

Murder at Jamestown

Chapter Twelve: Foolishness

Jamestowne Colony, 1609

The well hadn't been used in months. Like every other source of water they'd located since settling on this empty piece of riverfront, this well had been dug deep and was sweet and fresh—for a time. Then the brackishness had become plain, the salt seeping in as the tides of the river swept through with ocean water mixed within. Boiled it was nearly palatable, cooking with it a nuisance. But over time, it was poison, and every one of them knew it.

So once again, in the wretched and diseased heat of the summer sun, Jeremiah had found himself digging a new well.

It was back-breaking work, work for slaves and not for freedmen. But there were no slaves here to do the work, there were barely enough of them well and fed who could lift tools. Many had fallen to fever, and

were laid abed and helpless as lambs. But the colony had no use for lambs. They needed wolves.

The fever was vicious. It began with shakes, and moved through the eyes: when the whites of the eyes turned yellow, then it was a certainty that the man would fall to his bed within the day, and many would never rise again. Fewer than two of every ten who became ill recovered enough to be of aid to the colony, and Jeremiah knew full well that with the ongoing threat of the natives just outside the fence that was still barely constructed, they needed every able man they could find.

Jeremiah dug his shovel deeper into the soft soil at the bottom of the shaft. His head cleared the ground level by inches, but his feet at the bottom of the well sank deeper into the soft earth with every back-breaking effort.

There were no spare hands. There were no spare supplies. There was little food, and to Jeremiah's eyes, not enough to last them through the winter. His brother was gone, and his musket with him. And here was Jeremiah, feeling so young and afraid, with no weapon to defend himself, and digging a well that felt like a grave.

He prayed, fervently, that he might succumb to the fever, as had so many others. It was an unexpected prayer, even to him, but

it was testament to his conviction that much worse lay ahead than the trials they had so far faced. The well he was digging stank already of death, and Jeremiah was nowhere near the bottom.

Jamestown, Present Day

This wasn't the first time Kitty had been sucked into investigating a murder despite the fact that that she felt confident that she had zero business doing so. She wasn't trained as an investigator. Honestly, she was barely trained to work with other living humans. Archaeology had always been a gift, because she spent more time with the dead than the living, who could be judgmental and irritable and unpredictable. All the things Kitty hated. She had a tendency to under-react in social situations, which maybe made those who turned to her for help assume that she had it all together. But, then, they never saw her sneak away and break into offices in the dead of night.

She suspected strongly that would have undermined their confidence in her.

It was the middle of the night. The overhead lights were pressing down on her and giving her a headache. Talking to all these people,

looking at TWO dead bodies, worrying that the police were coming, all of it was an anchor dragging her under the earth. Soon, she knew, she would be one of the people she studied, a body left under the ground to be discovered by strangers, their secrets lost forever and only reconstructed with guesswork and supposition.

Her hand was in her pocket, worrying away at the tools still hidden there. Her breathing was coming more quickly, her heartbeat was elevated, her fingers twitchy.

She needed to get out.

"I need some air," she heard her own voice burst out.

Bryan jumped. He was still white as a sheet, standing with his arms dangling at his sides, feet frozen on the supply room carpet. Greg had high-tailed it back to the grad carell first chance he got, the only time Kitty could remember seeing him want to be anywhere other than in charge of things.

Without looking back or even consciously realizing that the hallway was brutally dark, Kitty spun on her heel and sped down the hall, her feet skimming the tiles and her eyes only semi-focused on the tiny sliver of moonlight bleeding on the floor far ahead of her.

She burst through the aperture, blind to where she put her feet. Gasping the fresh air deep into her lungs, Kitty felt the call of The Itch.

She was trapped, underwater, struggling to breathe--and the chance to reach inside and twist the lock was overwhelming.

She needed to break in.

Or out.

Her feet moved down the concrete sidewalk without her really paying attention to them. She wasn't going anywhere, she was just GOING.

Her mind churned as her legs pumped, walking so fast she was nearly running, only vaguely registering the sound of the door slamming behind her. A small corner of her brain wondered that Bryan hadn't followed her, but she was relieved. She couldn't spare the mental space at this moment to work through his feelings as well as her own.

She was underwater.

How had this happened again? How had she been sucked into this investigation? And now as accusations were flying--everyone seemed to point their finger at someone else to blame--there were two dead human beings inside the building behind her and a lot of eyes looking to her to sort it out.

Not all the eyes, though. Greg certainly hadn't wanted her to investigate. Not that it had prevented him from strongly implicating Ruth, at the end. Holy smokes, did that guy have it out for her. And was he

wrong? Kitty couldn't be sure. Bryan generally had excellent judgment of character, and he definitely didn't like Ruth. Was that just the prejudice of a man with an overbearing mother? Or was it some insight that Kitty didn't share?

And Ruth. She had gone out of her way to point her finger at Stella. Stella! That tiny slip of a thing? And why would Ruth turn on her like that--Ruth, who had been a mother hen to every member of the crew, whether they wanted her to be or not?

Kitty could hear the rushing of the river as she walked directionlessly forward. Her breath was loud and her blood pumped in her ears. The sound of the water moving along the banks soothed her slightly, and she slackened her pace. She was deep in the park now, with the reconstructed fort ahead of her and the Archaerium behind. Grassy land stretched around her, the kind of smooth lawn that would make any suburban homeowner proud.

The river continued to roll past on her right, the surface dark and murky. This close to morning, no moonlight remained. The sky was clouded over and the air was heavy around her face.

Something about the water rushing past so close drew her over to the edge of the river. She veered off the sidewalk and plunged into the grass, pushing beyond the marked boundary for day visitors and

tourists and letting her boots sink into the soft earth on the banks. Cattails and underbrush thrust themselves into her hands as she reached to steady herself, and she didn't stop until her toes touched the edge of the water as it lapped at the shore.

The salty scent of brackish water from the fresh river mixing with the incoming tide struck her nostrils. Four hundred years ago, Kitty knew, settlers on this exact spot of ground had smelled this same scent, had tied their uncertain future to this very shore, and had seen vastly more death than she had in the past 24 hours. Breathing deeply, she calmed herself.

And thought of the well.

The well at the center of the property was also at the center of one of Jamestown's most startling and scientifically important discoveries: that of Jane, the victim of cannibalism in the colony during the infamous Starving Time. At the bottom of the well her remains had been discovered, with the unmistakable marks of cutting tools used to remove her flesh when desperate men had gone to unthinkable lengths to preserve their own lives.

The well was a major draw for tourists and figured prominently in the tour guides' talks as they led groups of students and Midwesterners around the park. It was also the site of the discovery of numerous additional artifacts beyond Jane's remains, because it was one of the

many abandoned failed wells all over the property--and abandoned wells invariably become trash cans, no matter where they are in the world. A deep, dark hole is the perfect place to throw something away.

Across the Jamestown site, there were dozens of attempted wells that had been dug by the colonists. The brackish water that lapped at Kitty's feet also seeped into the groundwater all over this small island. That meant that for every well dug, the lifespan was predictably short: no fresh water would ever last, which meant that no well could be used for very long. The simple fact that the land had been uninhabited by natives when the colonists arrived, nor had been claimed by either the Spanish or the French, should have been a clear indicator to the settlers that there was something inherently wrong with it. They learned just what that was to their detriment: bad water, heavy mosquito infestations that led to yellow fever and malarial infection, and a lack of access to good farmable land meant that Jamestown was doomed from the moment their English boots hit the soil.

Dozens of abandoned wells taught this lesson to the settlers, but they also represented a treasure trove for archaeologists. Archaeology, Kitty knew, was really just digging through people's garbage to figure out who they were and what mattered most to them--because who they SAY they are is often different than what they DO, and it the disparity between the two that made Kitty intrigued by them.

Take Brandon. He said he didn't care about people, but he had consistently behaved in ways that made Kitty believe he was conscientious and concerned about the members of the crew. He didn't like that Greg took liberties with his position, and had a very dim view of Ruth. On the other hand, his size and attitude made him the ideal suspect for Hank's death.

He was a tough lock to pick.

Lock. Pick. Well.

Kitty's head snapped up. Her thoughts had been swirling, and something about the hypnotic way that the water was eddying around her feet had lulled her into a meditative state. Which was perhaps what had caused her to put the pieces together that she hadn't ten minutes prior, as she was giving in to her flight instinct and charging away from the death and uncertainty in the Archaerium.

The well. Because so many artifacts had been discovered at the bottom, because Jane's remains had lodged there for so many years, because it was so central to the teaching offered by the park rangers and guides, the well was covered at all times and made inaccessible.

By a padlock.

Kitty did a 180-degree turn in the soft soil under her boots, and lifted one leg to climb up the banks of the river. The earth gave way, and she found herself down on one knee, clawing up the steep side of the

waterway, digging her other toe into the wall of dirt to gain a foothold. Finally, she leveraged herself up and resumed her near-frantic pace, but this time it was with a specific and precise destination.

It took only a handful of minutes for her to race across the pen area between buildings and arrive at the massive oak tree that shaded the well. Surrounding it were backless benches made of split logs, perfect for sitting and listening to the stories spun by the rangers as they recounted the horrors of the Starving Time to visitors. Horrors made so much worse because the settlers themselves were largely of the gentlemen's class, not accustomed to hard work or rough living, and so the men had never seen the misery laid out before them until it was far too late.

Is that what Marty Ganguly had experienced? Was it a sudden and unexpected attack that had taken him down? It must have been, Kitty reasoned. How else does a man end up inside a copy machine?

Along the horizon and over the river, the sun was just beginning to break through.

Kitty stood over the well, breathing hard. She was excited in the way she could only ever be when confronted with a lock. The degree of difficulty didn't matter. It was the challenge of what lay beyond. And in this case, Kitty wanted to scratch the Itch and let her mind rest. The anxiety of the past fourteen hours weighed heavily on her, and at this

moment, so close to morning, picking this lock seemed like a prescription she needed filled.

She reached into her pocket and drew out her tools. Was it only hours ago she had been a mile away, opening the door of an office park on a quiet suburban road to feel the cool breath of corporate air conditioning blow across her cheek? It felt a lifetime away. Simpler.

Kitty lifted the padlock. It was a straightforward affair, but of very high quality and excellent make. Kitty admired someone who invested in a good lock.

As she slipped her tools inside the keyhole, her opposite hand on the hasp of the padlock to steady it above the wooden circle that blocked the opening of the well, Kitty could feel her mind relax. She wasn't worrying away at the dog bone of the murders she had discovered tonight, she was feeling her way forward into the innards of this mechanism, something that made sense, something that could be quantified and measured and controlled.

She had heard that control is an illusion, but in this moment, as she scratched The Itch, she could almost believe that some things could be brought under her thumb. Even if it was only for a moment.

As she moved her fingers to slip the second tool into the lock and hold the tumblers out of the way as she manipulated them, Kitty allowed her mind to wander. She thought about the lock, and how it was

necessary to protect the archaeological data of artifacts not yet discovered--leaving the well open to so many visitors invited them to use it as the settlers had done, and contaminate the strata with new refuse. Not that it would cloud the data necessarily, but no one wants to sift through popsicle sticks and Starbucks cups to seek out new information about long-dead colonists.

Her favorite story was of the musket. Somewhere along the way, some poor soldier had dropped his musket into this very well, where it was found centuries later by excavators. A musket, in the 16th century and across the planet from England, was not only shockingly valuable but entirely irreplaceable. And a soldier who had lost his musket was in a world of hurt.

Discovered in the same layer as the musket was a halberd, a sort of axe head on a long pole that soldiers carried when on patrol at the time Jamestown was settled. What was odd about this particular halberd was that the pointed tip opposite the axe head, made of iron and used for serious attacking only, had been bent into a sort of hook.

Archaeologists had determined that on a very, very bad day for that soldier indeed, he had not only dropped his musket into the well, but he had attempted to make a hook to fish it out again using his halberd--and dropped that, too.

The halberd had seemed like an independent artifact, but in

truth, it was intimately tied to the loss of the musket. The second loss would never have happened without the first.

Kitty caught her breath. The lock snapped open.

She didn't even need to pull back the wooden cover, because her thoughts were racing so quickly ahead of her. She could only try to keep up.

The second would never have happened without the first. The first loss had led to the second, to cover up the mistake. Cover up. Covering up.

Hank on the floor of the copy room, with shreds of paper in his hand. Marty Ganguly, inside the copier that blocked Hank's body. Flower petals, on and under Hank.

Stella's attack on Brandon. Greg's accusations of Ruth. Ruth's accusations of Stella.

Greg, rolling down his sleeve. Stella's weeping.

Hank, on the floor of the copy room.

The second covered up the first. Two losses in an attempt to correct a single accident.

Kitty knew who the killer was. She just had to get back to the bodies in time.

She snapped the lock back tight and raced toward the Archaerium. The sky was brightening all around her.

Morning was here.