

Murder at Jamestown

Chapter Six: Rue The Day

Jamestowne Colony, 1621

It had taken two years, but opening the gates had at last led to new freedom. A New Towne, in fact. Jeremiah stood in the center of the street and drew in a deep breath. Today, his crops would be sold and he would discover a new station in life. It was more than he could have dreamed, and everything his brother had hoped for. Hoped for but never survived to see.

With the help of Olaudah, he had tilled those fields in the blistering sun, day in and day out. Sometimes overnight, to protect them from both animals who would devour it in a single evening, and from the local natives, who would raid their crops when the rain was overdue. Every scrap, every ounce of grain had been nurtured with the sweat of their brows, and bore the mark of their dedication.

As delighted as Jeremiah found that he was at the prospect of becoming a very rich man at the sale of this, his first generous harvest, he also knew that his time as a rich man would be very short indeed if Olaudah achieved his goal: in just three more years, the black man would have met the terms of his indenture, and he would no longer be bound to service for Jeremiah, who would find himself with all the same land or even more, but without the able hands of his servant to help him care for and defend it.

Quite literally, Jeremiah was at a crossroads.

New Towne was the offshoot of the original settlement, and as soon as the gates had been opened and settlers permitted to leave the fort, they had poured into the fertile land and staked claim to it. Their fervor to be free of the stifling walls of the fort was the product of their years seeing it as both protectorate and prison, but none of them could have felt so quite as strongly as Jeremiah, who was haunted every day by the face of the girl, the girl they'd left in the cellar.

Even the sweet faces of his babes, more genial now they weren't at the breast and could call him Father and greet him when he arrived home, could never take away the memory of that first winter in Jamestowne. If anyone had yearned and pleased with the Lord above for release from the Old Towne and the chance to reach into the

wider world for something new and green and growing, it had been he.

Every penny had been sunk back into his land. Every farthing he had earned from the sale of his meager crops had gone to purchase more and better seed, to plan greater and deeper furrows, and to finance the labor of Olaudah, allowing him to work more crops and dream of better days.

It was all in the wagon now, a wagon built by his own two hands and with much swearing. With the road to New Towne stretching before him, and the road to the fort stretching from left to right, Jeremiah must decide: where would his fortune be found?

Jamestown, Present Day

Bryan sat with his back against the copy room wall, half crouched and rocking slightly. It looked to Kitty like a scene from a movie, except she knew Bryan, and knew his deep kindness. He was wracked with sadness over this dead kid.

“I wasn’t...I didn’t...” he said.

Ruth, who was squatting roundly next to him, rubbing his shoulders in a motherly manner, said, “Didn’t what, Dr. Brown? What is it you didn’t do?”

Kitty admired the woman’s softness, and suspected that her concern over the people around her was genuine, but was also convinced that Ruth loved the drama and attention, and fed off being close to the action—but not directly implicated.

“I should have...been watching...” Bryan said between sucking gasps for air.

Kitty looked over at him sympathetically. The poor guy felt responsible, but how could he have known? What happened to Hank...

“It was your fault, though,” Greg whispered savagely from where he still stood near the door.

All eyes turned to look at the man, his face twisted and cruel, his arms crossed over his chest and chin thrust haughtily in the air.

“Oh, Dr. Wood, oh my, you can’t mean that, this was not Dr. Brown’s fault, I mean, how could it be?” Sputtered Ruth from where her hand had frozen on Bryan’s back.

“The hell I don’t,” Greg retorted. “You said it yourself, Brown: it was your job to watch him, right? This is your crew, so anything that happens here is your fault, bottom line.”

There was total silence except for the snuffling coming from Bryan. Ruth shook her head regretfully, a look of disappointment on her face. Kitty stared at Wood, and just as she was about to open her

mouth and defend Bryan, another voice spoke up.

“Dr. Wood, you’re an ass,” Brandon said succinctly from where he leaned against the door jamb. He had put the camera down on the counter along the far side of the room, and his hands were casually placed in his pants pockets, but Kitty could see that his biceps were tense and his jaw was firm. When Wood turned his baleful glare to look at Brandon, though, the younger man averted his gaze.

“Excuse me?”

The voice was so tiny that they might have all overlooked it, but instead the tension in the room was so high that all of them jumped and turned, suddenly on edge.

Stella stood in the doorway, having crept up silently behind Brandon, who went white but never took his hands from his pants pockets. He was good at keeping his cool, Kitty noted.

Ruth wrestled momentarily between two individuals in need of coddling, and in the end leapt up and reached for Stella, embracing the tiny woman in her soft hug.

Stella, for her part, accepted it with stiff arms.

She looked over Ruth’s shoulder, past where Kitty stood in front of the recently-moved copy machine, and her eyes fixed on the arms and torso of the body against the wall.

“It’s him, isn’t it,” she said, more a statement than a question.

“It’s Hank.”

Kitty said nothing.

“Oh, honey, oh, it’s alright, don’t you look over there, now,” cooed Ruth in her ear, while patting her on the back.

Stella shook her shoulders to free herself from Ruth’s grip and took a step closer to the copier. Ruth released her reluctantly but stood in the doorway with her arms raised as if expecting Stella to return and fill them.

Stella’s eyes never left Hank’s body. Massive tears spilled down her cheeks, leaving streaks of red flesh behind from their heat as they poured over one another in a continuous stream.

Everyone stared, frozen, seemingly uncertain of what to do for the girl. In the background, Kitty could hear Bryan’s snuffling, so desperately loud in contrast to Stella’s silent weeping.

“Are those...flowers?” She asked.

Kitty nodded.

“They’re pansies, sweetie, we don’t know why they’re there,” Ruth said gently behind the girl. Ruth was wringing her hands, as if she didn’t quite know what to do with them when she didn’t have someone to soothe.

“Pansies are for thoughts,” Stella said in a monotone, almost as if she wasn’t thinking before speaking.

“I’m so sorry, honey, what’s that?” Ruth asked. Greg scoffed from behind her, clearly feeling impatient.

Kitty thought he looked a little ill at ease, now that she gave him a little attention, not like he was irritated, but more like he was... scared.

“That’s what my grandmother said, that pansies are for thoughts unspoken,” Stella repeated, still in that flat voice. Her eyes were locked onto the portion of Hank’s body that was visible behind the machine.

Kitty let out a soft gasp, “Language of flowers, I’m so stupid!”

Bryan wiped his nose on his sleeve noisily, and looked up at her, his eyes swollen and red, just as the rest of the group turned their attention away from Stella and over to Kitty.

She stood for a moment before realizing how many eyes were upon her. Her face was working, lips parted and eyes narrowed as her mind raced furiously to make sense of the pieces in front of her.

A body behind the copier, looking as if it were shoved there. Bits of paper debris on the corpse, along with pansies. The language of flowers. Thoughts unspoken.

“Brandon, where are those photos?” She asked suddenly.

The tall young man gestured toward the counter where the cam-

era sat waiting.

“Bryan, I need a laptop,” she told him.

Looking broken, he nodded wordlessly.

Kitty looked around her, feeling the tingling in her fingertips that told her she was getting close to...something. She met each individual’s eyes in turn, noting that Greg shifted his glance at the last minute, and that Ruth allowed her gaze to bore into Kitty’s as if attempting to send her a silent message.

Stella swayed slightly on her feet, and then collapsed into audible sobs, shaking Kitty away from her thoughts.

Kitty reached out at the last second and caught the girl, who hadn’t even tried to break her own fall, but had wrapped her arms around herself and was gasping for breath.

“Oh my word, is she choking?” Gaspd a startled Ruth.

“I just....I just....” sobbed Stella.

Kitty looked at her, and the girl’s eyes were screwed tightly shut.

“I just never told him,” she sobbed quietly.

“You have got to be kidding me,” muttered Greg unkindly, under his breath.

Even Kitty gave a blink of surprise. What was this, a Shakespearean revival? Was this girl professing her unspoken love over a

dead body?

“Sweetheart, what didn’t you tell who?” Ruth asked her. She patted the younger woman over and over on the back between her shoulder blades, almost reflexively, while looking around at the others with a helpless expression on her face.

“She means Hank, because she was all cut up over him,” Brandon said from where he stood, though without the unkind dismissiveness in his voice that Greg had shown. “I mean, she swiped right HARD, know what I’m saying?”

Stella let out a stifled sob. She was dead weight in Kitty’s arms, and Kitty felt she had seen enough death for one day.

Grabbing Stella by the elbows and making sure she had a firm grip, Kitty hauled the young woman to her feet and turned her body until they were face to face.

“You cared about Hank, didn’t you?” She asked Stella.

Stella’s eyes filled with even more tears and she nodded wordlessly, her face turning slightly and seemingly against her will toward the body on the floor. It

Kitty turned Stella’s chin back toward her with one hand, working deliberately to hold eye contact with the girl.

“And did he feel the same way about you?”

Stella wept silently but said nothing.

“Uh, Doc? No way he knew. Like, at all,” said Brandon.

Kitty didn’t look at him, but directed her words in response:

“What does that mean?”

“Hank was the kindest boy,” Ruth intoned, her voice lowered as if at a funeral. Which, Kitty thought, in a way she was. Or a wake.

“He wouldn’t have thought anyone would single him out, would he? He just went along and did his best, he was thoughtful and sweet, I mean, we all noticed it, he wasn’t like the rest of us. Always wanted to do the right thing, and was so considerate of everyone.”

“And that means he wouldn’t have known she was chasing him like a Taylor Swift fan?” Greg drawled sarcastically. “Maybe he was a good guy AND he knew she had the hots for him.”

Stella rounded on Greg and stepped forward until her face was in his—even from six inches shorter, she anger formed a barrier around her that pushed him back against the wall.

“Don’t you EVER, EVER say anything like that about him again, you hear me? Or about me. You have NOTHING to say, understand?”

Her vivid anger was a sight to behold, and she seemed suddenly much larger than her diminutive stature. Her rage filled the room.

Greg, if possible, went even whiter than before. To his credit, he held her gaze as she bored into him, but Kitty could see his Adam’s

apple quiver as he swallowed and affected a shrug of disinterest.

Greg was not as good at playing it cool as Brandon, it seemed.

Without even pausing to make a transition, Stella rounded on Kitty and this time took the older woman by the shoulders--and surprise.

“Why, Doctor Campbell? Why would anyone ever hurt him? He was the best guy, I mean, really the best, he was funny and smart and kind, and he never made fun of me or made me feel ridiculous... why would anyone want to hurt him??”

“And why would they put flowers on him afterward?” Bryan said, almost as if he couldn’t help himself in the face of Stella’s outburst of emotion.

“Right??” Now she rounded on Bryan, seeking some sense of solidarity, it seemed. “Why do that? I mean, what does that mean?”

“Those shouldn’t have been there,” Greg said, the words bursting out of him.

Kitty looked over at him and his face seemed even whiter than before.

He stared back at her, then said, “I just mean, what the hell? None of this makes any sense, and we are WAY above our paygrade messing with this stuff.”

His haughty look and anxious manner had returned. He fiddled

with his cuffs, avoiding meeting anyone’s eye.

“It was YOU!” Stella’s voice had risen to a fevered pitch, and even after her previous outburst, it took everyone by surprise. Kitty immediately looked to Greg, assuming this was who Stella meant, but was surprised to see the shock on his face as he followed Stella’s pointing finger--extended toward Brandon.

Brandon, for his part, rolled his eyes and kept his hands in his pockets.

“Listen, midget,” he began.

Stella cut him off. “NO! No more, no more teasing, no more names, no more making fun of me.”

She was red in the face and wild with fury, out of control to Kitty’s eyes. Stella seemed capable of...well, anything. And that wasn’t a good thing in the cramped quarters of the copy room.

Stella was advancing on Brandon menacingly, a sight that would have been ridiculous were the circumstances any different: her willowy form in its cut-off jean shorts and too-cool tee, earrings flashing in the fluorescent light, was miniscule next to the strapping six feet plus that Brandon represented, and even in his long-sleeved shirt, he was clearly far stronger than she.

Kitty watched, fascinated, and not entirely sure what to do next. The pair were so grossly mis-matched that it was unfathomable that

Stella was a threat to Brandon.

That was, until Stella raised her petite hand and slapped Brandon full across the mouth.

The tall young man recoiled with shock and instinctively lashed out to grab Stella's wrist. Kitty was amazed to see that not only did the tiny girl not back down, she rounded on Brandon with a sharp kick to the shin, followed immediately by a jab to the ribs with her opposite hand.

Brandon released the wrist he was holding to grab his own ribs, then used his free arm to extend outward and block Stella from striking him again. He placed it squarely on her forehead, and her arms were short enough that she was unable to reach him with her fists, though she stepped one foot back and appeared ready to land another kick when Bryan stepped between them, beet ready and sweating and, Kitty noted with chagrin, weepy-eyed.

"Stop! Stop, now, please!" Bryan's voice was pleading.

Ruth in the background was flapping her hands on either side of her face as if batting away a mosquito, and her lips were rounded in an astonished O. Kitty saw that Ruth's eyes, however, were bright with fascination.

Greg laughed out loud and even clapped his hands once or twice before folding his arms back over his chest, a broad grin on his face and

a cruel glint in his eyes.

"Please," Bryan begged. "Tonight has been...awful...enough. Please, no more."

Brandon looked over at the weeping man and grimaced. "Dude, I will if she will."

"I won't!" shouted Stella, shifting her weight and aiming to take another kick.

"You will," Kitty told her, breaking her silence at last. "Stella, stop."

Stella took three deep breaths, and then dropped her fists by her side. Brandon released the hold he had on her forehead, leaving a red mark the size of his palm behind on her delicate skin.

Stella let out a small sob, and her shoulders slumped.

"I just think..." she began. She gulped a deep breath and shook her head.

"I just think we shouldn't say anything bad about him."

Kitty nodded as Ruth stepped forward and put her arm around Stella's shoulders. This time, the crying young woman leaned into her and laid her head on Ruth's shoulder, where the older woman stroked her hair gently and led her away from Brandon.

The look Ruth cast over her shoulder at the tall man, who was still massaging his rib cage, made it clear whose fault she thought the

altercation was.

“Well, this is just better than late night TV, right?” Greg said nastily.

The entire group tensed up again, and Kitty cut over the sound of raised voices on all sides. “Enough, enough, everyone. That’s it for tonight.”

Reluctantly, they all calmed down and turned their attention toward her. Bryan was frowning and wiping his eyes, but his body language made it clear he was ceding leadership to Kitty--a decision the other people in the room had clearly already come to, given their body language.

“It’s late,” Kitty told them in the calmest voice she could muster. Even when working to keep their attention--and keep them from attacking one another--she couldn’t shake off the knowledge that there was a dead human body mere feet from where she stood, and that she was consumed with the desire to learn more.

“We are going to call the police,” she began, only to be interrupted.

“About time,” Greg said.

“You know, you are just Captain One-Liner tonight,” Bryan said, showing his own fatigue as aggression. “Why don’t you just shut up and let her talk?”

It would have been much more impressive if his tone hadn’t been quite so pleading.

“Are we really, Dr. Campbell? Calling the police, I mean?” Ruth asked, still holding Stella like a mama bird with her chick.

Kitty nodded. “We don’t need more proof that he’s dead. He has no pulse, we couldn’t have saved him. We have photos, and witnesses. It’s time to call the authorities.”

Bryan nodded sadly, and Kitty could see him trying not to look at Hank’s body.

“In the meantime, it’s very, very late. We’ve all seen...more than most people should see in a lifetime. I think everyone should go on and get some sleep.”

“Wait, what?” Brandon said, looking at Kitty with surprise. He seemed to forget the pain in his side, and raked his glance around the room to see if anyone else was as shocked as he.

“Get some sleep, she said,” Bryan told him, reaching over to make a half-hearted attempt to pat the muscular young man on the bicep. “She’s right, we should all go to bed. We can’t help him now.”

Stella let out a loud sniff, and Ruth clucked over her some more. Brandon’s face was exasperated. “You don’t make any sense, any of you.”

Kitty looked at Brandon questioningly.

“Twenty minutes ago, this is like, a crime scene, or something and you’ve got me taking photos and we’re all in a hurry to move the furniture, but now we should just go home? And what, leave him here while we go to sleep?”

His hands were spread to his sides, palms up.

“I can’t do that, man.” Brandon pointed directly at Hank’s body and continued, “There’s no way that guy died all on his own, which means somebody killed him. No way am I leaving him here without anyone watching.”

“Oh, he might be right, Dr. Campbell,” came Ruth’s soft voice. “On Law & Order, that would really leave the owners of the building open to liability, in the event that crucial evidence was mislaid or tampered with prior to a satisfactory evaluation by the proper authorities.”

Greg stared at Ruth after this speech as if she had just landed from another planet, perhaps because of its notable lack of the words “sweetie” or “dear.”

“I mean, she’s right. And I never say that,” Brandon admitted.

Kitty looked over at Bryan, who had gone paler and looked as if he was going to be ill. Just then, he made a visible effort to buck up, and cleared his throat.

“OK, so then we...uh...” he said. He cleared his throat again, noisily, and continued, “We set watches. OK?”

He looked over at Kitty as though wanting her approval.

“That sounds wise,” Kitty affirmed. “Let’s do that: we can sleep in shifts.”

“And let people leave the building?” Ruth asked. She shook her head. “Lieutenant Briscoe wouldn’t like that.”

Greg goggled at her. “Good God, woman, who are you yammering about now?”

“Everyone knows that Briscoe is Jerry Orbach’s character on Law & Order, Greg, stop acting like a jerk,” Bryan snapped.

This stalled conversation for another full minute.

Kitty picked up the thread and said, “Alright, how about this? Ruth, didn’t you say there’s a cot in the graduate carrel?”

Ruth and Stella both nodded.

“More than one, isn’t that right, honey?” she said to the younger woman, who seemed much calmer but hadn’t yet been released from the nest of Ruth’s arms.

“At least six,” came her muffled voice.

Kitty gave a sharp nod. “Great. Then we’ll take turns on watch. Would that suit Lt. Briscoe?”

Ruth and Brandon looked at one another, she shyly and he with reluctance. He shrugged and nodded.

“I think as long as we can make sure that no one tampers with

the body, then once the authorities arrive, they'll interview us and send us home," Ruth said with the conviction of twelve seasons streaming on Netflix.

"Ruth, will you please take everyone down there, and get them settled?"

"Oh, I would be delighted, Dr. Campbell, I know just where to put everyone," Ruth said with the fervor of a zealot.

Kitty took a deep breath and thanked the woman, watching her superciliously usher out Greg, Brandon and Stella. They all seemed a bizarre mixture of relieved, exhausted, reluctant and resigned.

As Bryan trailed in the wake of this odd parade, Kitty asked him, "You said that laptop is in the lab?"

Bryan nodded affirmation.

"I'm going to load those photos in and take a look while I have first shift," she said. "Will you grab it for me?"

He nodded again and looked as though he were about to speak, then shook his head sadly and pulled out his cell phone. Tapping to activate the flashlight, he headed down the darkened hallway with a cone of light pushing back the gloom.

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Twenty minutes later, Kitty sat on the floor of the same hallway, just outside the door of the copy room, which she had pulled closed until there was just a two-inch gap admitting light to the corridor next to her. The laptop Bryan had brought was across her legs, which stuck straight out in front of her on the cold tile.

Plugged into the laptop with a short cable was the digital camera Brandon had used to take photos of Hank's body. Kitty assumed that when Ruth's "authorities" arrived they would want the photos, but this was a lock she didn't want to let someone else pick unless she'd had a crack at it first.

It took a few minutes for the photo-processing software to load, and then for the images to import. Kitty watched as the little wheel turned and turned, waiting impatiently, and thought back to her almost-epiphany earlier that evening.

A body behind the copier, looking as if it were shoved there. Bits of paper debris on the corpse, along with pansies. The language of flowers. Thoughts unspoken.

It was like having her tools inside a lock, and feeling the tumblers, visualizing them almost, but still having them slip against the pick. She could tell there was something there, but she couldn't get the shape of it to come clear enough to make sense of what she was

feeling. She knew she was right, she knew there was truth here, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Not yet.

The images loaded one by one, and Kitty could see the miniaturized thumbnails but couldn't enlarge any of them until the importing process was complete.

She was struck by how surreal it was to be sitting outside the door of a room holding a dead body, one dead long enough that rigor mortis had come and gone, hours ticking by, and from just a handful of feet--and a lifetime--away, she was looking at photos the same body. Hoping for clues.

A small chim alerted her that the import was complete. She moved the cursor over the screen and clicked on the first image to open it up.

It was a mess. More accurately, it was wildly out of focus. She could tell this was a photo of Hank's body behind the copier, which was pulled away from the wall in the image, but it was a much better photo of the shag carpet than of any evidence.

She clicked to the next image, dismissing the first one as Brandon's practice shot.

It was blurry, too.

She clicked again. Another out of focus shot.

Kitty clicked through every image, and not one of them was in focus. Not one was even remotely a usable image from which to draw conclusions.

Was Brandon just a terrible photographer? Or had he...

Did he take poor photos on purpose? Kitty couldn't stop herself from wondering.

What if Brandon were somehow involved?

That didn't make sense, though. If he'd been involved, why did he insist that someone keep watch over the body?

Kitty went back to the beginning of the photos and started again. She scrolled through from start to finish, then once more, as if she were picking a recalcitrant lock: it wasn't enough to keep doing what you were doing when a lock didn't want to give way, you had to remove and re-introduce the picks, start again at the beginning to be sure you hadn't missed anything.

There were photos missing.

Kitty was sure of it. When Brandon had arrived with the camera--how had he known to bring a camera?--the copier had been in place against the wall of the copy room, with Hank's body pinned behind it. In these photos, not one showed the copier pushed against the wall. Not one.

She scrolled through again, more slowly this time. While none of the images was focused on Hank, there was clarity in them--just of the surroundings, and not of the body.

In some, she could make out few details of the body, but could clearly see the flowers scattered around him. They were pansies, like Ruth had said, but not all of them. Some of the yellow ones were surely not pansies, and if the focus hadn't been off, Kitty might have overlooked them. The blossoms were smaller, in various shades of yellow.

She clicked to another image, hoping the flowers were still in focus there. After scrolling through three or four, she found one. It should have been a photo of Hank's hand, but instead it was of the floor surrounding his hand.

Tiny yellow blossoms, in clusters at the end of a green stem, mixed in with the larger petals of the pansies, which were blues and crimsons and mustard colors.

Rue. The flower of regret.

Pansies. Thoughts unspoken.

Kitty was transfixed. For hundreds of years, the language of flowers had a long-standing tradition. Using flowers to send secret messages, to communicate emotions, to whisper secrets had been useful in all kinds of circumstances throughout human history, from lovers' trysts to political machinations. This power in plants to speak the unspeakable,

to hold a world's worth of emotion and mystery, had been one of the things that drew Kitty to archaeobotany in the first place--she was enraptured by the ways in which people and plants lived intertwined lives, fates embroidered together over the span of time.

She gazed at the flowers, deep in thought as she considered the implications, her eyes slightly out of focus themselves. Which is perhaps the only reason Kitty saw it.

In Hank's hand, the one behind his head that looked like he was resting upon it, was a scrap of paper. A tiny one, trapped under his thumb.

Along the edge, in blue ink, was a blossom.

A magnolia.