

# JERICO CAY

By Kathryn R. Wall

## Chapter One

*Kitty*. Such a quaint, innocuous name for the deadly, screaming beast of a storm.

Most hurricanes begin life as gentle waves, slipping off the coast of Africa, drifting past the Cape Verde Islands and out into the Atlantic where they sit for a few days, spinning harmlessly and gathering strength. If conditions are ripe, they eventually move west, earning first the designation of tropical depressions before graduating to tropical storms and finally to category one hurricane status.

Back in the days before feminism and political correctness, all storms had female names. Now they alternate, so that both men and women can share the dubious honor of being associated with widespread panic and destruction.

*Kitty* was different. She had popped up unannounced and unexpected in the Bahamas, intensified in a matter of hours, hung a sharp left, and pointed herself directly at the Lowcountry of South Carolina. Those of us who have lived here all our lives expect a couple of scares every hurricane season, but we generally have a few days' warning while the unpredictable storms try to make up their minds exactly who they're going to crush.

If my husband Red and I had been the only ones we had to worry about, we probably would have refused to evacuate, opting instead to hunker down in our beach house to ride out *Kitty*. Though just a few yards from the ocean across a sheltering dune, the house had been constructed to withstand these threats. Built up high off the ground, it could weather a modest storm surge as well as strong winds. We also had functioning hurricane shutters to protect the windows and a gas-powered generator in case we lost electricity.

But we'd had other responsibilities. My surrogate mother, Lavinia Smalls, along with my half sister Julia and her caretaker, Elizabeth Shelly, had been huddled in the antebellum mansion where I'd grown up on St. Helena Island. Presqu'isle had stood tall and proud for the better part of two hundred years and had outlasted both Mother Nature and the Union Army. Still, they'd felt vulnerable—three women alone—so Red and I had battened down our Hilton Head beach house and raced north.

But those computer models, so beloved by weather forecasters, had missed it by a few hundred miles. That night, while we crept along roads growing more crowded by the minute with frantic tourists and fleeing residents, the predictions had her coming ashore at Savannah which would have put us in the path of the deadliest quadrant. As *Kitty* neared the coast, however, she began a slow slide to the north, eventually devastating the poor folks along the North Carolina shore and dealing us only a glancing, but vicious, blow.

Almost two weeks later, I stood in the semicircular driveway of Presqu'isle and surveyed the progress of the repairs. All the live oaks had survived the onslaught of wind and driving rain, as they had done for a couple of centuries. The azaleas had been flattened, but

they'd come back. The roof hadn't been so fortunate. One corner of it had been crushed, as if some giant fist had struck it, exposing the attic to the elements.

Even though the repairs had been completed, I figured it would be an unholy mess up there, but none of us had yet had the time or the heart to tackle the cleanup.

I did a cursory walk-around of the entire property. Despite some downed limbs that still had to be hauled away and a lot of foliage stripped from the shrubs, everything looked to be making a comeback. Even the short dock had weathered the pounding it had taken from St. Helena Sound. It could have been much worse. I left my damp shoes on the back verandah and slipped barefooted into the kitchen. Lavinia, our longtime housekeeper and the one solid presence left from my childhood, stood, as usual, at the stove. She turned when I let the screen door bang shut behind me.

"So how does it look?" she asked, the spoon she'd been using to stir the gumbo poised over the pot.

"Coming along," I said. "I think by spring you'll never be able to tell we took a hit."

I'd driven over from Hilton Head that morning to check that everything was under control at my childhood home after I'd gotten my own clean-up crew started on what I hoped would be their final day of work. Red and I had been camping out at Presqu'isle since the night of the storm, but things had progressed enough that we'd moved back to the island a couple of days before. The beach house my first husband Rob and I had lovingly planned and built had withstood the wind, but the surge that devastated the dune had roared unchecked into the lower portion of the house, filling the garage with a foot of sand and debris before receding.

I reached in the refrigerator and pulled out the iced tea pitcher. I carried a glass to the old oak table and slid into my assigned seat, the one I'd been using since I was old enough to leave the high chair. I took a long swallow and wiped a trickle of sweat from the side of my face.

"The roof looks good," I said. "I thought finding someone familiar with those old materials would be difficult, especially with every contractor in this part of the state already up to their eyeballs in work. But those guys from Charleston did a great job."

I sometimes felt guilty about being what most people would term *wealthy*, but money certainly came in handy when you needed to get things done in a hurry.

She lifted the spoon to her lips, tasted, then added a little pepper and stirred again.

"Have you been up there lately?" I asked, my eyes lifting to the ceiling. "Is it drying out okay?"

Lavinia wiped her wrinkled brown hands on her apron and joined me at the table. "I haven't done a real good inspection," she said, her smile rueful. "It's hard for my old knees to navigate those stairs. I just poked my head up and looked around while the men from the church were covering the hole with plastic, right after the storm. A lot of rain came in. That'll be the biggest problem, but I think most of it's salvageable." She sighed, and the smile faded. "I don't even want to think about movin' all those boxes around and sortin' through everything."

"Red and I'll take care of that. You just keep us all fed."

"You're a good girl, Bay, honey," Lavinia said, moving back to the stove. "You hungry?"

"For gumbo? Always," I said, "as long as you don't mind if I dig the peas and okra out of it first."

We shared a grin, memories of my childhood pickiness a warm presence in the familiar kitchen.

“It won’t be ready for another hour or so,” she said. “I expect Redmond will be back with Julia and Lizzie by then.”

I smiled at her use of Elizabeth Shelly’s nickname. At first, when the idea of the three women’s sharing Presqu’isle had been broached, the two had been leery, addressing each other formally and circling warily. I wondered if it had been the shared danger of the hurricane that had finally allowed them both to unbend. Lizzie and Julia had been living in a rundown old rice plantation outside of Jacksonboro on the road to Charleston, but Lizzie’s advancing years and the exorbitant cost of Covenant Hall’s upkeep had made sharing Presqu’isle the only reasonable solution. I knew there would be problems with two such strong-minded women inhabiting the same domain, but recent events had proved they could work together.

Over the course of the past week they’d been gradually moving in. My husband was carrying them and the last of their belongings to their new home. I’m not a religious woman by any means—a backsliding Episcopalian, truth to tell—but I sent up a silent prayer that my half sister and her caretaker would find peace and harmony in their new home.

“I’m going to check upstairs. Just see how bad it looks,” I said, rising.

“You put shoes on, you hear me? No tellin’ what kind of critters might be up there.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, heading toward the hallway. “I’ve got a pair of old sneakers in my room.”

*Julia’s room*, I corrected myself as I climbed to the second floor and retrieved the shoes from the back of the closet. Already the place felt alien, some of my half sister’s clothes now hanging on the metal rod, her childish pink jewelry box sitting on the tall dresser. The sight of it made me sad. Though we were nearly of an age, Julia’s mental development had been stunted when, at the age of ten, she’d witnessed her mother’s tragic death. An unusual form of childhood post traumatic stress disorder, or so my friend and psychologist Neddie Halloran had diagnosed. She’d been working with Julia for several months and was optimistic about my sister’s progress. I hoped the disruption of moving to a new home wouldn’t adversely affect her treatment.

I was pleased to see that Lavinia had installed a new duvet and bed skirt as well as fresh towels in the adjoining bath. My late mother had been a fanatic about not changing a thing in the antebellum mansion her ancestors had built and furnished, and Lavinia sometimes seemed to have absorbed the same resistance into her bones.

But these were new times, with new inhabitants. Up until a few months before, I hadn’t even known of Julia’s existence, or the bizarre circumstances that linked us by more than blood. She had suffered, as a child and as an adult, and I wanted this to be a chance for her to start over, to begin to live the life she’d been cheated out of.

I walked down the long hallway and climbed the narrow stairs that led to the unused third floor where the house servants had slept back in the day. Up three more steps at the rear, I pulled open the door to the attic. As a child, I’d avoided its dark recesses and trailing cobwebs. I’d never been the kind of kid who enjoyed being scared—no horror movies or creepy comic books. Strange then, I thought, that I’d chosen private investigation for my second career. Accounting and financial planning had been safe, if unexciting. Erik Whiteside, my partner in Simpson & Tanner, Inquiry Agents, didn’t go looking for mayhem

and murder, and neither did I. It was just that sometimes they found us anyway. My new husband, former sheriff's deputy Red Tanner, had recently joined the team.

I fumbled to locate the dangling string for the lightbulb that I knew hung just above my head. My fingers finally closed around it, and I pulled. The weak shimmer illuminated only a fraction of the vast expanse. At the far end, I could see the pale eyebrow of the dormer window, just below where the roof had disintegrated. Scuffling my feet in the dust to announce my presence to anything live and wriggly that might have taken refuge from the storm, I moved down the narrow aisle, tugging on strings as they came into view. In a short time, I had lighted my path from the stairway to the end of the house.

At the height of Kitty, a giant limb from one of the live oaks had crashed through the roof, taking wood and shingles with it. It had required a block and tackle—and a few hefty men—to dislodge it so that repairs could begin.

The driving rain had soaked one corner of the attic floor. A few cardboard boxes had crumbled under the onslaught, mostly old clothes from the looks of them. They smelled damp and musty and would need to be taken downstairs to air out before Lavinia and I decided if they were salvageable.

Immediately ahead of me a humpbacked trunk, the kind with the leather straps my ancestors once used for long journeys, lay tilted onto its side. The lid had partially popped open. As I bent to right it, my foot kicked something hard, and it skittered away.

I used the toe of my sneaker to feel for it, unwilling to stick my hand into the dust and debris. The weak overhead light revealed a book, covered in dark red leather. I brushed away a few dead leaves and picked it up.

The rain had soaked the cover, which was swollen and warped, and many of the pages appeared to be stuck together. No lettering on the outside, but it reminded me immediately of the journal my late mother and Lavinia always consulted when considering any rearrangement of the furniture, especially in the formal parlors and public rooms of our antebellum mansion. Lavinia still used it religiously every Christmas when placing the holiday decorations.

This looked different, though. Gingerly, I pried apart a few pages. Unlike the “decorating bible,” this was filled with solid writing—no drawings or recipes—in a formal, ornate script with dated headings. The ink had faded to a pale brown.

A diary. I turned back to the front, but there was no name, no immediate way to identify the author. I set it aside and righted the tilted trunk. Tissue paper rustled in the heavy stillness of the attic as I lifted out a dress carefully wrapped. It had once been white but had yellowed to a soft butter color. Not a wedding dress, I thought as I laid it gingerly across a pile of storage cartons. It had a flapper look to it, like something out of the twenties, with lots of fringe and a beaded pattern across the bodice. There were more clothes, and I removed them with great care, revealing the treasure trove in the bottom of the trunk.

What looked to be a dozen or more of the red leather journals nestled on the water-spotted paper that lined its bottom. With a slightly trembling hand, I stacked them one by one on the floor next to my feet. As I looked around for something to carry them in, Lavinia's faint voice drifted up the stairs.

“Bay? Did you hear me?”

I wove my way around the boxes and discarded furniture to the open attic door.

“No, ma'am,” I hollered.

“Telephone,” she said. “It's Erik.”

“Tell him I’ll call him back.”

“He said it’s important.”

“Damn,” I muttered, the stack of diaries pulling at me like a magnet. I glanced once over my shoulder. “Okay, I’ll be right there.”

I laid the clothes back in the trunk and set the books gently on top, but I couldn’t resist another quick look. I selected one at random and eased it open.

“Madeleine Henriette Baynard,” I read aloud.

I glanced again at the open door before sighing and replacing the slim volume on top of the others. I’d just take Erik’s call and come straight back. I closed the trunk and slid it off to the side. Its passage left a trail in the dust, and I was sure I’d have no trouble finding it again. I pulled light strings until the whole place was plunged once again into murky twilight.

I knew it was only my imagination, but I thought I heard a faint rustle of crinolines across the pine boards just as I pulled the door closed behind me.

“I was in the attic,” I said breathlessly, having skipped down three flights of stairs.

“Sorry,” my partner replied.

“No problem. I need the exercise. What’s up?”

“I got a very interesting call a little while ago.”

“Client?”

“Could be. Does the name Winston Wolfe mean anything to you?”

I thought a moment. “It does, but I’m not sure why. Is that who called?”

“Actually, his secretary. A woman named Melanie Hearst. From New York.”

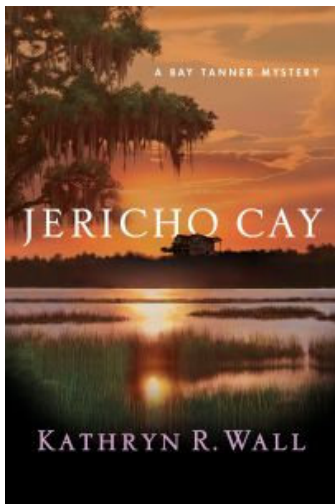
Erik loved forcing me to wring information out of him, drop by drop.

“Is it bigger than a breadbox?” I asked, and he laughed.

“Okay. Wolfe is an author. True crime. He’s done books on the OJ trial, Klaus von Bülow, and a couple of serial killers whose names I don’t remember.”

“Of course. Not my cup of tea, literature-wise, but I know who he is. What does he want with us?”

Erik paused dramatically, and I was just about to demand he quit playing games when he said, “Morgan Tyler Bell.”



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