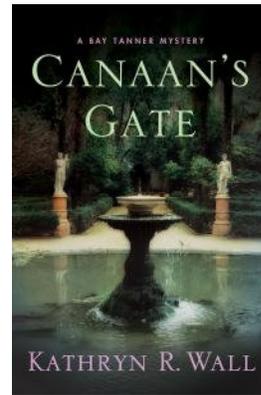


Canaan's Gate by Kathryn Wall

Chapter One



“I’m an orphan.”

Though I spoke the words aloud, there was no one in the office but me to hear them. I have no idea why the reality of it should have wormed its way into my head on that soft September afternoon. Maybe it was because I’d been watching sunlight slant through the half-closed blinds to send wavering lines of shadow dancing across the scarred surface of my father’s old desk.

When I was a child, it had dominated his study in my family’s antebellum home on St. Helena Island just off the coast of Beaufort. In later years, after a series of small but debilitating strokes had condemned Judge Talbot Simpson to a wheelchair, it had joined the other castoffs in the warren of attics above the third floor, its pride of place usurped by the utilitarian trappings of illness and infirmity. And death.

After the Judge’s passing, I had it moved into the new offices of Simpson & Tanner, Inquiry Agents.

Orphan. I rolled the word around in my mind while my gaze traveled over the expanded space, fully twice the size of my former office. The addition of my husband to the staff had made the move to larger quarters necessary. Whether the sudden increase in our caseload was directly tied to the fact that Red had spent years in the local sheriff’s department or whether it was simply that the exploding population of Hilton Head Island brought with it a corresponding increase in people with troubles, I couldn’t have said. The fact was we were busier than ever.

I tried to bend my concentration to the files spread out across the Judge’s massive mahogany desk, but my mind refused to cooperate. The faint smell of recent paint lingered in spite of my having thrown open all the windows on that warm Wednesday afternoon. My sole remaining partner, Erik Whiteside, had left right after lunch to track down information for a background check, and Red was at a meeting at his son Scotty’s school over in Beaufort.

I smiled, remembering the call the night before from Red’s ex-wife, Sarah. Scotty had gotten into a fight on the bus with another boy who’d apparently been taunting him about something. Though outweighed by twenty pounds, my stepson had given as good as he’d gotten. Red tried unsuccessfully to conceal his pride as he recounted the details of the battle. But the school had threatened suspension, so he was off to mend fences and promise swift retribution for any recurrence.

My gaze wandered again to the tangle of holly bushes spread beneath the loblolly pines just outside my window. We’d been lucky to find larger quarters in the same building just outside the gates of Indigo Run Plantation about halfway down the island. And I’d been able to keep this same calming view. Suddenly, I felt the urge to be out

there, inhaling the sweet Lowcountry air, feeling the warmth of the sun on my face. I snatched up my keys, resurrected my sunglasses from the bottom of my bag, and locked the front door behind me.

With our hordes of summer tourists gone, the island had lapsed back into calm again, traffic on nearby Route 278 creating only a mild hum. I strolled aimlessly across the parking lot, stopping to listen to the sharp *rat-a-tat* of a woodpecker high up in one of the pines. I wandered down the drive and around the building, my face turned slightly upward to let the warmth soak into my skin.

It had been a hell of a year. My father's death had altered my life in a number of ways, as had my marriage to Red a few weeks later. It was a promise I'd made to the Judge that last day in the hospital, and I'd had no valid reason not to keep it. We'd been dancing around it almost from the day my first husband, Red's brother Rob, had been viciously murdered. My misgivings had been worn away by Red's unwavering pursuit and my own realization that I could care for him in a non-brotherly way. So far, it seemed to be working.

I waved to one of the partners of the public accounting firm that occupied the end unit of our building and flashed back to my own CPA days in Charleston. Rob and I had been a team, combining our expertise to help the state attorney general's office sever the financial head of the illegal drug business in South Carolina. I sighed at the memories of that idyllic time when Rob and I had loved and crusaded together.

History seemed to be repeating itself in any number of ways.

I swung back around and unlocked the office. Work would banish the megrims. The old favorite term of my late father's companion, Lavinia Smalls, had me grinning as I stepped into the reception area. She'd used it to describe this antsy, dissatisfied feeling of low spirits for as long as I could remember.

A quick glance showed the message light glowing brightly on the telephone next to Erik's laptop. I waited until I had pulled the heavy chair up behind my father's old desk before I dialed the answering service.

The female voice was pitched low as if afraid of being overheard. "Mrs. Tanner, if you're the one who used to be an accountant, please call me at this number."

I scratched it on a notepad. Local, but that's about all I could tell. I waited through a long pause.

"Just leave a message, and I'll call you back. It's important. I mean, I think there may be a crime involved. I'm not sure, and . . . Well, never mind that now. Please call me."

She didn't leave her name. Interesting.

I went through the rigmarole to save it. On my computer, I clicked onto Google and did a quick reverse-directory check of the number. Nothing. I tried a couple of the more sophisticated programs Erik had installed to assist us with the background checks we now did routinely for several county and local government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Vetting potential employees and volunteers had become a priority for such groups, and Simpson & Tanner was reaping the benefits. Again I came up empty.

I dialed the number the nervous woman had left. It was a generic answering service, the kind you can get in one of those package deals from the phone company. No name, just a repeat of the number. I told the electronic voice that I'd be in the office until approximately four thirty, then forced my attention back to the files still strewn across the

desk. I told myself that vague feeling of unease and dissatisfaction that had sent me wandering the parking lot in the middle of the afternoon could be sublimated by hard work.

I'd been telling myself that a lot lately.

I barely managed to get my mind back on track when the phone rang.

"Simpson and Tanner, Inquiry Agents."

Erik would cringe if he heard me. He firmly believed that I should let the service pick up when he wasn't around to run interference for me.

"Is this Mrs. Tanner?"

"Yes?"

A short pause. "My name is . . . Well, that doesn't matter right now. And I don't have long to talk."

Calling from work, I told myself. I could hear a muted buzz of conversation in the background.

"Understood. Your message mentioned a crime," I said to spur her along.

"A *possible* crime. I just want to make sure . . . I mean, I don't want to get anyone in trouble. I could be completely wrong."

I waited a couple of beats, but she didn't continue. "Why aren't you talking to the sheriff?"

"I just said I'm not sure." The woman's voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper. She sounded afraid.

"Well, you're going to have to give me something concrete if I'm going to be able to help you." I listened again to the voices I could hear behind her and thought, *Retail store of some kind. Lots of coming and going, different people talking.* "Ma'am? Are you still there?"

"Look, maybe this was a bad idea. I'm probably wrong about all of it. It's just that they're such a nice old couple. I'd hate—" It sounded then as if she'd put her hand over the phone. I could just make out her muffled words: "I'll be right there."

When she came back to me, the woman's voice had dropped so low I could barely hear her. "Maybe I'll call you later. I don't know. I have to think about it." A pause. "I'm really sorry I bothered you."

The click in my ear told me I'd lost her.

Thanks to Erik's training I'd jotted down the caller ID number before she'd disconnected. Different from the first one she'd left me. I punched in the digits.

After three rings a chirpy voice said, "First Coast Bank of the Carolinas. This is Cindy. How may I direct your call?"

"Sorry, wrong number," I said and hung up the phone.