

Murder at Jamestown

Chapter Three: Ring It Around

Jamestown Colony, 1610

There were so few of them left. Fewer than sixty, just a tiny fraction of the number with which they'd begun. Most of the women, nearly all the children, gone. The dead lay stinking in the streets, and the living were too weak to bury them.

It had taken weeks to decide. Weeks to gather the strength to make the decision. It was a grueling effort just to speak by then.

"I cannae stay here another moment," the man said as he unwound the thick rope from the cleat on the ship's deck. "Every time the wind raises, I think I hear..."

His companion was coiling the rope at their feet as the other worked it, and nodded.

"Her voice," he said quietly.

The first man gulped visibly and nodded, a quick curt gesture that matched the nauseated look on his face.

"And the air around...where...near the place that we..."

"Is cold, I know it," replied his companion, looking around swiftly as if hoping they wouldn't be overheard.

The first man looked at him intently, gazing into his friend's eyes from where he stood stooped on the ship's deck. "Like her ghost is there, watching us. I know it, she's there."

The friend returned the intensity of the look, and without reaching out his hand, said, "And here is where she'll stay, an' God gi' us grace. We are done w' it and home again soon enough." Fervent hope was on his face, but the greenish tinge matched his friend's pallor.

A third man, ragged and worn but upright and moving quickly, came and stood next to them.

"Near ready, then, John?"

The man named John, who had been coiling the rope, nodded and then glanced toward his companion, who had finished unknottling the rope from around the ship's cleat.

"And you, Jeremiah? I know it will be hard for you to leave the place where your brother Francis is laid to rest."

“Sir. No, sir, it will be a blessing to be away from this hell, sir, if you’ll forgive me saying it,” Jeremiah replied.

“It is no mistake that she is called The Deliverance, Jeremiah,” the captain told him gently. “She will carry us away from our sorrow and on to England, son. This is a desperate time, and we must return to our lives before if we hope to have a life at all.”

John and Jeremiah looked steadily at their feet during this short speech. It was the most anyone had said above a whisper to either of them for weeks. The effort of organizing the remaining survivors to board the ships, one The Deliverance and the other The Patience, had been Herculean. Many were so deeply in a state of famished torpor that they were nearly impossible to rouse. The few who still had the muscle and will to move were slow and in a constant state of confusion.

Hunger gnawed at them all constantly. Hunger, and guilt. Because to avoid the hunger, many of them had done...unspeakable things.

These first few weeks of June were oppressively hot and humid, but nothing could be more oppressive to the men on the ships’ decks than the weeks since the governors had arrived from Bermuda.

They had sailed up the river and landed on the shores of Jamestowne colony, these men of power, disembarking with expectations of a thriving colony ready to feed and clothe and house them after months

trapped in Barbados by weather and unable to complete the journey the Virginia Company had paid for. When they landed on the shores of the river nearest the fort, they had called out. No one came to greet them, and dismayed, they began to come ashore.

Pouring from every hut were walking skeletons, shades of the people who the governors had expected to find. Their bodies were barely clothed, their faces were gaunt, and their voices were raised in desperation. The few who could manage staggered to the shore, only to discover that the governors had not come to save but to be saved, and that they had once again brought not rescue but more mouths to feed.

And so, the decision was made: abandon the colony. Leave behind the graves of wives, children, brothers and sail away, leaving the memory of this God-forsaken village far behind, months behind, leaving the horror of the choices they’d been forced to make covered by the foam and the tide.

Finally, they were casting off. Jeremiah had lost his brother, and had no life to go back to in England. He had abandoned that to come here, to a place where...her face would never leave him. His hunger had been tremendous, and his brother’s friend John had whispered the idea when both men were sick with fever. It had seemed impossible, demonic, unthinkable.

Until they were so faint with hunger and fear that suddenly it wasn't so unthinkable any longer.

The ships were away from the shore, and Jeremiah looked back over the stern.

"This stinking river cannae disappear fast enough," he said to himself.

Behind him, John simply wept, his tears streaming into his beard quietly while he squeezed his eyes shut to the vanishing coastline.

The wind blew through Jeremiah's clothing, what was left of it. It was fresh and clean, and Jeremiah's heart rose in hope. His future was uncertain, but that was a welcome change from the certainty of what he was leaving behind: the memory of her face, tightened in fear and surprise; the sound of the club hitting her skull; the smell of the vomit as he stood over her and John began the grisly work of preparing the only meal the two of them had seen in weeks that didn't include boiled snakes and shoe leather, both of which were in very short supply.

As he looked down the length of the river before him, Jeremiah prayed. More fervently than ever before, more fervently than any preacher had ever done in his presence. He prayed for a new life, a new start, and to forget, forget, forget.

"Wha..." John grunted from behind him.

Jeremiah opened his eyes. The froth and foam on the water far in front of the ship's bow was higher than he would have thought.

No, it wasn't foam. It was clouds. Was it clouds?

"Is that..." he started to ask John.

"Sails," the other man told him.

Jamestown, Present Day

"Alright, alright, alright," Bryan kept saying. Kitty hoped it was a new mantra that would keep him calm. She didn't need him to cry right now, she really didn't.

"Bryan," she said.

"Alright. Alright. Alllllllright," he repeated.

"BRYAN," she spoke more loudly. She hoped she'd get his attention without freaking him out.

He looked at her, and there were tears in his eyes.

Good gravy, Kitty thought.

Kitty lowered her voice to avoid being overheard by the students across the room. Ruth was making coffee in the Chemex that lived next to the floatation sink in the corner, the perfect retro-throw-back coffee brewer for this ultra-modern laboratory. Stella was wiping

away tears and taking deep breaths while Brandon looked on in mild annoyance. She appeared to have removed her nose ring so she could blow her nose, and Brandon's face made it clear that he did not find it attractive in the least.

"Bryan, listen to me," Kitty said in a quiet but firm tone. All trace of the relaxation Brown had achieved from their "you're a liar" routine had vanished, and she was facing a man who was tense, tired and scared.

He looked at her, his face anguished. He darted his eyes at the door as though thinking of a means to escape.

"There are a lot of conclusions being jumped to here, Brown," she told him sternly. "That this isn't just a lost tooth, for one thing. I mean, couldn't someone just have lost a tooth, maybe an accident, I don't know, a fist fight?"

He looked at her dubiously.

"And nothing in this collection of artifacts proves that these are from the same person, only that we have them found in the same context. We've got an MNI of one, and that's all--nothing definite."

"What's MNI?" asked Ruth, who had suddenly appeared over Kitty's shoulder carrying the carafe of coffee in one hand and two empty mugs clutched in the other, their handles jammed together in her pump fist.

Kitty turned to look at Ruth, not expecting her, but Bryan jumped out of his seat and almost knocked the woman over in his hurry to get away from her. He pushed between the two and began pacing the terrazzo floor about ten feet from them. Kitty smoothed over the moment by graciously accepting a mug and allowing Ruth to pour her a cup of hot coffee. The older woman appeared to forget--or forgive--the rudeness of her supervising professor when offered the opportunity to play mother hen.

"You're right, I know you're right. OK, Kitty, let's be logical here," Bryan was saying, as if he were in calm control of the situation, despite the raised pitch of his voice and his shaking hands.

Stella had moved back toward them as they began speaking, leaning in to hear details. Brandon, for his part, was leaning coolly against the lab table furthest from the group, flexing his forearms and watching the light dance over his muscles.

"MNI, Ruth," Bryan began, making an effort at an authoritative tone, "stands for minimum number of individuals. It's a term used to indicate that we have multiple...."

Here he paused. Cleared his throat.

"Uh, human remains," he went on, "and that we can prove that there aren't any duplicates."

"Duplicates," Ruth repeated. "You mean, only one skull, that

kind of thing?”

“Correct,” Bryan told her curtly.

“So because we have one tooth and one bone,” Ruth said, watching Brown’s face, “that means we might have one person, or two people?”

Brown nodded again.

“But that doesn’t mean they’re even the same age, does it?”

Ruth continued. “I think what I’m saying is that, you know, couldn’t the tooth be new but the bone be old?”

Kitty nodded. “Yes, exactly, Ruth. We have no evidence so far that we’re even dealing with anything...nefarious. Isn’t that right, Bryan?”

Bryan looked at her, and Kitty tried to communicate with him using only her eyes.

Slowly, he said to the group, “That’s right, Dr. Campbell. We can’t jump to any conclusions here. We have to work methodically and use what we know to make solid conclusions supported by evidence.”

“You mean, like the fact that there’s a bloody tooth on that tray that doesn’t belong to the settlers or the Native Americans who used to live here, and the blood is still wet, so it must be pretty new? You mean, like that kind of evidence?” Brandon drawled dryly from where he stood. He was still flexing his forearms and never looked up to see

anyone’s reaction to his words.

Bryan blanched again. To his credit, he stood his ground and said, “Yes, Brandon. Like that kind of evidence.”

Stella shook her hands out like she was trying to dry them off, and twisted her neck around the way an athlete might when warming up for an event.

“Modern tooth,” she muttered to herself, rolling her neck back and forth. “Modern tooth with blood on it, OK.”

Her head popped up and she looked at Kitty shrewdly. “What if it got knocked out? I mean, maybe we’re all freaking out over nothing, right?”

“Except nobody started screaming except you, so maybe you’re the only one freaking out,” Brandon said.

Stella avoided looking at him, pointedly. “So, then, how do we rule that out? I mean, how do we know whether this tooth came from someone just, like, with gum disease or something and not...”

“Not murder, you mean?” Brandon said.

Every eye turned toward him.

He scoffed. “Come on. Everyone was thinking it when Stella started screaming her head off a minute ago, right? You all assumed that a bloody tooth plus a bone that looks like it got made into stew equals murder. It’s all Jessica Fletcher up in here.”

“I’m impressed you even know who that is,” Ruth told him snifflily, but she said it mostly under her breath.

“Right, anyway,” Brandon said dismissively, “shouldn’t we go down the list of who might have lost a tooth and keep track of everyone?”

Kitty had been listening to all this, impressed. She hadn’t expected Brandon to have genuine logic to back up his swagger, and she’d have pegged Ruth as far more likely to get shaken than Stella. If only Bryan would step up to the plate, they might be able to get to the bottom of this--and hopefully, find that it was a whole lot of nothing.

Kitty had known about her Itch for years. She’d always hated having secrets kept from her, and never met a locked door she liked. Solving the puzzle was her catnip. From her youth, she was obsessed with jigsaws and puzzle boxes and crosswords and fill-it-ins. Empty crossword boxes and padlocks made her fingers tingle.

That was probably what led her to archaeology. She’d tried to satisfy her urge to dig up the unknown with legitimate lock-picking activities--there really were groups who did that, like Locksport, an international lock-picking championship--but the fact that there was already a solution, that someone literally held the key and was just a few feet away, somehow took away from the thrill for Kitty. She wanted not just to be the one to solve the puzzle, she liked the excitement of not

knowing it could be done at all. No easy solution in the wings.

Archaeology had always been that for her. When she opened a unit at an excavation, she never knew what she’d find. Maybe nothing. Maybe the one piece of evidence that would prove or destroy her hypothesis about the site. It kept her working through the layers of soil, kept her recording every piece of evidence laboriously, tediously, as she went. It kept her sifting through soil samples, bags of actual dirt that she sent tumbling through sieves to recover just the tiny bits of seed or bone that might have been overlooked otherwise.

In fact, archaeobotany, Kitty’s specialty, was one of the most tedious sub-disciplines in all of archaeology, if you asked most folks. It involved far more lab work than field work, and anyone who had ever watched an Indiana Jones film knew that field work was where the excitement was at. Hardly anyone got chased by enormous boulders or swung from vines in the lab.

Kitty had clocked hour after hour at the lab table, endlessly counting seeds under a microscope to document what species were in a particular layer of an outhouse sample, for instance (turned out that Ben Franklin and his peers had a real hankering for raspberries in the summertime, a fact that Kitty had endlessly considered as she counted hundreds of thousands of tiny, tiny raspberry seeds under ten-times magnification one internship year). She didn’t mind the repetition or

the small scale of the work, because she loved the carrot it represented: a constant opportunity to pursue another piece of the puzzle.

Every once in a while, she'd go scratch The Itch. But her work kept it at bay better than anything she'd ever tried. Until they took that away from her, too.

Kitty had been arrested for breaking into a secure government facility after a protest, led by her mother, had failed to force the release of information on some truly sketchy research practices. Kitty had justified her felonious efforts both as a scientist and as a concerned citizen, but the authorities had hauled her in, anyway. When the charges were dropped, she heaved a sigh of relief at having dodged a bullet--only to learn that her department head had friends in the police, and that she'd lost her tenure-track position as a result of her extra-curricular activities.

It was hard to fight The Itch for long after that.

Kitty had an exceptional reputation as a researcher, and she was one of a very few experts in her field. She also had intensely loyal friends, like Bryan Brown, who helped her out by offering her work on their own projects. Which was how she was at Jamestown this summer, out of the goodness of Bryan's heart. She had hoped that it would be enough to keep her lockpicking tools in her pocket, but tonight had proved otherwise.

So when she saw a mystery literally sitting in front of her, a tooth and a bone and no idea if they belonged to the same person or if they had gotten there by illicit means, Kitty saw an irresistible feast. And maybe a little redemption. Her Itch always felt like a dirty secret, but her science had felt like a service. Without the chance to do research or contribute to the archaeological community, she'd felt cut off and unfairly dismissed. Digging into the unknown was her gift, and she hadn't been allowed to use it for too long. She'd need the help of her colleague and his students to get to the bottom of this, but even more than that, she needed this puzzle.

"We know that cannibalism took place at Jamestown, so let's set the bone aside for now," she began.

"Wait, they proved that?" exclaimed Stella with some agitation.

"Dude," Brandon told her, "didn't you do the reading before you got here?"

Stella shot him a look.

"Lucy. Oh, that was just so sad, the way they reconstructed her face and you can just imagine what she looked like!" Ruth interjected.

Stella looked over at Bryan, her eyes seeking an explanation.

"Lucy is the name given to a set of remains discovered in a trash pit in the cellar of one of the buildings from the Starving Time," he told her. "She was young, about fourteen, and had been butchered.

The skull and shinbone were uncovered, and were the first hard evidence of how far the colonists went that winter.”

Stella looked ill.

“I mean...” she whispered. “I knew that they’d written about it, but I figured... I just thought, they’re exaggerating, right? I mean, they wouldn’t really...”

“There are at least five written accounts of cannibalism from the Starving Time,” Kitty told her gently, “but many of them have been dismissed over the years. Or researchers claimed that we were interpreting them wrong, just like you’re saying, because it’s abhorrent to us and we’d rather believe that nothing like that could happen in America. Even in early America.”

“And they know for sure that she wasn’t already...you know, dead? When the did it?” Stella asked her, eyes wide in her whitened face.

Kitty nodded. “The bone evidence is pretty clear that she was very ill, but that if she died of natural causes, it was very, very soon before her body was dismembered. When the remains were taken apart, it was without question as a source of meat.”

Ruth looked decidedly ill at this conversation. “I would prefer if we...didn’t talk about this anymore. I do not like it, and I want to change the subject.”

“Are you being serious?” Brandon said strongly, probably the first real emotion he’d demonstrated that evening.

Ruth looked back at him with daggers. “I am completely serious. I don’t know what you all are thinking, talking about that poor girl and calling her remains and casually discussing chopping her up. It’s disgraceful.”

“You mean, while we stand over a bloody tooth and talk about whether or not it was murder?” Brandon snapped back at her.

“She was a human being!” Ruth snapped back.

“Who died three hundred years ago! This tooth is from today!” Brandon’s cheeks were flushed, and Kitty was reminded of just how tall he was when he moved toward Ruth and towered over her tiny round body. He flexed his arms again, this time unconsciously.

“You’re both right,” Kitty told them, thoughtfully. “We aren’t talking about something abstract here, we’re talking about real people.

“So let’s begin by working out what real people could have been in this lab, or on the site, and where this tooth might have come from. Bryan, who excavated this unit?”

Brown cleared his throat. “Um, that was Stella, she was doing trenching today.”

All eyes swiveled toward Stella.

“No, no, no! Not me! My teeth are all intact and accounted for,

right?” She pulled back her cheeks with her finger tips to indicate no missing teeth, her movements choppy and insistent.

“And then Oliver was in the field lab, cataloging, but I don’t think she handled this sample.”

“Let’s check the logs,” Kitty said to Bryan.

Careful logs were kept of every step of an excavation, almost like cataloging evidence from a crime scene. It was important to track not just where an artifact came from on a plan map, which showed the area of the excavation like a road map might, but also to track its location in three-dimensional space, where it sat in depth related to the surface. This allowed researchers to determine when a particular item was deposited, in addition to where.

Archaeologists also routinely recorded who handled particular artifacts, not only who had excavated it from what unit, but also who handled it in the lab and analyzed it after it was removed from the ground--also called the “archaeological context.” This ensured that if at any point there was uncertainty or, heaven forbid, contamination that they would know whom to ask and ideally to trace the source.

The goal was always to preserve the integrity of the evidence. Excavation was destruction, Kitty knew, because unlike a scientific experiment that was designed by necessity to be repeated and recreated, once an item was dug out of the ground, it couldn’t be UN-dug and put

back to check the results. It had to be done correctly the first time.

Kitty knew that Bryan Brown was a careful, meticulous researcher. He had degrees not only in anthropology and archaeology, but also in biochemistry, and took laborious notes in the field and in the lab. His work could be trusted to be accurate and thorough.

“Where is Olive now?” Kitty asked.

“She went back to our room,” Stella told her. “We’re room-mates.”

The girl looked at Kitty nervously.

“Do you want me to call her?”

Kitty looked at the clock. It was nearly 10 pm. “Not yet. Let’s keep looking at what we already know before we sound the alarm and start waking people up.”

Stella looked relieved. “OK, cool. She still gets pretty cranky, ever since--”

“Ever since she nearly threw up in our unit, you mean?” Brandon sneered.

Stella rounded on him and fairly spat, “Because you’re so mean to her! She’s smart, she’s really smart, you know that? And you just trash talk her all day!”

Brandon barked a cruel laugh. “She can’t take a joke, OK?”

“That’s not joking, and you know it,” Ruth said over Stella’s

continued spluttering. “You know there’s truth in humor. You like making her the butt of it, and it’s cruel.”

“Speaking of butt, have you seen Olive’s?” Brandon said, his off-hand nastiness obviously deliberate and all the more distasteful for it.

“Enough,” said Kitty with force. “Brandon, there is no place for any of that on an excavation. We don’t have room for ruffled feathers or power plays or mistakes.”

“I didn’t make a mistake,” he told her coldly.

“You make drama,” Kitty answered, standing her ground in the face of his determination, ignoring the color rising in Brandon’s cheeks. “You do it because you like to bully people, and it’s bad science.”

Brandon looked like he’d been slapped in the face. He had no reaction to Kitty calling him a bully, but her implication that he was practicing bad science made him step back.

Ruth looked like she could crow.

“What about you, Brandon?” Stella sneered. “Got all your teeth?”

He looked back and forth between the three women. Bryan stood nearby, swallowing repeatedly and looking ragged from the emo-

tion moving through the room.

After an extended pause, Brandon pulled back first one cheek and then the other, revealing his molars. All were intact.

“Satisfied?” he spat.

Kitty held his eyes. She nodded.

“Who was working sifting with you, Brandon?”

The young man looked away and sniffed in deeply.

“Hank,” he said shortly.

“And where is Hank now?” Kitty asked Bryan.

“I...well, I don’t know, actually. Brandon?”

Brandon shrugged. “I don’t know. He didn’t go back to the room, he was my ride. His car’s still outside.”

“You know his car is still outside?” Ruth asked suspiciously.

Brandon gave her a withering look. “I threw my gym bag in this morning and went to get it after we covered the unit today. The only reason I’m even in this lab right now is because I wanted to find him to get the keys, right?”

Stella spoke up. “Dr. Campbell?”

Kitty looked at her. The girl had lost all color again.

“Didn’t you say there was something special about the tooth, you know, that showed race or something?”

Ruth chimed in, “That Carabelli’s cusp, right Doctor?”

Kitty nodded. She had locked eyes with Bryan, who was pressing his lips together. Hard.

“That’s right,” Kitty said. The gears in her brain were working very quickly now.

“And doesn’t that, you know, indicate Native American heritage, and stuff?” Stella continued, sounding very young.

Kitty nodded again, Bryan mirroring the gesture.

“And isn’t...” Stella was all but whispering now, “isn’t Hank, like, part Cherokee or something?”

Brandon said quietly, and with very little attitude, “He’s three-quarters Creek Indian.”

Silence fell over the room as they all looked at one another, a silence that was broken suddenly when the lab door crashed open and a harried-looking man backed in awkwardly, carrying a banker’s box balanced on one hip.

He looked around over his shoulder, sweat pouring down one side of his face.

“Hey, someone want to give me a hand here?”

It was not Hank.