

Murder at Jamestown

Chapter Seven: The Natural World

Jamestowne Colony, 1624

These days, despite the fact that Jamestowne Colony still consisted of under one thousand souls, Jeremiah could easily go an entire week without seeing anyone else who had survived the Starving Time, as he had. The reminders of the girl in the cellar had become fewer and fewer over the years, and there were moments when he would shake himself with the realization that just for a bit, he had forgotten.

And well he should. Newly elected to the regional parliament, Jeremiah was a man of considerable standing in Jamestowne. The government for all His Majesty's colonies in the Americas met right there in the New Towne, though there was talk among some that it would soon be moved to Williamsburg, a handful of miles up the road on the mainland and the seat of the governor. Should that come to pass, Jere-

miah would be more politician than farmer, and his wife and children would see him far less frequently than they did now.

Jamestowne Colony had grown rapidly, far faster than any of the investors of the Virginia Company had expected when their ships turned into the harbor and forced the escaping settlers back to land. There had been no leadership and no food then, and desperation had made all their decisions for them. Today, there was a settlement that looked every inch an English town, and a governor to oversee it all.

Jeremiah looked about him, considering all he surveyed. Twenty-two large and prosperous houses inside the limits of the town, and many homesteads beyond it. Three stores, selling every good that could be gotten on this side of the ocean, from candles to cottons to furnishings. A church. A court. Though some days Jeremiah could hardly tell the difference between those latter two.

Today, however, was not the day for judgment or regret. Today was a day that sat bittersweet on Jeremiah's tongue: for now Olaudah had repaid his indenture, and was to be released from Jeremiah's service to enter Jamestowne as a full citizen.

The economics of this transition troubled Jeremiah. Not a learned man, he at least had the sweat memory of the days under a brutal sun alongside Olaudah to remind him constantly that the work

of farming in the New World was constant and back-breaking. Every crop they had tried here, it seemed, had resisted their staunchest efforts to produce wealth—or even something of value to send back to Mother England. Every crop save one: tobacco.

She was a bitter weed, tobacco, and a harsh taskmaster. She required coddling in the fields, the perfect balance of sun and rain, and a watchful eye in the drying house to prevent mold and rot from stealing away the hours of labor spent growing it. Before she was dried, she was worthless, but once the leaves had given up their moisture, they were worth every ounce their weight in solid gold, and then some. The masses back in England could scarce get enough of the stuff, as leaf or snuff, and there were constant cries of “More!” With every ship that came into port.

Jeremiah had become far more wealthy and respected than he and his brother had ever dared to dream. He wondered how long that would last should anyone ever learn of the choices he had made in that dark cellar over a dozen years ago.

Perhaps it was this that fed his convictions as a merchant and a landowner. Perhaps it was the gnawing guilt that influenced his vote in the aggregate, and influenced his treatment of Olaudah in the specific. He knew that there was talk of bringing slave labor over from the

Caribbean, and that when he reckoned the costs involved, it would be a far better investment to bring strong backs from the islands or even from Africa, as some hoped to do, than to indenture another servant like Olaudah only to have him pay back the investment and take what he had learned to start his own farm someplace else.

But after that most grisly meal, Jeremiah could not bring himself to feed his own children off the backs of enslaved men, even if they were hardly human, as the auctioneers said.

Instead, he stood on the street today with documents in his hand, and strode purposefully toward Olaudah’s lodgings. He had one paper to signify that the black man was free. He brought another as a contract, to hire back Olaudah’s labor at wages, to ask the man—whom Jeremiah hoped to call friend—to reinvest in Jeremiah’s own farm rather than starting another. Perhaps it would be one step closer to redemption. The law may not agree, but Jeremiah had learned through his bitter tears that there was little about any of them different under the skin.

Jamestown, Present Day

Kitty stared and tried to make sense of what she was seeing. A blue magnolia on a scrap of paper, clutched in the hand of a dead student who had no reason to be dead. No business being dead, as far as she was concerned. Seriously, Hank, so inconvenient.

The petals of the magnolia were broad, and even from this stylized outline, she could imagine the velvety softness of each creamy blossom, the waxy coating on the leaves, the heady aroma of the flowers with their aggressive stamens rising above the bowl of fragrance. Magnolias were a symbol of the South, one that Kitty had always treasured. Their appearance on each massive tree, shaped like bushes with branches arcing toward the ground but towering over the landscape at 80, 100, 120 feet tall, was a harbinger of hot weather, and the scent could float for miles around.

The magnolia in the photo had no aroma. Neither did the body in the copy room behind her, where it lay unreasonably uninteresting—no movement, no scent, no life.

Kitty used the photo editor to zoom in on the image. It was grossly out of focus, but the resolution was sublime—at least 4000 pixels wide, this image could be emblazoned on a billboard if necessary.

Is that what it will take to figure out how Hank ended up like this? Kitty wondered.

She sat gazing at the image, working to make sense of it. Like every other lock she picked, she began by visualizing the parts, separate from the whole. Tumblers and mechanisms spoke the language of her picks because Kitty took the time to think like they did, to understand why they were where they were and what purpose each piece served in the system. Archaeology was the same way: no artifact, no soil layer, no carbonized seed fragment appeared in an excavation on its own, but rather arrived by some form of human intervention, and each brought a story along with it. Every one of them had a purpose and a message, if she were willing to listen long enough to hear it.

The magnolia wasn't in Hank's hand because it wanted to be there—a printed piece of paper may carry a message, but Kitty wasn't so far gone to puzzle solving that she believed the paper had its own will. Hank did, though. And it was Hank's hand that had clutched the scrap as he was murdered and stuffed behind a copier machine. Hank wanted the message that scrap of paper contained to be communicated to someone, and Kitty was the operator on the other end of this short-wave radio. She was eager to receive the message.

As she mentally chewed away at what she was seeing, she

clicked through the other images, looking for another angle or a closer shot that might give her additional details or help her gain some kind of insight into Hank's thoughts before he died, when he had held this piece of paper in his hand with deliberation and intent.

The other photos, all as woefully out-of-focus as the picture with the magnolia in it, showed little of the angle Brandon had captured. How had he managed to get EVERY image so blurry? And how had he not realized that he was taking picture after picture of carpet and scraps?

Scraps. That's what Kitty was seeing over and over again: not only the petals from the flowers that had been tossed on Hank's body, but small pieces of paper, under the body.

Under it.

Alright, Kitty, she thought to herself. Under. That's context.

In archaeology, context is everything. It isn't only the appearance of an artifact in an excavation unit that matters—it is the relationship of that artifact to the other items found in the same unit, or to the layers of soil that are carefully sketched and drawn and catalogued as the dig continues. Kitty very clearly remembered her first field school experience, where she had come back from a toilet break down a deserted arroyo and kicked her boot against a stone paint palette that dated back to the days of the Ancestral Puebloans, the ancient Native

peoples of the American Southwest. The palette was a piece of stone that had once been used to mix pigments for decorating bodies during religious ritual or ceramics to be fired in the kiln, over 1000 years ago on the very land where she was working, and carried into the canyon presumably on a flash flood over the previous winter. It gave Kitty a thrill to have held in her hand a tool that another woman, maybe her own age, had once held and used to give color and meaning to her world. And Kitty's discovery had meant absolutely nothing to the scientists who were excavating, because they had no idea where on the site it had come from. Without context, without an established relationship between where that palette had lay in the earth and each of the other artifacts discovered nearby, a means of establishing the relative age of the piece based on its relationship to other pieces of known timeframe, the precious paint palette had exactly zero value as a tool to answer questions or reveal truth about how the Ancestral Puebloan peoples had once lived.

Archaeological context was what told Kitty, for example, that a piece of pottery buried ten meters deep was older than one buried five meters deep, because the more shallow piece must have been left on top of the soil that covered the one buried more deeply, as time passed and additional layers of soil built up, in much the same way the layers of rock forming the Grand Canyon had grown. Different span of time,

identical concept. It was this same principle of temporal deposition—the establishment of a timeline based on the order in which items were deposited on top of one another in the ground—that told Kitty without any doubt that the paper Hank clutched in his fingers had once been whole, and that it was torn to pieces before he landed behind the copy machine.

And for Kitty, the tumblers she was picturing in her mind began to take form.

Hank was killed because he knew something. He knew something and had a piece of paper to document it, was holding it in his hands immediately before he died. It was illogical to assume the two had no connection. Something on this piece of paper got Hank killed and the magnolia was the clue.

“Kitty?”

Bryan’s voice was so near to hear she could almost feel his breath, and even after years of being one step up from a cat burglar—she never TOOK anything, she told herself, breaking wasn’t the same as entering—the tension of the evening had taken its toll, so much so that Kitty leapt, juggling the laptop, and emitted a loud yelp.

Bryan scrambled back on this hindquarters where he’d been crouching, attempting to catch himself with his hands and finally ending up squarely on his rump across the corridor from where Kitty sat. The

two stared at one another, both breathing hard.

Frowning at her friend, Kitty took a deep breath and steadied herself. Bryan took a couple of gulping breaths and tried to stand, struggling a bit and finally just deciding to scoot on his bottom to sit next to Kitty. He folded his hands in his lap primly, stretching his legs in front of himself, and appeared to have forgotten whatever mission had sent him down the hall to find her. He seemed instead focused primarily on not getting yelled at for frightening them both.

“Find anything in the photos?” he asked with an innocent look at the laptop screen.

Determining to let it slide, after a slight pause Kitty replied, “Nothing. But also something.”

Bryan screwed up his face as if trying to make sense of this.

“Nothing in the photos?” he tried to clarify.

“The photos are, almost entirely, garbage.”

In answer to his look of alarm, Kitty showed him the screen and scrolled through the blurry images.

“But...you can’t see Hank!” Bryan sounded deeply worried.

“They’re all like this,” Kitty told him, nodding. “And that’s not the only thing.”

Bryan turned to her with the air of a man awaiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Some of them are missing,” she said.

She didn’t want to, but she sort of enjoyed the drama of that.

Suck it, Miss Marple!

Bryan’s hands traveled, almost of their own will, to his hair and raked their way through it, leaving the strands in disarray and standing up slightly.

“Missing,” he said with confusion. “How can they be missing?”

Kitty shrugged, “Beats me.”

Bryan sat and shook his head very slowly from side to side, his hands working against one another in front of his breastbone, like a cloistered nun saying her morning prayers.

“Wait,” he asked, spreading his palms—now bright pink from the friction—in front of him as if halting traffic. “Which ones are missing?”

Kitty scrolled back to the start of the images, over-shooting by a bit and then working back through some shots of the lab and the tooth they had examined earlier in the evening. And half a lifetime ago.

“Look,” she showed Bryan. “See? The first ones, here, show Hank behind the copier. But remember? We had Brandon take pictures with the copier in place first, THEN we moved it to make super certain that Hank was...”

She trailed off at the look on Bryan’s face and finished lamely,

“No longer with us.”

“And now the pictures from before we moved the copier...”

“Not here,” Kitty said with deep portent. Stop it, she reminded herself. DON’T enjoy this. A man is dead, this isn’t just a puzzle to solve.

“Then...where are they?” Bryan asked, somewhere between unbelieving and helpless.

“What about Brandon?” Kitty asked abruptly.

Bryan looked at her blankly.

“He’s been a nightmare up until now, bad enough that even I noticed. It was impossible to pair him with anyone else on a crew, and he sent Stella home in tears more than once.”

Bryan nodded agreement and seemed to be reliving the unpleasant memory.

“But since we found the tooth...” Kitty prompted.

She waited and watched as Bryan churned through the past few hours in his mind. He lacked confidence, she knew, but he didn’t lack brains.

“Huh,” he grunted. “I didn’t even notice, I guess I was just...”

“Not missing it?”

“Yeah, I mean, who needs the added headache?” This last came out with an upturned lilt in his voice at the end, making the question

legitimate rather than rhetorical.

Kitty nodded. She agreed. Brandon had made a reputation for himself from Day One on the site as a young man who had been spoiled to the point of being adored, his entire life. He had every advantage—physical, educational, financial. And he clearly had perfected the craft of using those to the utmost in order to get what he wanted. He also showed very little remorse when it came to manipulating the emotions of others, if it meant he could get a little closer to his own goals.

Bryan continued his train of thought: “But you’re right, ever since the tooth, he’s been helpful, knowledgeable, almost even nice.”

Bryan’s face revealed his astonishment, either at the change in Brandon’s personality or at his own failure to take better notice of it.

Kitty nodded, thoughtfully. “Yeah. Exactly. And my question is: why?”

“Do you think it has something to do with the missing photos?” Asked Bryan, following Kitty’s logic.

She waggled her head a bit, an uncertain gesture that neither admitted nor denied the idea.

“He’s the one who took them,” she pointed out. “But I admit that doesn’t mean he also deleted them. I don’t know.”

“What do the photos have to do with the tooth?” Bryan asked her.

Kitty looked over at him, confused.

“You said Brandon’s behavior changed after we found the tooth. But the photos aren’t OF the tooth. So why would he do something to the photos AND act different after we found the tooth? What do they have to do with one another?”

Kitty practically stared at him. In truth, she hadn’t really been thinking along those lines. It had never really entered her mind that the tooth might be the root cause of Brandon’s change in personality, it was just a convenient way of measuring time over the past day when so much had taken place. But Bryan made an excellent and insightful point: what if there WAS a connection between the two?

“I wasn’t even thinking that,” she confessed to him. “I was thinking more about what I CAN see in these photos, even though they’re ruined—by Brandon or by someone else, either way.”

Bryan turned his attention back to the screen and looked more closely. Leaning in, Kitty navigated to the photo she’d been concentrating on, and zoomed in to show Bryan what she’d seen: the scrap of paper with the magnolia on it.

“What am I looking at, exactly?” he asked her.

“Hank had a piece of paper in his hand when he died,” Kitty told him.

Bryan let out an odd noise, like his mouth was suddenly a bal-

loon losing air and his lips were vibrating from it.

“I’m living a James Patterson novel,” he said softly, almost sadly.

Kitty’s excitement drowned out his exclamation. “Look here,”

Bryan screwed up his face and leaned in closer to the screen, suddenly with the air of an old man who has forgotten his glasses.

“See? In his hand?” Kitty had to hold back her excitement. It was something akin to when she uncovered charcoal fragments in the soil at an excavation—in her speciality, charcoal meant something had burned, which almost almost meant that food had been prepared in that location, often learning tantalizing glimpses into the diet of the people who had used a place, or the season of year when they had lived there. It was just a hint, but it so often led to more exciting things. And that was the sensation Kitty was having now and trying with only limited success to hide: that she was on the cusp of discovering another clue.

“What, the paper?”

“Yeah, and look what’s on it, see?” Kitty prodded her friend.

“Looks like a flower,” Bryan said skeptically.

“A magnolia,” she clarified.

“Ok…” Bryan’s voice trailed off. He seemed to be waiting for Kitty to explain.

“Does that mean anything to you?”

Bryan looked back at her blankly, his eyes shifting very slightly from side to side.

“Should it?” he asked.

Kitty drooped, disappointed. “Well, I was hoping it would. Can you think of any reason why Hank would have been holding a piece of paper with a graphic of a magnolia blossom on it?”

“A graphic?” Bryan repeated, his face thoughtful.

“I mean, it’s pretty stylized, the lines are all a single color. Seems like some kind of outline or graphic more than a picture, don’t you think?”

“Like, a logo?” Bryan asked her.

Kitty frowned a bit and looked more closely at the photo, zooming in again until it filled the entire screen.

She nodded as she considered it, then said, “Yeah, maybe. And look at the paper, right?”

Bryan looked again at where Kitty was now pointing.

“See how it’s watermarked? Could this be letterhead?”

“Oh, sure!” Bryan exclaimed, suddenly lit up with insight.

Kitty waited for him to share his realization with her.

Silence for a full three seconds, then a jump as Bryan noticed Kitty’s expectant look.

“Oh, I just mean, yeah, that must be the consulting firm. Mag-

nolia something.”

“Consulting firm,” Kitty said. It was a statement, and it took work for her to keep the irritation out of her voice. How could it have taken Bryan that long to work out that the graphic had been from a piece of letterhead for a company he obviously new about?

Was Kitty even right to trust Bryan?

“Right, so, you know how this whole building was built by Archaeological Virginia, and they’ve got the whole partnership with the National Parks? And it’s not always super friendly, there might be some disagreement from time to time and stuff.”

“And stuff?”

“Just, you know, professional toes getting stepped on, who has jurisdiction or whatever, that kind of thing. You know archaeologists, Kitty, bunch of princesses, they all have their little part of the sandbox and they don’t like to share toys.”

Kitty blinked at the bitter tone at the end of Bryan’s speech. She didn’t disagree with him, but she’d always seen this aspect of archaeology more as an inside joke than anything else—most of the scientists she knew were very collegial and friendly with one another.

But it was certainly true that there were plenty in the profession who would tie themselves to train tracks with an oncoming diesel engine rather than share credit on an excavation with another investigator.

“And they called in a consultant to, what, mediate?” She asked Bryan.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “It was right before I got here, so I wasn’t part of the drama, but I guess the Parks Service felt like maybe Archaeological Virginia was being a little stingy with their share of the funding? And so they called for a review.”

“Did Greg Wood have anything to do with the consultant?”

Bryan appeared to think through his answer. “He must have, I guess. The guy’s name was Marty. Real peach, I mean, this guy has zero personality, Kitty, I’m telling you.”

“Hang on,” Kitty said, rapidly scrolling through images on the laptop. She paused as she came to one, zoomed in, then shook her head in irritation as she moved forward to the next image and the one after that. Finally, she found what she was looking for and turned the screen toward Bryan so he could see it, as well.

The photo, with the fuzzy pixels of Hank’s hip in the background, was magnified to show the pieces of paper on the floor under and around him—specifically, two scraps that were barely connected to one another, as if they’d been torn apart incompletely.

On one was a cursive M with the scribble of a remaining signature flowing off the torn edge and onto the other scrap, where it joined with a loosely-drawn G, followed by more scrawling signature.

“What’s Marty’s last name? Do you know?” Kitty asked Bryan.

“Couldn’t forget it if I tried: Ganguly,” he told her. “Tough name to take through life. What kind of name is that, anyway?” He shook his head.

Kitty looked steadily at Bryan. “It’s Indian.”

Bryan blinked back at her. “Like, Navajo?”

“No,” she replied. “Like, Eastern Indian, from the Indian sub-continent, Indian. Specifically, I think it’s a Gujarati name.”

“Why do you know that?” Bryan half-whispered, almost awed.

“Why do you hate Ruth?”

Bryan moved his body away from the laptop monitor and away from Kitty at this non-sequitur.

“Uh, she’s...I mean...” he stammered.

He took a deep breath and said in a rush, as if eager to get it out quickly, “She reminds me of my mother and it makes me uncomfortable. I can’t concentrate when she’s around.”

He let out a huff of breath.

Kitty nodded. “What is it about her that makes you think of your mother?”

“Besides that she gossips and tells really long involved sto-

ries that she doesn’t need to tell about people we have never met, in between listing every plant in her garden and what day she put them there? Just like my mother?”

Kitty waited.

Bryan’s shoulders sagged as he appeared to think it over.

“She’s crazy, that’s all.”

“Crazy how?” Kitty prodded.

Bryan half-shrugged, half-heartedly. “She’s super controlling, you know? Like always up in everyone’s business, almost smothering in the way she’s ‘helping,’ except it isn’t really helping, just over-protective helicoptering.”

Kitty nodded, thoughtfully, her eyes far away. Another tumbler fell into place.

“And what about Stella? How well did she really know Hank?”

Bryan looked slightly dizzy.

“I think she met him here, after they both arrived for the internship,” he told her, his face confused. “Does that matter?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Kitty answered. She was mulling things over, fishing around inside the tumblers to see which one would give way.

“Did this Marty guy, did he have an office here?” She asked.

Bryan nodded. “A part-time one, he shared with Greg’s assistant. Just a desk and a file cabinet, I don’t think there’s much else there.”

“A file cabinet?”

Bryan told her, “Yeah, a small one in the corner?” He seemed to have given up following her logic.

How much could she share with Bryan? He obviously had strong feelings about both Ruth and Brandon, feelings that didn’t necessarily seem to line up with what Kitty had observed herself. Could he have other reasons for his dislike, beyond the usual son-of-a-controlling-mother hangups? Could she trust him? That was the real question.

One thing she knew without doubt: Kitty needed help. For a woman who had secrets to keep and worked hard to keep them, who even in the world of archaeology which relied on teams of workers to complete excavations during the season and on time, Kitty was usually a lone wolf. Asking for help was going to be hard.

Almost as hard as admitting her secret.

“Remember the tooth, Bryan?” Kitty asked him.

His slight shudder was confirmation that he did.

“Remember what was special about it?”

“The cusp of Carabelli,” he said immediately. Bryan wasn’t talented with people, but with facts he was still an ace—and Kitty was counting on that now.

“I was part of a study a few years ago,” Kitty told him. “One of the lead investigators, actually. We were working with skeletal remains from the American Southwest, and analyzing C3/C4 markers to nail down seasonal diet.”

Kitty didn’t bother to explain to Bryan that C3 and C4 markers were carbon isotope anomalies that appeared in human bone and directly related to the proportion of corn versus grass-family grains an individual consumed in their lifetime—which could reveal, for example, whether a particular skeleton belonged to someone who lived on the ancient plains where wheat was plentiful or whether he had lived in the Southwest and farmed corn. It might also help reveal if a particular tribe or village had moved with the seasons between campsites, and perhaps have eaten more corn in the winter as a stored food, but more grassy grains in the harvest when it was fresh. She trusted Bryan was more than familiar with the implications of the research.

“What we found was a population with a high incidence of Carabelli’s cusp, which isn’t that unusual in Native tribes,” she continued.

Bryan nodded, and looked relieved that the conversation had veered into territory where he could easily follow Kitty's train of thought.

"So we went the extra step of identifying other populations who might have a similar common occurrence of that one dental marker, the extra cusp on their tooth, not just the skeletal remains we were working with. Then we could compare the C3/C4 levels and confirm or disprove our findings."

Bryan nodded again. He was following closely as Kitty laid out her research.

"Guess what other people group has a very high incidence of Carabelli's cusp, in addition to Native American tribes?" Kitty asked him.

She waited and watched his face. His eyebrows came together and his lips pressed into a tight line. Then, almost against his will he said, "Indian subcontinent?"

Kitty nodded. "Specifically, Gujarati."

Bryan only looked sad.

"I'm going to need to see what's in that file cabinet, before the police get here," she told Bryan.

"Why?" he asked, surprised. "What could possibly be in there? And why not just let them handle it?"

"Because of rue, for regret. And pansies, for thoughts unspoken.

Bryan, I have a feeling that if we let them get here and start digging, the wrong person is going to be accused of murdering Hank."

Bryan jumped at the word "murder" and looked utterly helpless.

"Kitty," he said, his voice pleading. "It's just going to be locked, they lock all the file cabinets around here to keep the Other Side from poking their noses in."

Kitty took a deep breath and looked at Bryan.

"About that," she said, closing her eyes and steeling herself for what she was about to say. "The lock isn't going to be a problem."