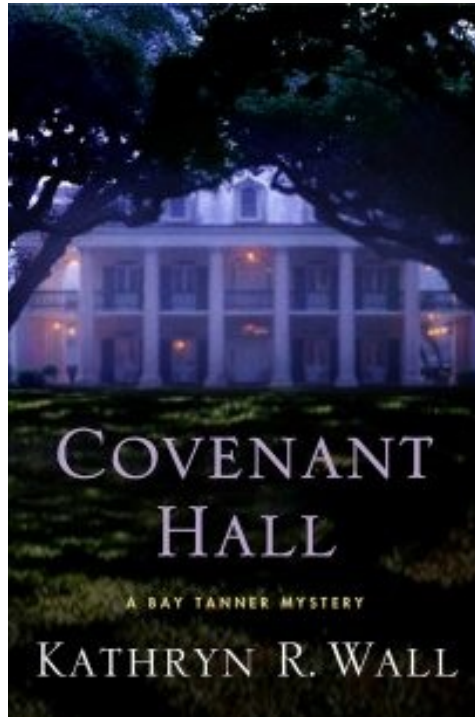


COVENANT HALL

By Kathryn R. Wall



1

It began, as so many of life's critical events do, with a phone call. One moment you're working or reading or sleeping or shopping, blissfully unaware that your whole existence is about to be altered; the next, some disembodied voice plunges your ordered world into chaos.

Wednesday afternoons are generally quiet at the office of Simpson & Tanner, Inquiry Agents. We occupy a small space in a one-story building just outside the gates of Indigo Run Plantation, about halfway down Hilton Head Island. It was unusually warm, even for March. In the Lowcountry of South Carolina, winter is generally confined to a few cold days at the beginning of the year, and spring bursts through with the azaleas, often in late February.

My partner, Erik Whiteside, worked on his laptop at the reception desk just outside my door. We'd been busy for the past couple of months steadily processing job applications and volunteer statements for the island's recreation board and several other county agencies. Background and criminal checks had become routine, even for me. Computers and I coexist, but there's no love lost on either side. Except for the fact that he's tall and blond and handsome, Erik could rightly be classified as a geek, and he'd taught me well.

I'd just finished running the final name on my list through the series of databases we'd subscribed to. I clicked on the icon to print out the report and leaned back in my chair. I stretched and tried to work the kinks out of my neck. Absently, I massaged the ache that had settled in my right thigh. The damage caused by the attack had healed well, with only a minor scar, and physical therapy had me nearly back to normal. I'd even begun jogging on the beach again, taking it easy until I built the muscle back to full strength. But when I sat too long in one position, it still tended to cramp up on me.

I stood and stretched again, and the tightness eased. The phone rang. I reached for the receiver, but Erik beat me to it. I paused, left hand extended, and studied my mangled ring finger.

This other remnant of that horrifying night had not fared so well. The jagged scar still throbbed when I let my hands dangle at my sides, and the nail had grown back in crookedly. Still, it could have been worse. The tenderness would fade, or so the doctor assured me. The swelling had taken a long time to go down, but it now resembled my other fingers more than it did a Vienna sausage.

In a few more days, I'd have no viable excuse for not putting on Red's engagement ring.

"Bay?"

"Yes?" I stepped around the desk and into the doorway of my office.

"It's Lavinia," he said. "She sounds kind of strange."

I whirled back and snatched up the receiver. Lavinia Smalls has been the principal caregiver in the old antebellum mansion on St. Helena Island since before I was born. Through the chaos of my childhood, her steady hand and loving heart had been the rocks to which I'd clung. In the past years, her care of my aging and crippled father had enabled me to live my life free of the burden and responsibility. I owed her a great deal.

"What's the matter?" I snapped into the phone.

"Nothing to get excited about," she said calmly. "Your father's been feelin' poorly today, and I'm taking him in to see Dr. Coffin."

I frowned. "Why isn't Harley coming to the house?"

Her pause set off tiny alarm bells in the back of my head. "He wants to run a couple of tests." Again she hesitated. "At the hospital."

"Tell me the truth, Lavinia. Are they admitting him?"

"Bay Tanner, I swear you just have to see the worst in everything. If it was somethin' more, I'd tell you, wouldn't I?"

I wasn't so sure about that. Lavinia had been protecting me—and my family—for as long as I could remember.

"Maybe," I said. "Should I meet you there?"

"No need, child. We'll be back in a couple of hours. I just didn't want you to worry if you called and we weren't here."

I glanced up as the outer door opened, and a striking black woman in a sharply tailored gray suit stepped tentatively through the door. Erik rose to greet her, and I snapped my attention back to the phone.

"You'll call me? As soon as you get home?"

"Of course. Now I have to go." I could almost see the softening of the stern expression on her wrinkled brown face. "Don't worry, child. I'll take care of things."

"Yes, ma'am," I said automatically before I realized she'd already hung up.

I replaced the receiver gently in the cradle. My stomach felt as if I'd been plunged suddenly to earth from a great height, like one of those drop-of-terror rides at Six Flags.

Retired judge Talbot Simpson had celebrated his eightieth birthday in January. Lavinia and I had thrown him a massive party, inviting all his former courthouse cronies, the remnants of his Thursday night poker gang, and his old hunting buddies. Truth to tell, there weren't all that many of them left, but those who were physically able showed up. There was a lot of talk of the old days—trials won and lost, doves and ducks blasted out of the sky, scandals and rumors of scandals, and whatever-happened-to-so-and-so reminiscing. For once, Lavinia let the bourbon flow unchecked and didn't even force the cigar smokers out onto the verandah. It had been a bang-up party, and the Judge had enjoyed himself immensely.

"Good to see everybody," he'd said when the last guest had shuffled down the steps. "Better than having them all standin' around gawking at me in my coffin."

I remembered I'd laughed at that. "I promise I won't let anyone gawk," I'd said.

"Good," my father had replied, not sharing the joke. "Just see you stick to that when the time comes."

A chill like the bitterest winter wind off the ocean shook me, and I sank back into my chair. A moment later, Erik stepped in and pulled the door closed behind him.

"Is the Judge okay?" he asked.

"Just some tests," I said, trying to force circulation back into my face. I knew my attempt at a smile must have looked more like a grimace.

"Lavinia will take care of it," he said, and I cringed.

"He's *my* father," I snapped, then deliberately relaxed my shoulders. "Sorry. Who's the woman?"

"Potential client," he answered.

"Any idea what her problem is?"

"Nope. She wants to talk to you."

I ran a hand through the tangle of my reddish-brown hair and sucked in a long breath. "Give me a couple of minutes and send her in."

"Right," he said and closed the door after himself.

I stood again and pulled the black blazer off the back of my chair. I was plenty warm in the white silk turtleneck, but I felt more professional with the jacket on. I straightened my desk, retrieved a clean legal pad from the right-hand drawer, and made certain the small recorder had a fresh tape. I smiled a little, remembering Erik's disdain for the antiquated technology, but it worked for me. Maybe if I lived another forty-one years I'd figure out how to use a BlackBerry.

My hands were folded demurely in front of me on the desk when the door opened.

"Bay, this is Joline Eastman. Please have a seat, ma'am."

"Thank you."

The slim black woman perched on the edge of the client chair and smiled briefly over her shoulder as Erik retreated. She didn't offer her hand, so I kept mine to myself.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Ms. Eastman."

"It's Mrs." Her thin smile didn't reach her deep brown eyes.

"How can we help you, Mrs. Eastman?"

She pulled a manila folder from a black leather briefcase and extracted a single paper and what looked to be an old photograph. She hesitated a few seconds, appearing reluctant to relinquish possession of the documents, then laid them faceup in front of me.

It looked like a genealogy, one of those charts you can print out from a computer program designed to keep track of the family tree. Lines and boxes spread out across the page. Without studying it too closely, I could see some prominent blank spaces.

The picture was indeed old, mounted on stiff cardboard and with that grainy, blurred finish so prevalent in early twentieth-century photographs. It was a black family—parents and three children—and what were probably one set of grandparents as well, dressed in their best. The women’s frilly, high-necked blouses and jaunty hats perched on upswept hair made me guess 1920s. The photo had been taken outdoors, and the backdrop looked to be some kind of store or business.

“Your family?” I asked and looked up to see Mrs. Eastman with another picture clutched tightly in her slim fingers. Unconsciously, she rubbed her thumb back and forth across its surface.

“Yes. Mine. My grandfather is the young man. I think.” She paused a moment to clear her throat, and I saw pain flicker in her nearly black eyes. “I can’t say for certain.”

“They look like nice people.”

Her expression changed again, and anger replaced the misery I thought I’d detected just a few seconds before. “I wouldn’t know. That photo and these old letters are all I have to go on.” She laid a bundle of envelopes on the desk beside the genealogical chart.

I had no idea where this was going, but I could sense some deep emotion barely held in check. I gave her time to gather herself by flipping the picture over to study the faded photographer’s imprint. Hard to read, but I thought it might have said *Charleston*. Someone had written the date, 1919, in the upper right-hand corner, in pencil.

“I’m sorry.” It sounded lame, even to me, but I couldn’t think of what else to say.

“I want you to find them,” Joline Eastman said. “My family. Or what’s left of it.” Suddenly she rose and laid the second photo on my desk. In color, it showed a gangly teenaged girl with light brown skin and braided black hair dressed in tennis whites, the racket held in front of her as if she were preparing to return serve. “If you can’t,” she said in a quavering voice, “my daughter is going to die.”

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