

DEATH BY POISON

A JOSIAH REYNOLDS MYSTERY BOOK SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER ONE

"Mrs. Reynolds, do you understand why you have been arrested for criminal trespassing and destruction of property?"

I replied, "Yes, Judge Kenton."
"How do you plead?"

My African-American attorney, Shaneika Mary Todd, pinched the upper part of my arm. You might recognize her namesake, Mary Todd, the wife of Abraham Lincoln. Shaneika was one of the best criminal lawyers in Kentucky, but she had a penchant to styling her hair differently every time I saw her. I have had the same haircut for twenty years, only cutting it short-short after my husband left me.

Recently, Shaneika shaved her head so close to the scalp, she looked almost bald. I liked the new look as it emphasized her striking cheekbones and hazel eyes, even though I wondered if something was going on in her personal life. At the moment, however, I was not as interested in my lawyer's new look as I was cross with her for she had pinched me again.

"Ouch!"

My lawyer spoke up, "Mrs. Reynolds pleads *not guilty*, sir."

The judge looked at me. "Do you, Mrs. Reynolds?"

"That woman was going to kill my animals," I said, pointing to Bitsy Beamer sitting smugly on the prosecution's side of the courtroom. I once composed a little ditty about rhyming her surname Beamer ending with the words *ream her*. You get the gist of the ditty.

Bitsy Beamer was a woman of means who lived next door to me. In less than a few months since her arrival, the woman had managed to feud with about everyone living on my country road, including myself. She was a petite woman with tawny hair streaked with golden highlights, a custom airbrush tan, a thin nose, and full lips. I wouldn't say Bitsy was pretty or even handsome, but she was striking, wearing revealing clothes inappropriate for her age and high heels to make herself taller. I think she garnered a lot of attention as she was rather bosomy. She liked to wear tops which exposed her ample cleavage.

"Hush," Shaneika hissed to me. "My client pleads *not guilty*, Your Honor."

Now the judge was an acquaintance of mine, who can only be described as a non-descript, white male wearing a black robe. That's all I can say about him.

"You've already stated your client's plea, Ms. Todd. I have it recorded." The judge addressed me again. "This is not the first time you have gotten into trouble with the law, Mrs. Reynolds."

"I've been more sinned against than sinned, sir."

There was an amused smile on the judge's face, which quickly faded when the DA harrumphed.

"The charge is that you took a chainsaw, trespassed upon your neighbor's property, and cut down all Mrs. Beamer's fruit trees."

"Yes, sir. I told you I had to."

"Are you confessing that you did, indeed, commit these acts?"

Confused, I blurted out, "I plead the fifth, Judge Kenton." I heard Shaneika exhale with frustration.

"Mrs. Beamer has a video of you cutting down her trees," the judge said.

I shrugged. "Does she have a video of her fruit falling on my side of the property fence? Her fruit has pips, which cause cyanide poisoning. She planted too close to the property line. I have told and told her that my grazing animals can get sick if they eat the cherry and peach pips."

"I chew on fruit stones all the time and never become ill," Mrs. Beamer offered. "Besides the orchard was young and had not born fruit yet. This is a fanciful conspiracy theory of my neighbor's."

"It was a preemptive strike, Your Honor," I said.

"Mrs. Reynolds acted with malice. How could my trees be dangerous, Judge?" Judge Kenton slammed down his gavel. "I'll ask the questions. You be quiet until spoken to, Mrs. Beamer."

"Mrs. Reynolds has her own orchard," the DA said, intervening. "I don't see how she takes offense at Mrs. Beamer having one."

"My orchard is fenced off. My pasture animals can't get to it, but Mrs. Beamer's trees were right next to my best horse pasture. Many of those horses are worth over a hundred thousand dollars, and I'm responsible for them. The branches of her trees overhang my property and the fruit will fall on my grass."

Bitsy cut in, "See how she exaggerates, Judge. They did not hang over her property line. They were young trees."

"But they would have," I countered, turning to face Bitsy Beamer. "Everyone knows not to plant stone-pitted fruit trees around pasture animals—that is everyone but you." I pleaded with the judge. "Remember when the horses got sick from eating from the wild black cherry

tree in 2001. Over a thousand foals were lost. It devastated the Thoroughbred industry in our area for years.”

“Put your precious horses in another pasture,” Mrs. Beamer shot back.

“QUIET!” roared the judge. He turned his ice blue peepers on me. “Let’s settle this once and for all. Mrs. Reynolds—you are to pay Mrs. Beamer restitution for her orchard.”

Bitsy Beamer smirked.

I protested, “Judge Kenton, she started it.” I couldn’t believe the judge was ruling against me.

“I’m not finished, Mrs. Reynolds.” He flashed his cerulean peepers on Bitsy. “Mrs. Beamer, if you choose to plant another orchard, you are to plant at least fifty feet from any property line with your neighbors. I also suggest you learn to get along with your neighbors. Since you have bought your property, Mrs. Reynolds and Lady Elsmere have sued you over water rights.”

“I was trying to form a lake in front of my house, Judge.”

“That may be, but you are not allowed to dam up a running stream that supplies water throughout the farms of Lady Elsmere and Mrs. Reynolds plus other neighbors north of you. Their animals rely on that water.”

Bitsy Beamer sniffed. “It was not against the law to do so.”

“Actually, it is, which is why you lost that suit. Then the neighbor on the other side of your farm sued you for building new fences on her property and tearing down 19th century stone walls that divided the property.”

Bitsy remarked, “It was a mistake caused by the land surveyor. He told me the wall was on my property.”

The DA objected. “Objection. These cases have no bearing on the current charge against Mrs. Reynolds, Judge.”

The judge said, “Overruled.” He continued with his lecture. “Kentucky is trying to save those rock walls, Mrs. Beamer. Irish immigrants taught enslaved African Americans how to build them, which is why we call them *slave walls*. Many of them are over two hundred years old and an integral part of Kentucky’s history. The descendants of those who built the walls take offense at seeing them torn down. It makes people cranky, you understand.”

“The rock fences were in terrible shape, and I didn’t think my neighbor would mind if I tore them down and put up a nice pretty, wood fence,” Bitsy Beamer replied to Judge Kenton.

“They weren’t yours to tear down, and there are grants available to help with rock fence repairs in the state.”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

"It always seems to be someone else's fault." The judge peered at her over his glasses. "While I don't condone Mrs. Reynolds actions, I understand seeing stone fruit trees planted near one of her pastures put the fear of God into her and why she did what she did. It's simply not done, Mrs. Beamer, to plant these trees near pasture animals."

"I see. I didn't know, Judge."

I wanted to vomit. Bitsy Beamer was lying through her teeth. She knew those trees would cause a ruckus with me, but I remained quiet. Mainly because Shaneika pinched me again.

The judge didn't believe her either. "Let's try to get along with your neighbors, shall we?"

"They should try to get along with me. They do nothing but harass me."

The judge sighed while giving Mrs. Beamer a long, hard stare.

It was my time to smirk now. I could tell Judge Kenton didn't like Bitsy Beamer, but that didn't stop him from doing his duty according to the law. Drat!

"Mrs. Reynolds, the trees have been valued at seven thousand dollars. The court orders that you pay that amount to Mrs. Beamer as restitution plus court costs." The judge slammed his gavel and quickly left the bench. A glass of bourbon was customarily awaiting the judge in his chambers, and he muttered under his breath that he needed a shot after dealing with those middle-aged loonies. Judge Kenton corrected himself. Only one was a middle-aged loony. Josiah Reynolds, though meddlesome, was well respected in the community, but God help those who got on her wrong side.

After the judge left the courtroom, I turned to Shaneika. "Seven thousand? Oh goodness, where am I going to get that amount of money? Things are tight right now."

"I told you to let me handle Bitsy Beamer, but, oh no, you had to go over to her orchard in a fury and cut down those trees. Now, you've got to pay the piper. If you can't do the time, don't do the crime."

Hildegard Elizabeth Beamer, nicknamed Bitsy, stood gloating in the aisle between the prosecution and defense tables. "I hope that teaches you not to mess with me, Josiah. I'll expect a check by the end of the week or I'll call the judge about it."

I mumbled something under my breath.

"What was that?" Bitsy asked, looking for an excuse to argue.

Shaneika injected, "Mrs. Beamer, please don't speak directly to my client. You may speak to me, and I will relay any message you wish to give to her."

"Josiah can't hide behind your coattails forever."

"Mrs. Reynolds doesn't hide behind anyone, and you need to understand she is very beloved in this community. She is revered for her sleuthing skills and has many friends."

“Really? Does that include Ellen Boudreaux and her crowd? I hear different—like Josiah drove her husband to a heart-attack, which killed him.”

I felt the blood run to my face. Ellen Boudreaux was the woman my husband, Brannon, left me for. It didn't help matters that Ellen was the same age as my daughter, Asa, and had a love child with my husband.

Shaneika was firm. “That's enough, Mrs. Beamer. You'll get your money.”

“See that I get it soon.” Bitsy turned and joined the DA walking out of the courtroom. We followed them out of the court building at a discreet distance.

“Someone ought to put that woman out of her misery,” I said, without thinking. “Be quiet, Josiah,” Shaneika shushed. “You can't say things like that. It will come back to haunt you if someone overhears.”

“Can I think it?”

“Do you think? I sometimes wonder.”

I made a face. “Oh, ha ha. You're so funny. I've got to pay that harpy seven grand. How much do I owe you?”

“A couple thousand.”

My head rolled. “I'll have to go to the bank and pull it out of my savings. I don't keep that kind of money in my regular accounts. I'm taking a real hit here.”

“I'll go ahead and pay Beamer for the trees and send you a bill for the total amount. That way you'll only have to cut one check.”
I blew air out of my cheeks in frustration.

Shaneika couldn't resist saying, “I told you not to do it. Cutting down that woman's trees would only cause trouble. Didn't I tell you that?”
I answered mischievously, “The Devil made me do it.”

“The Devil is right. Now you need to make nice-nice with that woman and stay out of her business.”

“Okay. I will,” I said, thinking I would do no such thing.

Shaneika looked at the time on her phone. “I've got an appointment soon.”

I looked at my wrist watch. “I'll go to the bank and transfer funds.”

“You can do that online, you know.”

“I like to do it in person, if you don't mind. I don't trust computers when it comes to money.”

"Suit yourself," Shaneika said, walking down the street to her office.

I waved good-bye and headed in the direction of the bank, fuming the entire way. Paying for those trees was going to be the least of my worries in the future, but I didn't realize it. Nobody did at the time.