchen, She watched Olivia stirring the huge stewpot hanging over the fire in the kitchen. Nearby lay a stack of knives with rusty stains waiting for scrubbing. Some looked as if they had been used to separate a carcass. The idea made her gorge rise. Faith frowned. If she did not know better, she would swear Olivia was keeping her back to her. It made little sense but then nothing this morning did. Shrugging, she walked out the door back to the tavern.

Outside the door, Titus lingered carrying a plate covered with a napkin. At her glance, he looked nervous.

Faith smiled. "No worries, Titus. I'm sure you worked up quite an appetite this morning."

"What? Oh sure, mistress. Quite an appetite."

He was sweating despite the chill of the predawn air. Faith wondered how much would he had chopped. She felt guilty for sitting when he and his wife had been working. Faith touched his sleeve. "It is of no concern to me Titus."

"Yes, ma'am."

Faith shook her head as she moved past him. Why would he think her worried about a little food? Surely, he knew her better than that. Normally Titus ate in the kitchen with Olivia. Pushing the distracting thought from her mind, she moved onward, determined to ignore the soft whispers behind her.

She managed to catch the door behind her before it slammed. She hurried down the tavern's hall to the one private space she possessed. Creaking upstairs warned Faith to hurry. Other sounds told her that there would be chamber pots to empty and clean. Pouring water from the pitcher she had filled last night, she washed her face and combed her hair. This time, she took time to coil her hair and pin it in a respectable manner. Her hands shook as she tidied herself. The steel mirror showed a face pale and frightened.

“God help me,” she whispered before turning to where her son slept. “Andrew, it’s time to rise. I need you and Joshua to go get the sheriff.”