

WIDOW'S TEARS

A Pecan Springs Mystery

Featuring Ruby Wilcox, with China Bayles

By Susan Wittig Albert

PROLOGUE

Galveston, Texas: The Oleander City

Saturday, September 8, 1900

The coast of Texas is according to the general laws of the motion of the atmosphere exempt from West India hurricanes and the two which have reached it followed an abnormal path which can only be attributed to causes known in meteorology as accidental. . . . It would be impossible for any cyclone to create a storm wave which could materially injure the city [of Galveston].

“West India Hurricanes”
by Isaac M. Cline, Chief Meteorologist
Texas Section, U.S. Weather Bureau
Galveston News, July 16, 1891

Rachel Blackwood got up early that morning. She had not slept well: her youngest daughter, three-year-old Angela, was suffering from a sore throat and had cried often for her mother in the night, needing to be soothed.

But it wasn't just Angela's whimpers that had disturbed her mother. It was the thunder of the waves on the beach that had kept her awake—and the heat, the unspeakable, unbearable heat. According to the daily newspaper, the *Galveston News*, sultry weather had smothered almost the whole of the country that summer, from the Rockies east to Pennsylvania, from the Great Lakes south to the Gulf of Mexico. Thirty people in New York City had died one awful August Saturday. Dozens of others had

succumbed in Chicago and Memphis, and in St. Louis, two bears and a leopard had been felled by the heat.

On Galveston Island, summers were usually cooled by ocean breezes, and the miles of shining white sand beaches, groves of palm trees, and extravagant flower gardens made the city seem a paradise. But this year, summer in paradise had been marred by both sultry heat and unusual rains. During July and August, tropical storms had drenched the city—sixteen inches of rain in one downpour, nine inches in another. Boys sailed the flooded downtown streets in wooden tubs, fish flopped across lawns, mothers despaired of ever getting the laundry dried in the damp air. And there were the morning fogs, and the foghorn in the lighthouse on the Bolivar Peninsula, a forlorn ghost calling, calling, calling through the dim gray mist.

The Blackwood household—Rachel; her husband Augustus (the newly-appointed vice-president of the Galveston National Bank); the five Blackwood children and their fifteen-year-old nurse Patsy; and Mrs. O'Reilly, the family's long-time cook-housekeeper—seemed to be moving in a languid and stuporous dream that summer, half-asleep under a sweltering blanket of humidity and heat. The thermometer on the back porch had registered 90 on Thursday and 91 on Friday, and when Rachel had taken the children the four blocks to the beach, they had complained that the Gulf was as warm as bathwater.

The morning air was cooler, though, and for the first time in weeks, Rachel could draw a deep breath as she slipped out of bed and dressed. But she had awakened to the strange, unsettled sense that something was different, something was . . . menacing. Now, even though she was up and about—bringing an armful of dewy white roses and

rosemary sprigs and the last few pink oleander blooms from the garden for the bowl on the table in the morning room and overseeing Mrs. O'Reilly's breakfast preparations in the kitchen and the plans for Matthew's birthday supper that evening—she could not shake the feeling of apprehension. And even as she arranged the flowers in a crystal bowl, wondering once again why white roses were supposed to signify sadness when the rich scent of their silvery petals gave her so much pleasure, she was uneasy. Perhaps it was Angela's worrisome illness, or the rising north wind, unusual for September, that made a peculiar whistling in the eaves. Or the pounding of the surf that seemed much louder now than when she got up, and the tremors of the wooden floor under her feet.

Rachel had occasionally felt the floor trembling during Gulf storms, although it had never been quite so pronounced as now. The Blackwood house was located on Q Avenue, just off Bath Avenue, only three blocks from the white sand beach. The highest ground in the island city, on Broadway, rose only 8.7 feet above the Gulf, and some (perhaps remembering that Cabeza de Vaca had named the island *Malhado*, “misfortune”) had cautioned that a strong storm would flood the entire city. A sea wall had been proposed as early as 1874 and several times since, but was considered to be too expensive and unnecessary. Isaac Cline, a noted meteorologist and chief of the Weather Bureau's Texas section (and the Blackwoods' neighbor on Avenue Q), had written in the *News* that it was “simply an absurd delusion” to believe that Galveston could be seriously damaged by a tropical storm. The city was protected by “the general laws of the motion of the atmosphere.”

Nevertheless, many prudent Galvestonians built their houses on pilings, and Rachel's husband Augustus was one of these. He had ordered his house to be constructed

atop wooden piers driven deep into the island's sandy soil, ensuring that it would stand well above the highest of storm tides, locally called "overflows." As he explained to Rachel, it was the piers, standing eight feet above the surface, which transmitted the shudder of the waves against the beach to the floors of the house. The trembling, he said with a confident smile, was in fact a token of the strength and security of its anchorage to the earth.

Indeed, it was not just a secure and solid house but a splendid house, as befitted a man of Mr. Blackwood's rank among Galveston's men of finance. It was a large, three-story towered and turreted Victorian, with a drawing room where Rachel served tea to the ladies who called every afternoon and a library filled with Augustus's fine collection of books and a music room fitted out with a Steinway grand piano. There was a magnificent oak staircase, fireplaces with gleaming marble mantels, and glorious stained glass windows in the dining and drawing rooms, commissioned from the Tiffany Glass and Decorating Company. The opulent furnishings and draperies, all in exquisite taste, had been brought from as far away as Paris and New York.

Painted a sober brown with red trim, this fine house was set back from the street behind a wrought iron fence, a border of oleanders and hollies, and a row of date palms, which in the late summer produced an abundance of fruit. The steps up to its wide front gallery were guarded by twin stone lions, each turned to gaze thoughtfully at the other. The heavy bronze knocker on the oak front door wore the enigmatic face of Neptune, the god of the deep. And the steep slate roof was crowned with a wooden-railed widow's walk that offered a panoramic view of the island paradise and the vast blue-green Gulf stretching to the eastern horizon.

But while Mr. Blackwood prized his house for its solidity, its splendor, the beauty of its furnishings, and the view from its roof, Rachel prized it for far more. It was the home of her heart. It held all that was dear to her—Augustus and her children: stalwart Matthew, ten years old this very day; sweet in-between Ida; the five-year-old mischievous twins, Peter and Paul; and dear Baby Angela. To Rachel’s great delight, the children were all very musical. Just the night before, they had all gathered in the music room. Matthew, a gifted young pianist, played “The Maple Leaf Rag” on the Steinway baby grand—Scott Joplin’s song was wildly popular everywhere. Then Rachel accompanied the children in one of the family’s favorite songs, a poem called “Sweet and Low,” written by Alfred Lord Tennyson, while Matthew played his flute, Ida played her harp, and Peter and Paul sang sweetly. Baby Angela, in her little red-painted rocking chair, laughed and clapped her hands. On the sofa, Augustus read his newspaper, smoking his favorite cherry tobacco. Rachel thought then that she had never been so happy. She could not know that she would never be happy again.

Since the house had been recently built, it made all sorts of interesting new-house noises, murmurs and sighs and groans as the pilings and joists and beams and rafters settled into place. All five of the children insisted that the house talked to them. Rachel often made an amusing little game of it with them, asking what the house was whispering today, what secrets it had to tell, what stories it wanted to hear. With giggles and great delight, they would tell her what the house had to say—oh, such miraculous tales of intrigue and mystery! And then they would run to whisper their stories into the waiting ears of the stone lions that guarded the steps, for the lions were their dear friends and would keep them safe always, just as the house kept them safe.

At the morning breakfast table, Mr. Blackwood always read aloud items of interest from the *Galveston News*, believing that the children should know what kind of world they were going to inherit. The front page story concerned the Boxer Rebellion in China, where an eight-nation alliance was fielding an army of 20,000 men to take Beijing and release the Americans and others held captive there. On page two, the latest census dominated the local news. Since 1890, Galveston's population had grown by nearly thirty percent, a rate much higher than rival port city Houston. (This news cheered Mr. Blackwood greatly, for he was a Galveston booster.) On page ten, Weather Bureau officials reported that they were monitoring a storm that appeared to be passing the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts, and while they felt it would probably go ashore somewhere in eastern Texas, they did not anticipate a "dangerous disturbance." On the back page, the Galveston forecast was reassuringly routine: "For eastern Texas: Rain Saturday, with high northerly winds; Sunday rain, followed by clearing."

Mr. Blackwood put down the *News* with a smile. They must all be grateful, he remarked genially, for the good north wind, which would push the heat and humidity out into the Gulf and make for a cooler, pleasant weekend. An afternoon picnic at the beach tomorrow would be in order, he suggested with a glance at his wife. Rachel smiled and nodded as the children shouted gleefully. And of course, there was Matthew's birthday to celebrate that evening, with the chocolate cake that Mrs. O'Reilly was this minute baking in the kitchen. Rachel had invited two of the neighborhood families—enough to fill all eighteen chairs at the dining room table.

Most Galvestonians worked a six-day week, so when breakfast was over, Mr. Blackwood set off as usual for his downtown bank. Rachel sent the children out to play

with their friends—all but little Angela, of course—but she had become increasingly uneasy. She could feel even more strongly now the trembling of the house under her feet and hear its sighings and moanings. If she could only have understood its language, she might have understood that the house was whispering to her of a powerful storm, even now churning and turning in its unstoppable journey across the Gulf. She might even have heard its insistent whisper, as plain as words, as urgent as a shout: “Run, Rachel! Take your children and go, *now*, while there’s still time to leave the island!”

Rachel did not speak the language of the house and could not understand its warning. Still, she felt the tremors and thought apprehensively that the floor was beginning to vibrate in a subtle and unusual way, a drum thrumming in tune with the thudding waves, accompanied by the eerie, high-pitched whistle of the wind in the eaves. She finished consulting with Mrs. O’Reilly about the menus for next week—now written on the menu board in the kitchen—then lifted her skirts and went quickly up the wide, curving stairs.

Three flights and a few moments later, she was opening the door to the widow’s walk at the top of the house. As she stepped outside, she pulled in her breath, startled. When she had glanced out the bedroom window at first light, the sky over the Gulf had seemed to be made of iridescent mother-of-pearl, tinted in glorious pinks and lavenders. Now, it was a flat, ominous slate-gray, with heavy-bellied clouds, flushed smoky-orange by the sun, sulking along the eastern horizon. To the north and downtown, atop the Levy Building at Twenty-third and Market, the storm flag fluttered, a crimson square with a black square at its center, topped with a white pennant, both hoisted yesterday morning by their neighbor, Isaac Cline, who was in charge of the island’s weather bureau. The red

and black storm flag meant that heavy weather was rolling in; the pennant meant that the winds would come from the northwest. But to anyone who knew his weather, the flags were reassuring, for together they predicted that the storm would come ashore to the east of the city. Galveston was not likely to see much of a blow.

But it was the sight of the Gulf that startled Rachel the most, for the normally blue-green waves were a thick, chocolate-pudding brown, laden with sand and laced with ropes of seaweed. And they weren't waves at all, not in the usual dancing way. These were slow-moving swells, heavy, mud-brown hills of water that crashed with a roar higher and higher upon the beach, the sound shuddering through the earth, through the wooden pilings and floors and frame of the house, so that even at the highest point, on the widow's walk, Rachel could feel the whole weight of each wave almost as if it were crashing directly against her feet.

She could not know what was to come. No one in Galveston could know, or even imagine, that by midnight, over eight thousand of their fellow citizens would be swept away by the hurricane and drowned.

But she could feel it coming and was afraid.