

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

EIGHT HISTORICAL MYSTERIES

by

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This, and everything, is for Joe.

DEAD OF WINTER

IN JAMESTOWN THEY CALLED THE WINTER of 1609 “The Starving Time.” My Indian slave-master called it “No Bird Winter,” because no birds nested that winter in the marshlands around Chesapeake Bay. But I remember it as the winter when I was seventeen and accused of murder.

As usual, that autumn the birds had come from the north. They cloaked the sun in their wings and cast vast shadows on the leaf-gold land, as if Almighty Okeus’ hand were casting a blessing on the Powhatan people. Then Okeus withdrew his blessing. At dawn on the day of the first snowfall, the birds began to leave the brittle reeds and to fly on farther south, as if they knew this would not be a good place to spend the winter. Dawn after shivering dawn, the hunters watched their winter comforts fly farther south. Everyone knew what would happen as clearly as their shaman Araparedhunt had years ago foreseen the coming of the Floating Islands. There would be no bird flesh that winter for their stews, no tiny bones for their children’s toy whistles, no feather capes to warm their wives.

Day after day it snowed, until the drifts were too deep for the longest-legged deer. Then the snow stopped as the cold cascaded down from the north—a cold so cold that the wide James River froze over and every drop of moisture vanished from the air.

The English were always hungry in Virginia. That is why the officers sold me and a handful of other ship’s boys to the Indians for corn almost as soon as we landed in 1607. But in the winter of 1609 they almost starved to death. Before long all they had to eat were old boots and thrice-boiled horse bones. No Indians died of hunger and cold, though, in “No Bird Winter.” The great Emperor Powhatan did not let his people suffer. Before the birds abandoned the land, he was already prepared. His storehouses were packed with bearskins, smoked oysters, char-kee, walnuts, maize, and other riches. No Indians died, that is, until late March when my master Araparedhunt (known as Redhunt to his friends) sent me to spy on Jamestown. He was sure they had nothing left to eat except each other, and he wanted me to find out who had survived.

That was how I got into trouble. By the time I reached Jamestown, the commanding officer had decided to “consent” to marry Powhatan’s daughter in return for some corn. Captain Percy ordered me to carry his marriage proposal back to the Emperor Powhatan. Apparently he did not know, or did not care, that Princess Pocahontas was already married to a warrior named Kokoum.

Then, to make matters worse, just before dawn on my way back from Jamestown to Powhatan’s winter headquarters at Orapakes, I ran into Kokoum.

One minute I was alone—the forest silence broken only by the tinkle of icicles as my fringed sleeves brushed the tree limbs—and the next minute the air was filled with the crunch of another human approaching me in the snow.

“What are you doing here?” he asked suspiciously.

I was afraid to tell him about the English Cutthroat's proposal to steal his best wife, so I said, "I'm on an errand. What brings you out so early?" We stood there struggling to ignore the bitter cold, slapped our arms, and pressed our stiff, gloved hands into our armpits.

"Hunting." Kokoum's sharp eyes had spotted a bird in the twilight sky the night before. "First sign of spring. I expect another sky today as bright as an English steel pickax," he said. "It's still too cold for snow."

"*Cuppeh*," I agreed.

Kokoum turned away. I watched him head off toward the east. His snowshoes punched no holes in the deep, crusted snow. I had no snowshoes, and when I turned toward Orapakes my leggings disappeared up to my knees.

Little did I know—this was the last time Kokoum would be seen alive.

WHEN I REACHED THE VILLAGE TWO HOURS later, I went straight to my master's warm yehawkans, where the aroma of breakfast succotash beckoned me. There I found Redhunt reclining on a bed of mink skins clad only in a breechcloth. He reminded me of a mountain lion on a hot boulder. When I gave him Percy's message, his expression did not change. He just stroked his beloved little green-and-yellow snake, curled asleep in a basket beside him.

"Powhatan and Pocahontas will understand," he said. "There's no benefit to us in this. It's not an offer of friendship. Cutthroat marriages degrade the women." He took the snake out of its basket and draped it around his neck to feed it a tidbit of fat. "Pocahontas has the right to exchange Kokoum for Percy if she pleases, but I doubt she will. Be prepared to take him a polite refusal." A princess like Pocahontas could leave her husband whenever she wanted.

After that, I heard no more about the Cutthroat proposal. But when Kokoum did not come home after three long, cold nights, the village did begin to gossip about that. So, Pocahontas, who was as skillful a tracker as any man, went on the fourth day to look for her husband. That was the day it snowed for the first time since the bitter cold had driven all clouds from the sky above Chesapeake Bay. It was what we had longed for, but by noon it was a blizzard and we worried that Kokoum and Pocahontas might get lost in it.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON THE STORM let up. I was in Redhunt's yehawkans when Pocahontas burst in gasping for breath. Her moccasin soles were slick with ice, and her legs were rubbed raw from her snowshoe straps. Little icicles clung to her fringed cape. When she pulled it off, the leather crackled. Even the fringe of black hair across her forehead was beaded with ice which melted and streaked her cheeks like tears as she knelt to warm herself at Redhunt's fire.

"Great shaman," she pleaded, "find my husband's murderers." She looked up at Redhunt with eyes as black and hard as obsidian.

"Murderers?" The word shot through me like an arrow of ice. I wasn't about to admit it then, but I knew I must have been the last person to see her husband before he was killed—last except for his killers.

"What happened?" said Redhunt as if nothing were more common than for frantic princesses to interrupt his meditations like that.

“I found Kokoum’s body in the snow,” she said. “Near the Great Fertile Swamps. Skull pierced. An English pike, I’m sure of it. Someone crept up behind him, and there had to be more than one man.”

I knew the area she meant. All around Chesapeake Bay and the shore of the Great Salty Waters were lush swamps. The English called these places the Great Dismal Swamps, but the Indians—who better understood the land—called them the Great Fertile Swamps. Like all hunters, Kokoum had secret bird blinds there.

Redhunt tensed ever so slightly. “Signs of a struggle?”

“Yes. He was still clutching his bow. He must have wounded one of his attackers. About a hundred feet away I found a blood-covered boulder.”

“You’re a good tracker. Even in a blizzard you should have been able to tell where the killers came from and where they went.”

“I looked everywhere. They left no trail. As if they had wings—no footprints anywhere.”

“Not even Kokoum’s snowshoes?”

“Only faint marks,” she said. “It was hard to follow his tracks. They were covered by snow. I found no others there.”

“How is that possible?” I asked.

Redhunt and Pocahontas stared at me for a moment. Then Pocahontas shook her head and drew a charcoal map for Redhunt on some birch bark.

“You’re certain the snow didn’t bury the killers’ tracks?” he asked.

“Do you question my eyesight? But they could have escaped through the frozen swamp without leaving tracks.”

“Only if the ice had thawed, and the killers would have soaked their feet in icy water,” I said.

Pocahontas frowned at me but nodded.

“True. The swamp is still covered in snow.” Redhunt sucked thoughtfully on his long-stemmed pipe, then blew a perfect ring of smoke and said, “You came straight back here, following the same path as before? Saw no signs of anyone else in the woods?”

“I found your slave’s tracks. They crossed Kokoum’s about half a morning from here.” Her eyes clouded, like deep pools suddenly glazed with ice. “It must be Percy and the Cutthroats. Who else could it be?”

“The Monacans, that’s who,” I said. They were the Powhatans’ mortal enemies—a savage race who lived in the western mountains.

Redhunt was inexplicably patient with me in those days. He didn’t reprimand me for interrupting, just shrugged and turned to Pocahontas. “I agree with you that the English are the only ones foolish enough to wade through the swamp in winter, but I can’t believe they would attack one of our warriors when they badly need Powhatan’s help.”

She laughed bitterly. “I thought you would want to help me catch the murderous Cutthroats, not defend them. It’s time to drive them home to England, once and for all.”

“It’s hard to understand how there could be no tracks,” said Redhunt. “Especially clumsy Englishmen. I need to see this strange place where men can fly and wade through frozen-solid water.”

That night the people of Orapakes slept uneasily in their mink beds, haunted by nightmares of savage man-slayers roaming Chesapeake Bay’s rime-covered shores.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE RUMORS BEGAN to fly. Most villagers blamed the Cutthroats. They gave me the evil eye and reminded each other that I was once English. The only thing that saved me from the gauntlet was that Redhunt made Pocahontas promise to keep my secret: no one else knew I had met Kokoum in the forest that evil dawn.

The Emperor Powhatan agreed that Redhunt should investigate Kokoum's murder. He warned me that if the English had done it, I could expect to pay the ultimate price and he would burn Jamestown to the ground. Then he gathered an entourage to accompany Pocahontas and prepare the body for burial. I was to pull the supply sled—this time wearing snowshoes like everyone else. Despite the peril of the journey, Kokoum's oldest sister and sole heir, Kasha, insisted on joining us, as did Kokoum's second-best wife, Aguasquaw. Kasha was Kokoum's heir, not Pocahontas, because inheritance passed from parent to children in birth order, regardless of whether they were male or female.

From the moment we left Orapakes that morning, we were all on edge. The slightest noise along the path produced a dozen taut bowstrings and a dozen sharp eyes squinting down a dozen arrow shafts. I blame this edginess for what happened next.

Amocis, the guard at the end of the procession, started the trouble. Jiggling the rattlesnake tails in his hair, he said, "I don't know why you're all so afraid of a Cutthroat ambush. They're cowards. They'd only ambush a lone hunter."

"That's right, Amocis," said Aguasquaw, "the Cutthroats killed Kokoum, but they could only have found his secret bird blind if someone here betrayed him. Who told them where to find my husband?" She pointed her finger at me. I stopped dead in my tracks. Then she turned on Kasha in her thick, gray-fox robe. "Or you! You could have had Kokoum killed, before he could father any children to disinherit you."

"How do we know Ward-no-tuak himself did not kill our friend?" Amocis shouted. (My name is Edward, but the Powhatans called me Ward-no-tuak.) "This slave was in the woods the day Kokoum went hunting. Ward-no-tuak could have followed Kokoum and killed him."

"Why would my slave do such a thing?" Redhunt asked calmly.

"He's English," said Amocis. "Besides, the Cutthroat Percy must have known that Pocahontas's husband would be dead soon—killed by this slave. That's why he wasn't afraid to offer marriage to her."

Then Kasha laughed—a laugh like a tomahawk whacking a rotten tree trunk. "If you want to know who had a reason to kill my brother, look to his best wife." She glared at Pocahontas. "How do we know that Kokoum was already dead when she found him?"

I was so shocked that I dropped the sled onto the riverbank and had to scramble to keep it from sliding onto thin ice.

"That's impossible. Even Pocahontas isn't that bad," said Aguasquaw. "Kokoum loved her best of all his wives. Night after night they shared the same bed. I should know." She frowned at the memory. "She would have born him many children, and her children would have inherited all his wealth. Instead of you." Aguasquaw shook her finger in Kasha's face. "That's why you had him killed, you wretched, greedy woman!"

Amocis put a comforting arm around Aguasquaw's shaking shoulders. "I agree with Aguasquaw. Other than the English, Kasha benefits most from Kokoum's death. But it wouldn't have taken her much to bribe this slave to kill her brother."

All eyes turned to me.

“Oh, is that so? No one else benefits but his wives who are both free now to remarry.” Kasha glanced smugly at Pocahontas and then back at Aguasquaw and her protector, Amocis.

Redhunt might have ignored a mere second-best wife like Aguasquaw, but Kasha was a werowansquaw too important to ignore. He stood for a moment with his arms crossed on his chest, no doubt reading Kasha’s mind. Her tiny fox-like eyes looked back at him unblinkingly from beneath her fur hood. “And why would Pocahontas kill her husband?” he asked.

“She longs for an Englishman,” Kasha said with contempt in her voice as thick as frozen sap. “Pocahontas craves the tickle of their furry chests and bearded faces. She always fawned over Captain Smith the way a she-bear fawns over a cub. No doubt she sent Ward-no-tuak to Jamestown with word that she could get them some corn if one of them would marry her. But the Cutthroats don’t believe in marrying a woman who already has a husband. I hear that English women can’t even leave husbands who beat them.”

Struggling to drag the sled back up the embankment, all I could hear of Redhunt’s quiet response was, “I am the one who sent Ward-no-tuak to Jamestown, not Pocahontas.”

Pocahontas laughed. “The last person I would trust with such a message is a Cutthroat boy.”

At dusk, we finally reached Kokoum’s secret hunting spot near the Great Fertile Swamps. The squabbling had distracted us from thinking about what we would find when we got there. But as soon as we saw the bloated shape sprawled on the ground, the bickering stopped.

His body lay in the shadows of a velvety, snow-laden spruce surrounded by a knot of spindly pines. Majestic icicles dangled from every branch, like jeweled earrings. From there a hunter could see in all directions without being seen. But it was odd, I thought, that anyone could have seen Kokoum crouching there—especially someone who did not know this was his favorite place. I wondered if anyone but Pocahontas knew about it.

Redhunt ordered us to camp behind the bird blind so as not to disturb the ground around the body. “Tomorrow we’ll search for signs of his killer.”

Despite a circle of guards, no one slept well that night except Redhunt, who never lost sleep for any reason. Every few minutes during the night some nervous woman started up out of her sleep and stared into the darkness beyond the campfire—at the sound of nothing more than cracking ice or the rustle of a black English rat in the brush. I know this because my eyes never shut. I didn’t want the last thing I ever heard to be the sound of Amocis’s warclub thudding into my skull.

I had to get up once to relieve myself, and I noticed a woman’s figure kneeling over the sleeping Pocahontas. Whoever it was saw me, stood, and stepped outside the ring of firelight. I assumed she, too, had to relieve herself.

AT DAWN REDHUNT BEGAN HIS SEARCH for clues. He moved like a deerstalker. His moccasins left no imprint. Returning to the spot where the rest of us waited, Redhunt said, “The winter has painted a picture of what happened here, as clear as black charcoal on white birch bark. There—Kokoum’s snowshoes left tracks leading to the bird blind. And there are Pocahontas’s.”

He looked back at Kokoum’s body. “Follow me, but not all the way into the bird blind. Stand back.”

The ground was frozen solid, and it suddenly occurred to me that the killers could have crossed the frozen swamp without walking—on London steel blades like those I wore as a child on the frozen Thames. “What about ice skates?” I asked.

“Did any of your Cutthroat friends bring such toys from London?” he asked, curling his lip ever so slightly. Redhunt knew all about the English and their strange ways.

I thought not and shook my head. I recalled how few possessions I was allowed to bring with me from home.

“Notice how black and bloated Kokoum’s body is,” he said. Indeed, it was barely recognizable as a man’s. Like everything else, his body was coated in ice.

Pocahontas gasped. “He wasn’t that color when I found him beneath the snow.”

“The cycle of melting snow and ice on sunny days, followed by freezing nights, did this,” said Redhunt. “His flesh is frozen now, but it will thaw by noon.”

It struck me then there was no smell of death. Winter had frozen it right out of the air.

Redhunt crouched down beside the body and stared long and hard at the wound in Kokoum’s skull. Then he took a long turkey quill from his shoulder pouch and stuffed it into the wound as far as it would go. Before withdrawing it, he marked the feather with his fingernail.

Even from where I stood several yards away, the wound appeared to be about the diameter of an English pike, just as Pocahontas had said.

“Maybe the killer was already hiding up in a tree before Kokoum got here,” I said. Redhunt glared at me. After that I did not pursue this line of inquiry.

“Did you move his body?” he asked Pocahontas.

She shook her head, unable to utter the simple word “*mattab*,” no.

Cautiously he touched the bow still grasped in Kokoum’s bloated hand. Then he looked around at the bird blind. A brace of swans and geese lay near the body. “Kokoum was a good shot.”

“Better than me,” Amocis said hastily, as if Redhunt had accused him. “But the birds look rotten.” Like the warrior’s, their carcasses had frozen and thawed several times. “I wouldn’t eat them.”

“I wager a starving Englishman would,” I said. After all, I had seen what they were reduced to eating in Jamestown.

Redhunt looked at me but said nothing. Next he examined Kokoum’s quiver and counted the arrows. “One is missing. Did you find an arrow?” he asked Pocahontas.

“*Mattab*,” she said.

“Show me the bloody boulder. The rest of you, keep away from the body. Do not follow us.”

The two made their way gingerly through the swamp, parting clumps of reeds. A few times they plunged through the ice into the water. Around them alarmed birds flew up, hiding them briefly behind a curtain of rising and settling white wings. Redhunt stooped to study something. It would be extremely difficult, I thought, even for Redhunt to find signs of a killer’s trail out there.

At last, they climbed up on a boulder.

“What are they looking at?” asked Kasha.

“A Monacan enemy’s blood,” I said, to turn suspicion away from myself and the other English. “Redhunt can tell their blood from ours.”

Amocis eyed me suspiciously. “Oh? And English blood?”

“It wasn’t Englishmen,” I said.

Redhunt picked something up. Then the two made their way back to us. Without a word, Redhunt walked to the campfire. His moccasins and leggings were soaked. He looked like a tired wolf—ready to snarl at the first person who dared to speak. He sat down abruptly and pulled off his moccasins to warm his frozen feet at the fire. Pocahontas did the same. We crowded around them.

Reading our minds, Redhunt held up a long black flight feather.

“From the Monacan’s warlock!” I said.

“Is that what logic tells you?” Redhunt asked, disappointed in me. “I found no signs of any man fleeing through the swamp. Granted, the very best hunter couldn’t track a giant elk out there right now. Even so, I don’t believe Kokoum’s killer escaped through the swamp.”

“But how did the killer escape without a trace?” said Pocahontas. “What’s the meaning of the bloody boulder? Did some wounded enemy step on it to throw a warclub which struck Kokoum in the back of his skull? It seems impossible.”

“It is.”

“But the blood?” she persisted.

“Kokoum always hit his target,” said Redhunt. “His hand still clutches the bow, but his arrow was loosed at something on the boulder, probably the instant before he died. From the body’s position, it’s clear the death blow could only have come from one direction. That direction is not the swamp.” Again he held up the black feather. “Is not Kokoum’s killer plain to see?”

I stared at my cold feet, afraid to catch someone’s accusing eye fixed on me. Kasha looked at Pocahontas, who stared back at her. Aguasquaw covered her face in her hands. Amocis looked at me.

“Who but the Cutthroat English would be so cowardly?” Pocahontas asked.

Amocis spat at me.

“I grant you, the English are not to be trusted,” said Redhunt. “But as Ward-no-tuak said, the English are so hungry they would have stolen Kokoum’s game. Besides, it would have taken more than trickery for a clumsy Englishman to get close enough to drive a pike into Kokoum’s skull and then leave without a trace. No Monacan’s snowshoes, and certainly no Englishman’s boots, could have walked up to the bird blind without leaving a mark.”

“It was a demon then?” I blurted out.

“Of course not,” said Kasha, “Kokoum’s killer did leave tracks—Pocahontas’s tracks.”

In the shocked silence, all I heard were tiny icicles tinkling to the ground in the bird blind a few feet away. No one wanted to admit it, but Kasha’s logic was good. The only person besides Kokoum who walked around the bird blind was Pocahontas.

And then a rare thing happened. For one fleeting instant, Redhunt let his anger show. Even brave Amocis took a step back in fear.

“You’re fools. Pocahontas had no reason to kill Kokoum. She could have left him for Percy if she had so desired,” he said. “But Kasha, you stood to become immeasurably wealthy if your brother died childless. And you, Aguasquaw, it looks as if you preferred Amocis over

your husband, but had no excuse to leave him. He was good man, didn't beat you. And Amocis you coveted Aguasquaw. Besides, there's unmistakable proof of Pocahontas's innocence. Kokoum was dead when she found him." He sighed wearily.

"Snow fell on Kokoum's body before Pocahontas got here. Even before she reached the swamp. Her tracks in the snow prove that. There is no snow on the body now, because it melted in the sun. Kokoum died before it snowed."

Then Redhunt pointed to the icicle-covered spruce, whose branches sheltered the body. The icicles focused the sun's rays like hundreds of burning-glasses.

"Watch, my friends," he said. "Kokoum's killer is about to reveal himself—in the bird blind."

Kasha gasped. Amocis snapped the bow off his shoulder and readied an arrow. Aguasquaw clutched her arms around herself. Pocahontas took a step toward the bird blind.

A sharp crack sounded. A branch high in the spruce dipped and swayed, as if something had brushed it. From the shower of snow and ice, a black swan rose into the air, an arrow dangling from its breast. The bird struggled up into the clear blue sky, where its white companions now were flying north. But it could not reach them. It dipped, and glided, and finally came to rest again far out in the swamp. A black shadow in the brittle reeds.

Then a crash near the body drew our eyes back to the bird blind, where a giant icicle pierced the earth like a spear.

"Stay clear!" warned Redhunt. He retrieved the icicle and held it up toward the sun. In my mind's eye I could see its big brother crashing down on Kokoum's skull.

"You mean that Kokoum wasn't murdered," I said. "An icicle killed him."

"Of course. Would you prefer to believe that Kokoum foolishly allowed Monacans or Englishmen to trick him? No. Just when Kokoum wounded the swan, some other bird landed in the spruce, shaking the branches. It wouldn't be the first time falling ice impaled a man."

I thought that Kasha and Amocis and Aguasquaw must be ashamed to realize how wrong they had been. For my part, I was suddenly relieved of the burden of suspicion, which like heavy snow, had weighed on me for hours.

"Kokoum must have been so enthralled by the sight of the rare black swan that he let down his guard, forgot about the sun warming the branches above him. He knew better than to expose himself to falling ice, but even a wily hunter can grow careless celebrating the end of a 'No Bird Winter.'"

THAT WINTER LIVED FOREVER IN OUR MEMORIES. I was sent back to Jamestown, where I became a translator. Kasha inherited Kokoum's wealth. Amocis married Aguasquaw. The Emperor Powhatan, of course, never responded to Captain Percy's absurd proposal. And Pocahontas, as you may have heard, eventually married an Englishman, but not because she wanted to be tickled by his beard. It was part of her plan to conquer the English—a plan that failed only because she died in London, hacking up blood. Or so the Cutthroats claimed.

