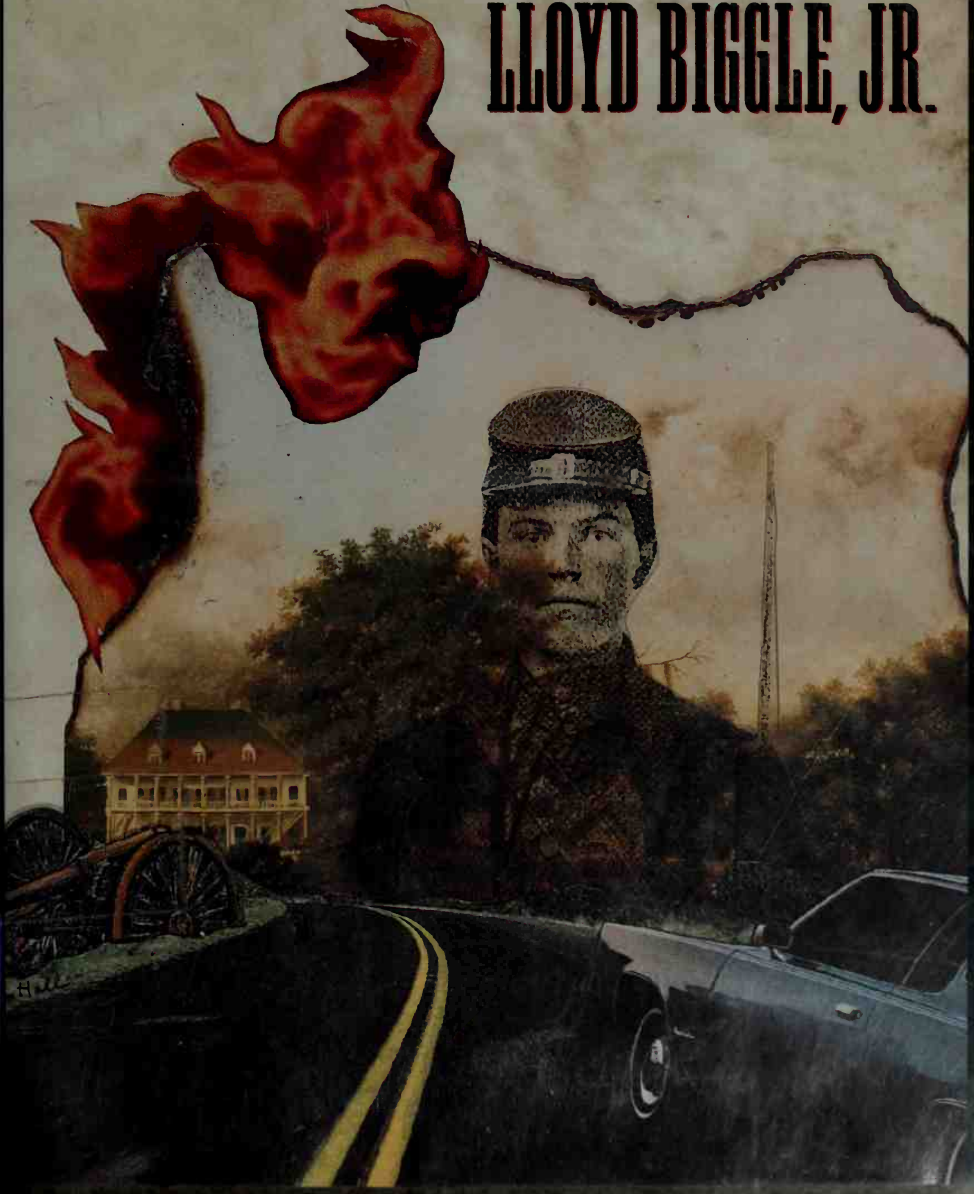
WHERE DEAD SOLDIERS WALK

A PLETCHER & LAMBERT MYSTERY

LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.



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Driving south to Napoleon Corners, Georgia, private detective J. Pletcher has a simple assignment: Go to the Corners General Store and Café, ask for a mint daiquiri, and wait for information about his next case. On the way there, his car is hit by a cannonball on a rural back road—his introduction to a world of Civil War history, Southern manners, and murder.

Pletcher learns that he and his partner, Raina Lambert, have been hired by the Johnstons, an eccentric, wealthy family whose oldest member believes he is a Confederate general. One of the General's grandsons has disappeared from the Johnston estate, and a man who had claimed to be a long-lost relative has turned up dead near Chickamauga. Pletcher and Lambert suspect that someone is trying to kill off the General's heirs. But as they investigate—each pretending to be visiting the town for different reasons—they realize the Johnstons aren't the only ones at risk. In a community that includes an order of monks who carry pistols, a self-described witch, and a ghostly brigade of Union soldiers who set fires in the middle of the night, quirkiness is hiding a deadly plot that puts even Yankee detectives in danger.

ALSO BY LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

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Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

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All of the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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1

The last thing I expected on that pleasant fall afternoon was to be shot at. Those who endure the unrelenting stress of police work, whether they are private detectives or regular police, try to preserve health and sanity by shifting their nervous systems into neutral when they are between cases and have no cause to be physically and mentally alert. Except for a growing suspicion that I was lost, my mind was wholly occupied with admiring the landscape.

Even if I had been alert, there have been few times in my life when a cannon barrage wouldn't have taken me completely by surprise.

It was a splendid day for a drive—a Friday in mid-October, crisp and bright—and northwest Georgia is lovely country for driving. It has broad valleys and old, wooded, sandstone-crowned mountains that extend obliquely across the corner of the state from Alabama to Tennessee and beyond. Main roads follow the valleys, giving maps of the region a canted look. The mountains were still green, but isolated splashes of color marked those trees that were beginning to brood about winter. God may have fashioned this humped land out of leftovers, but He lavished special care on it.

Everything was perfect for a drive except the road. It was private—a narrow, seldom used strip of gravel that meandered through a forest in the general direction of west and pointed steadily upward. Common species of oak, hickory, sweetgum, and poplar lined the road; pine, dogwood, and redbud were scattered among them. I hadn't seen another car since I left the highway, but I drove cautiously and slowed to a crawl on blind curves. Once I had to ford a small stream that crossed the road through a cemented dip. Birds would have woven ethereal patterns of song about me if it had been summer, but on this fall day, the sounds I heard through an open window were mostly the chirpings of insects accompanied by occa-

sional unidentifiable squeaks. The road itself was the only sign that humans had ever passed this way.

I kept checking my mileage indicator with increasing skepticism. By the time the road finally leveled off at the end of a lengthy, zigzagging ascent, I felt certain I was lost. I emerged in an elongated mountain meadow that had the look of an abandoned pasture or hay field. Except for an occasional isolated clump of shrubs, the weeds had taken over. Solitary small red cedars were bold scouts for some future forest. On my right, which was north, the land rose gradually for half a mile or so to a grove of trees. It sloped downward on my left and dropped steeply behind me. The view of the valley I had just emerged from was spectacular. I made an approving mental note: If I ever required a magnificent spot for a picnic, I would know where to come.

A distant "boom" seemed to herald my arrival. My attention was fixed on the road, which had taken a sudden jog to the south, and I saw nothing at all. Another boom sounded, and another, and another. Suddenly, thirty feet ahead of my car, a cannonball described an elegant arc, bounced twice, kicking up dust as it crossed the road at an angle, and bounded away. Between bounces it seemed to soar gently enough to be caught with a butterfly net.

How you react to an emergency depends, I suppose, on temperament and experience. My experience of being cannonaded was minimal, so I fell back on temperament and got the hell out of there. I stomped on the accelerator and followed a sharp curve to the right. As the car leaped ahead, I glanced at the rearview mirror and saw a cannonball bounce behind me with the same kind of weird slow motion. Almost simultaneously there was a ringing double "thud" as something struck the car, and a sharp "crack" sounded from somewhere nearby. I kept the accelerator on the floor. I heard another "crack," much fainter than the first and with no accompanying thuds. By then I was driving at top speed, and I quickly put that particular trouble spot far behind me.

There are large numbers of enthusiasts in the United States who pursue the Civil War as a hobby. Some spend substantial sums to outfit themselves with authentic weapons, uniforms, and equipment, and they reenact famous Civil War battles. My first thought was that

I had inadvertently driven through one of their practice sessions. That faded at once when I began to apply question marks. The cannon fire had been held until my car was plainly in sight, and the rifle shot that hit it must have been carefully aimed. Probably the cannon had been carefully aimed, too. The only thing about the barrage that was accidental was that it had missed.

I knew instantly that these were *Civil War* cannon. Modern artillery doesn't shoot cannonballs, and I had been thinking about the Civil War ever since I left the Atlanta International Airport that morning. In northwest Georgia and southern Tennessee, one follows a trail of Civil War history and legend. Near the sites of major battles, every traffic intersection throbs with it. While zinging along on Interstate Highway 75, the main route between Atlanta and Chattanooga, I had breathed a silent tribute to the Civil War armies that dragged artillery and wagons over those mountains on tracks we wouldn't even consider roads.

For all I knew, another barrage might come crashing down at any moment, so I drove as fast as I could. I didn't breathe deeply again until the road began a zigzagging descent and I had left the meadow—and its alarums of war—far behind me.

Unlike the forested east side of the mountain, the west side was bare. The road crossed and recrossed the rocky face of the slope. When I finally reached the bottom, I encountered the first evidence of human habitation I had seen along the private road: several vine-covered stone chimneys that remained standing long after time had consumed the buildings they were attached to. I kept a wary eye on a murky patch of woods on my right because it seemed like an ideal spot for another ambush. After the cannonade and the small arms fire, I needed only a cavalry charge to really make my day.

Beyond it, I arrived suddenly at a decrepit village. I recognized it immediately. The directions relayed to me by telephone early that morning had been accurate enough except that they made no mention of the cannon or the ambushing sharpshooter.

This was Napoleon Corners, Georgia, and it had been described to me as a cluster of abandoned buildings on an infrequently traveled private road at a crossroad that no longer existed. Clearly the place had never been a metropolis, but it was slightly less dead than

reported. The nonexistent crossroad was still in use and deeply rutted, and the village was spread out along it. The dwellings, which had clusters of rundown outbuildings gathered about them like broods of chicks around mother hens, could have been used to illustrate progressive stages of decay in rural housing. South of the intersection, the structures looked utterly abandoned, and one—with a collapsed roof—had been partially burned. To the north, however, several buildings were in surprisingly good repair and freshly painted. One of these was a tiny church with a blunt little tower.

At the intersection, the private road was blocked by white wood gates identical to a pair I had negotiated at the other end when I entered it. I slowed to a halt and watched an unlikely procession pass in front of me. Two monks in dark brown cowls were in the lead, walking on either side of a donkey that pulled a rickety wagon loaded with logs that had been sawed and split. Behind them came two hefty-looking men in overalls carrying axes, and bringing up the rear were several long-haired goats and a kid. No matter how I considered this strange array, it made no sense whatsoever, and I could only gape at it. No one glanced in my direction, not even the goats.

Just beyond the intersection was a handsome old stone farmhouse with wings that were arrayed in sparkling white aluminum siding. It seemed to have no connection with the grubby, dilapidated village and the rutted crossroad. There was an expanse of parklike lawn in front with a scattering of picnic tables and a barbecue pit. The graveled parking lot was empty. The sign, CORNERS GENERAL STORE AND CAFÉ, was ornamented with drawings of crossed Civil War rifles at either end, and there were two snub Civil War cannon on cement bases guarding the steps that led up to a broad porch with more picnic tables.

A swinging sign beside the road evoked that era of innocence when travel had been adventure rather than mass entertainment. It said CABINS, and several miniature buildings stood in a row behind the old farmhouse, freshly painted and in excellent repair. I wondered how travelers managed to find them in that out-of-the-way location.

I got out and opened the gates, each of which bore half of a large PRIVATE ROAD sign similar to the one I had already seen when I entered the road. I got out again to close them behind me and drove to the

empty parking lot beside the Corners General Store and Café. My first order of business was to inspect the damage to my rented car. Something had passed completely through it, entering just forward of the back window on the right side and exiting above the rear side window on the left, leaving two neatly punched holes. A slug from a shotgun might have done it, but the "crack" I heard hadn't sounded like a shotgun blast.

Whatever the projectile had been, its path passed through the plane the driver's head was on, and the marksman might have given me a permanent headache if he had led the car a bit instead of aiming directly at me. Probably my sudden acceleration had thrown him off. I locked the car and walked to the door of the Corners General Store and Café in a thoughtful mood, pausing at the bottom of the steps long enough to sniff the muzzles of the two cannon. Probably they hadn't been fired since 1865. They were almost completely filled with dirt, cigarette stubs, orange peels, gum wrappers, and other memorabilia of our decadent civilization.

A bell tinkled as I opened the door. On the left side of the hallway was a large room with shelves, counters, and tables that were crammed with merchandise. On the right side was the wing that served as a café. It was furnished with rustic tables and chairs, and its interior was paneled with knotty pine. Its tiled floor looked freshly waxed and clean enough to eat on.

I seated myself in the most remote corner and waited. An elderly, bald-headed man with the build of an overweight wrestler looked into the room. He wore a red flannel shirt, and he had a towel tied around his waist. He shuffled forward, scowling.

"Are you Duff Schaffer?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I'll have a mint daiquiri."

He nodded again and turned away. He hesitated in the doorway and sent a searching glance in my direction—it could have indicated either skepticism or curiosity—before he shuffled out.

I heard a distant bellow. "Tad! Where is that boy?"

A few minutes later, through a window in the opposite wall, I saw a black boy of ten or eleven heading west on a new-looking bicycle. He was riding more in the leisurely fashion of one beginning a

marathon race than as a courier entrusted with an urgent message, and I hoped his errand had nothing to do with me.

Nothing happened for almost half an hour. I passed the time absently looking out of the window at a stretch of forest that climbed into the distance, softening the outline of a humped hill that probably was an outrider of the mountain I had crossed. It was a lovely view, and I felt like the proverbial fish out of water.

However enjoyable such scenery might be to look at or even to wander about in, tranquil landscapes pose extraordinary difficulties for a detective. There are relatively few crimes, and when a felony does occur, there will be few witnesses and fewer suspects. I wanted to tackle the problem of who had shot at me and why, but I had no idea how to track down suspects and find witnesses when there were no people about.

Finally Duff Schaffer brought cocktails for two—two large, tulip-shaped glasses on an enormous, circular tray that could have held a six-course dinner. He clumsily placed one glass in front of me with a paper cocktail napkin and arranged the other on the opposite side of the table. He acknowledged my thanks with a nod, responded to a comment on the weather with a shy smile, and retired. He still hadn't spoken a word, and I had no idea what was going to happen. I'd had the impression that liquor wasn't sold in rural Georgia, so the drinks were unexpected. When I asked for a "mint daiquiri," I thought I was giving him some kind of password.

The sound of a galloping horse reached me faintly. It came closer, and the rider flashed past the window. A moment later she entered—a woman of perhaps twenty-five in full equestrian costume including a short whip and a cap she didn't bother to remove. She came directly to my table, seated herself opposite me, and looked me over with an expression that made me feel like a tainted cut of meat being rejected by a finicky cook.

She was a tall, slender, highly attractive blonde. An advertising writer would have described her as "statuesque"—she even looked good in riding pants—but such a formidable female would never be called "cute." She was a type I find most appealing when I can admire it from a distance: a woman with muscles. She had just demonstrated her skill with a horse. Probably she also played championship golf

and tennis, ran up and down mountains before breakfast, and ate her bear steaks rare. She was Superwoman, modestly attired.

When I scrutinized her in return, her blue eyes met mine without wavering. Then she raised her mint daiquiri and took an unladylike swig. "You don't look much like a detective," she announced. She added reflectively, "I suppose that could be an advantage. I'm Kolina Kirkland. Laurette Johnston's secretary."

I had never heard either name. "All the wise books of the world warn about judging from appearances," I told her. "At the moment, you don't even faintly resemble a secretary."

She burst into laughter.

"What's a detective supposed to look like?" I demanded. "Were you expecting the deerstalker hat, the calabash pipe, and the magnifying glass? That isn't a detective, that's a caricature. While we're being personal, you don't sound much like a Southerner, either, but I wouldn't know about the advantages or disadvantages of that. What brings a Boston Yankee to Georgia?"

"The General pretends to be a Southerner, but the Johnstons are really transplanted Yankees," she said. "Miss Laurette is allergic to the South. A thousand years here wouldn't convert her, and when she needed a new secretary, of course she went to Boston for her. Meaning, for me. Do you have a card or some kind of identification?"

I passed one of my business cards across the table. It has the phone numbers of our Los Angeles and New York offices in fine print at the top, followed by their addresses—the Klemmer Building in Los Angeles and Mayly Plaza in New York—after which it reads, LAMBERT AND ASSOCIATES, INVESTIGATIVE CONSULTANTS, with my name, J. Pletcher, in the lower left corner.

"And you're J. Pletcher?" She sounded skeptical.

"The 'J' stands for Jariath. My mother was frightened by a Latin dictionary."

She was still regarding me as tainted meat, and her lips curled in disgust. She would have been far more attractive if she had radiated less energy. Even while sitting motionless, she conveyed the impression of having more electrons in her body than it could contain.

"If it isn't too much trouble, I'd like to know what I'm supposed to be doing here," I said. "No one told me anything except how to

find this place and what to say when I arrived. I don't even know who hired me. I thought 'mint daiquiri' was a password."

"It's a very good drink, but I'm the only one around here who likes it—which is why I suggested that you ask for one. I told Duff to send for me the moment anyone did."

She took another swig of her mint daiquiri, and I sampled mine out of curiosity. If you like that sort of thing—a daiquiri with a mild flavor of mint—then this is a drink you'll like.

"Miss Laurette hired you," she said. "Laurette Johnston. General Bramwell Johnston's daughter. I have no idea why. Even if I did, I'm sure Miss Laurette would prefer to tell you herself."

"If she has a problem, surely her secretary knows something about it. Just give me a rough sketch so I can turn on my brain and start working."

"I know absolutely nothing about it. This is a peaceful, quiet place. The people are friendly and helpful. Miss Laurette has been extremely kind to me, and the General is a dear. I was both shocked and amazed when she said she was hiring a detective. She'll have to tell you herself what she wants you to do. Unfortunately, she's extremely busy at the moment. She's getting ready to entertain a visitor—a niece from the West Coast she's never seen and didn't know she had. She'll send for you the moment she's free, but that may not be until late this evening."

I refused to believe her. "You're the kind of secretary who *always* knows more about the boss's business than the boss does," I told her.

"Laurette Johnston's secretary never knows more than her boss wants her to know," she protested. "Really—I have no idea at all. I suppose we have more than a normal quota of peculiar happenings here, but they aren't the sort of thing one hires a detective about. At least—Miss Laurette never did before."

"Tell me," I persisted.

"They're complicated."

"Most things are, even when they look simple."

"Nothing about the Johnstons ever looks simple. But Miss Laurette would skin me if she knew I'd been discussing family secrets."

"She won't know. Anyway, she's going to tell me those secrets herself, or I'll go back to Miami and let her do her own detecting. This

job is difficult enough without a mulish client withholding information. Tell me."

She giggled, perhaps at the reference to her employer as a mulish client. Then she shrugged. "A man has disappeared."

"Who is he?"

"Albert Johnston. Al. Miss Laurette's nephew. He's General Johnston's grandson and the heir apparent to a substantial fortune."

"How substantial?" I asked.

"I don't know. Millions, I suppose. Miss Laurette looks after all of the finances herself. She counts every penny and doesn't tell anyone anything."

She was smiling, but she sounded resentful. "Miss Laurette is a character," she went on. "She tries to run everyone and everything. She carries on as though the family were perpetually on the verge of bankruptcy, but she's actually a very generous person, and I've noticed that there's never any shortage of money. High Acres—the Johnston estate—must be immensely valuable, and Al Johnston should inherit quite a pile if he lives long enough to collect it. Unfortunately for him, he'll have to outlive both the General and Miss Laurette to do that, and they're going to live forever."

"Is foul play suspected?"

"In Al's disappearance? No way! He often goes off for a week or more without telling anyone where he's going. In recent months he's been gone more than he's been here, but this time no one saw him leave, and he's been gone for nearly four weeks. He never stayed away that long before."

"How old is he?"

"A bit under thirty-five, I would say."

"Occupation?"

She snorted. "Loafing—raised to the level of a vice."

"Is there any reason for not supposing he suddenly decided to visit Disney World or take a Caribbean cruise?"

"Al Johnston never in his life decided anything suddenly. Anyway, he would have said something—if only to ask for money."

"Did he take anything with him?"

"I suppose he took the things he always takes when he goes away. All of us have the uneasy feeling something should be done about

finding out where he is, but I'm sure no one would even consider calling in a detective, either about him or about the other peculiar things."

"What other things?"

"Someone is taking potshots at the General when he goes out to play."

"What do you mean—'when he goes out to play'? How old is he?"

"He's in his eighties. Maybe almost ninety. He's a Civil War veteran, and he plays war. He's planning to retake Chattanooga for the Confederates. He holds maneuvers—"

I held up a hand to stop her. "Just a moment, please, while I sort this out. The last time I checked, the Civil War had been over for a few years. If he actually fought in it, he couldn't have been born much later than 1850, and even that would have made him a precocious fifteen when it ended in 1865. 'In his eighties' doesn't have enough stretch to it. A genuine Civil War veteran would be about a hundred and fifty years old and an international celebrity. Even I would have heard of him."

"Actually, it was the General's grandfather who was the Civil War veteran. He served in the Federal army, and he was only a private. But when the General bought property down here—during the Depression, when it was cheap—he transferred his loyalties. He went over to the enemy completely. He started having his suits made in Atlanta so he could disguise himself as a gentleman from the Old South, and he began holding his own maneuvers and studying the Civil War's military history to see if he could find a way to make it come out differently. Someone made him a courtesy colonel, and he rapidly promoted himself to lieutenant general. Now he thinks he's ready to march his troops on Chattanooga and correct the blunders made by the Confederate General Bragg when he lost the battle there in eighteen sixty-something. The General has trained some neighborhood boys to imitate a Confederate army, weather and school permitting. They hold maneuvers in full uniform, shoot off cannon and rifles, make cavalry charges, and generally have a ball—under the General's stern command, of course."

"And someone is taking potshots at him?"

"That's Miss Laurette's version. The General's version is that the

damned Yankee sharpshooters get more pestiferous every day. My version is that he caught his coat sleeve on a dead branch and got a hole poked in it. But the hole is there, and the General did complain about Yankee sharpshooters, and I know Miss Laurette is concerned."

"But not enough to hire a detective," I suggested.

"Surely not that much. And then—someone tried to force her car off the road the last time she was driving back from Chattanooga."

"I see. It really doesn't add up to much. Right now Al Johnston could be studying higher mathematics at the Las Vegas blackjack tables. Even if the potshots were real, they could have been strays from hunters anticipating the season. Miss Laurette probably encountered a drunk driver."

She nodded energetically. "That's exactly what I think. As I said, this is a peaceful, quiet place. There are remarkable ghost stories being rumored about, we've had a series of arson cases, someone poisoned the cattle on the south farm, and several times roofing nails have been scattered on the High Acres drive, but in this part of the country, people don't import a private detective over things like that. They call the sheriff, who already knows who the local nuts are and probably knows which one is responsible. Miss Laurette will tell you what her problem is, and I'm sure she'll be far more convincing about it than I could be. She's giving a ball tomorrow night for this visiting niece—a Military Ball—which is why she's so busy. You'll hear from her as soon as she's free."

She called, "Duff!"

Booming laughter came from the room opposite the café. Duff was busy with a customer. Kolina Kirkland went down the hallway and returned with a tiny, thin woman with gray hair and bony hands and arms. Her flowered housedress and matching apron looked homemade. I got to my feet as they approached the table.

"This is May Schaffer," Kolina Kirkland told me. "Duff's wife. This is Mr. Pletcher, May."

We shook hands. She was a startling contrast to her enormous husband.

"Mr. Pletcher will be staying with you for a night or two or perhaps longer," Kolina Kirkland went on. "Give him his choice of cabins, but don't put his name in the register, and don't mention him

to anyone. You can tell him anything he wants to know. He's a detective, and Miss Laurette has hired him."

She turned to me. "There are no telephones here. If you have a message for either me or Miss Laurette, tell Duff. He'll see that it's delivered." She picked up her cocktail glass and drained it, set it down again, nodded at us, and walked to the door with a brisk, athletic stride. A moment later she flashed past the window on her galloping horse, and the hoofbeats faded rapidly.

"Dynamite!" I murmured. "She's an abrupt young lady."

A flicker of a smile crossed May Schaffer's wrinkled face. "She is that."

She also was a liar. The bulge under her left arm could only have been made by a handgun in a shoulder holster. I had been tempted to tell her that the high-buttoned riding coat was the wrong costume for it. She would have to virtually undress before she could draw.

If she couldn't imagine a use for a detective, why had she felt compelled to arm herself for a swift afternoon ride across a peaceful, quiet countryside populated only with friendly, helpful people? Unlike my cannon barrage, this mystery had a simple explanation. Kolina Kirkland wasn't merely showing off her equestrian talent. She rode fast because she was frightened of something.

If I were to question her about it, no doubt I would be tartly informed that people in these parts wouldn't hire a private detective over a little thing like that.

2

May Schaffer gave me a shy smile and slipped away. I sat down again and tried to fit the day's events into a logical pattern: Civil War cannon, the strange holes in my car, monks in full regalia in rural Georgia, an armed equestrian secretary, and the peculiar happenings that weren't worth bothering a detective over. I didn't succeed.

Duff Schaffer's customer left, and he came in to ask me if I wanted another cocktail.

"I thought the sale of hard liquor was restricted in Georgia," I said.

"I'm not selling it. There's no law against giving it away." He was being wary. His wife must have told him what Kolina Kirkland said, but neither of them knew what to make of me.

"I'd rather have beer," I said.

He brightened. "So would I. I don't go for these namby-pamby drinks."

"Why don't you join me?"

He transferred the two cocktail glasses to the tray and took them away, returning with two opened bottles of beer and two glasses. He seated himself, poured the beer, and raised his glass to me. I raised mine, and we drank.

"Quiet place here," I remarked.

"Things jump a little on weekends," Duff said.

I asked casually, "Does the General use real ammunition in his Civil War games?"

He set his glass down with a thump. "Why do you ask?"

"I was narrowly missed by a cannon barrage as I came over the mountain. Then my car was hit by some kind of slug."

He looked at me intently for a moment. Then he got to his feet. "Show me."

His heavy stride must have communicated his concern. May emerged from the back of the house to trail after us as far as the front door. She stood there clutching a wad of apron in one hand and watching anxiously while Duff and I went to the parking lot. He scowled at the holes in my car.

"Probably a Minnie ball," he said. "Dangerous."

"What fires it? A rifle?"

"A Civil War rifle, yes. Were you thinking of reporting this to the authorities?"

"What would the authorities do?"

"Probably nothing. It's private property—even the road is private—and Civil War weapons are fired here all the time. They'd figure the General did it, but it's his land, and he pretty much does what he likes on it. I'll tell you one thing for sure. There's something

really odd about this. The General never shoots anything in the direction of the road. That's his army's rear. He pretends he's a Confederate general, and he always fires toward the north. His games have never hurt anyone or damaged anything. Also, he's home sick today. He's had a touch of the flu all week, Miss Laurette said. If you don't mind a suggestion, I'll ask my son to stop by this evening. Eddie is an investigator for the county sheriff. He grew up here, and he knows what goes on. He'll know how to handle this."

"Please do," I said. "I'd like to meet him."

We returned to the café, and while we finished our beer, we talked about Napoleon Corners, which had its own distinctive Civil War connection. It hadn't been named in honor of either French emperor but for a type of Civil War cannon called the Napoleon. Bragg's army had abandoned one somewhere nearby during its frenzied retreat from Chattanooga after Grant defeated it there in the fall of 1863. This would have made a much better story if one of the military remnants outside the door had been General Bragg's missing field-piece, but they were iron cannon with rifled bores. The Napoleon had been a smooth-bored cannon cast of bronze.

Finally I asked, "Do *you* know why the Johnstons hired a detective? I'd like to start work, but I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Probably it has something to do with Drew Fithie," Duff said. "He's the biggest scoundrel between Chattanooga and Atlanta. Always trying to put something over on someone."

"Who's Drew Fithie?"

"Man that runs the Village. Or tries to."

It was *Village* with a spoken capital letter. "What *Village*?" I asked.

"The one west of here."

That was all he would say. He knew of no problem the Johnstons might have that didn't involve Drew Fithie.

"What's this about ghosts?" I asked, intending to run down Kolina Kirkland's list.

He looked up quickly. "Ghosts? I don't know anything about ghosts."

But he did. Like the equestrian secretary, he was frightened.

15

We went to look at the six tiny cabins. They lacked bathtubs and telephones, but each had its own toilet, lavatory, shower, and propane heater. They were scrupulously clean, and they had comfortable beds. The wardrobes and small writing tables made the interiors far too cramped to swing a cat in, but few travelers did much of that anyway.

At least they had electric lights and modern plumbing. Schaffer operated his own power system with a couple of windmill generators. The lack of these things had contributed substantially to the demise of Napoleon Corners, he said. Its population gradually abandoned it for the Village, where such luxuries were available. Now a religious community had taken over some of the houses, and the monks were restoring them. They didn't seem to mind the primitive living.

The six cabins were all that remained of twenty or so that had been built for temporary farm workers when Bramwell Johnston had notions of establishing a southern plantation in the Georgia mountains. That had been decades ago, and it hadn't worked. When Schaffer took over the general store, he added the café, tore down most of the cabins, and modernized the six that remained.

"Do you actually have customers for them?" I asked.

"Most nights I have one or two rented. Sometimes more."

"To whom?"

"Traveling men covering this territory or passing through it. They always stop with me."

"How do they find the place?"

"They know about it." Duff chuckled. Then he added, simpering like a schoolgirl caught coming in late from a date, "I got billheads that say 'Crossroads Motel.' I give 'em a bill for thirty dollars, plus taxes, and charge 'em a flat twenty for bed and breakfast. The thirty is reasonable for a night in a motel with breakfast included, so their bosses don't complain. They have a quiet, comfortable place to stay, they get a super breakfast, and they make money every time they stop. They're loyal customers, I'll tell you, and it's profitable for me. Usually they eat dinner here, too. A couple of them will be along tonight."

I had been wracking my imagination for a cover story that would

account for my presence in this quiet backwater. "Traveling salesman" seemed ideal, but when I suggested this to Schaffer, he scrutinized me doubtfully.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Don't I look the part?"

"You aren't glad-handed enough."

"I'll work on it. Maybe I can get by for a few days."

"Maybe," he said without enthusiasm. "If you're planning on doing much walking, you'll need shoes and clothes for it. These hills are hard on the feet if you don't have proper shoes, and we've got brambles that just plain eat a man's suit."

I had the right clothing. I never know when I may have to disguise myself as a ditchdigger or attend a formal dinner party, so I carry a wardrobe designed to meet almost any contingency.

I selected cabin number one because its parking place was behind the store building and partially shielded from the road—not that there was much traffic to conceal it from. With Duff's help, I sketched a rough map of the Johnston estate, showing approximate locations for Napoleon Corners; High Acres, the Johnston mansion; several tenant farms; and Drew Fithie's domain, the nearby community that Schaffer called the Village. He returned to his work, and I carried my suitcases into the cabin and unpacked a few items I might have immediate use for.

Then I seated myself on the cabin's one chair and passed the events of the day in review. Early that morning I had been in Miami, winding up my pursuit of a fugitive bank teller from Providence. Raina Lambert, who would be a six-star general if the personnel of Lambert and Associates had military ranks, was in Toronto acting as a consultant to an industrial concern that had a problem with employee theft. Her orders were relayed to me by our New York office when I reported by telephone after placing the absconding teller in the hands of the authorities.

They were cryptic—she never divulges more than she has to in any message delivered by a third party. I was given directions for finding Napoleon Corners and instructed to take myself there as expeditiously as possible and ask Duff Schaffer, owner of the Corners General Store and Café, for a mint daiquiri.

17

In Raina Lambert's vocabulary, the word "expeditiously" refers to something that should have been done yesterday. I flew to Atlanta, picked up a rental car there—which was quicker than waiting for a connecting flight—and drove north on Interstate 75. South of Chattanooga, I switched to secondary roads and began looking for landmarks. Eventually I found the private road that unexpectedly crossed a battlefield.

After arriving precisely on schedule with the unexpected bonus of being shot at, and talking with the client's secretary, I still didn't have an inkling of what I was supposed to be doing. Normally Raina briefed me herself by telephone when I was about to take on a new job, or she arranged to have the client talk with me. I couldn't remember a more unlikely beginning for a case, but mine was not to reason why.

The thrifty Laurette Johnston surely hadn't brought in an expensive investigative consultant to hash over the items Kolina Kirkland mentioned. The only oddity about the missing grandson, a man almost thirty-five living in a household dominated by an elderly maiden aunt who pinched pennies and tried to run everyone and everything, was that he hadn't left years before. Peculiar happenings were to be expected in the vicinity of a wealthy old man who refought Civil War battles with real cannon. If it hadn't been for the barrage I had driven through, and Kolina Kirkland's shoulder holster—and the fact that all of these people were frightened—I would have been willing to go back to Miami and start over with another case.

While I waited for someone to tell me why I was here, I thought I might as well familiarize myself with my surroundings. I locked my cabin and walked in the direction of the religious community. It was one of Miss Laurette's charities, Schaffer had said. The order was called the Brotherhood of the Reborn, and it was a religious retreat for men who had wrecked their lives with drugs or alcohol. The abandoned buildings and land at Napoleon Corners weren't worth anything to the family, and it cost nothing to have a worthwhile charity repair and use them. The men came here to restore their health—physical, mental, and moral—through a radical change of

lifestyle and long hours of healthy, hard work. When their minds and bodies had been healed, the sponsoring organization would help them make a new start.

It sounded like a noble project, but it had a kicker I didn't care for. If there really were peculiar goings-on in the neighborhood, the monks' characters and backgrounds were so dubious that any competent precinct cop would have picked up the entire brotherhood every time anything happened.

I counted more than a dozen of them—young, middle-aged, and elderly; white, black, Latino, and even one Oriental. Only three were wearing traditional brown monks' cowls. The others were in patched overalls. They were fencing fields, repairing outbuildings, roofing, painting, chopping wood, looking after livestock. Two were building a small barn—one laid cement blocks while the other supervised and instructed.

I walked as far as the last building on the rutted road. When I turned back, a monk stepped from the church porch to intercept me. "Were you looking for someone?"

"Just looking," I said with a smile. "I'm staying at the Corners, and I wondered about all of this activity in such an out-of-the-way place."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! I do hope we haven't disturbed you!"

He was a big, swarthy man with a barrel chest and a voice that boomed even in casual conversation. He wore a traditional cowl with hood and flopping sleeves, but I noticed when he came down the church steps that his feet were shod in stout work shoes. This was a working community.

I assured him that the activity hadn't disturbed me. Duff Schaffer had told me a little about the brotherhood, I said, and I was impressed.

He beamed at me. "I'm Brother Mulberry. In the Middle Ages, I would have been the prior, but here and now I'm only the boss." Probably he was a reformed addict himself. His eyes held that distant, haunted look of one who could love humanity and emulate heaven all the better because he had already experienced hell.

"I'm J. Pletcher," I told him. "The 'J' stands for 'Joachim.' " Because I was impersonating a traveling salesman, I didn't offer him a card.

We shook hands, and then I reached out and fingered the sleeve

of his robe. "That's an unusual weave. I'm in menswear, and I could get a fancy price for a robe made of that cloth."

"It's hand-woven from goat's wool," he said. "We make it ourselves. Unfortunately, we haven't produced enough yet for our own use, but eventually I would like to market it. We desperately need income. There are far too many things that we can't make for ourselves. When we have no money, we must do without." He hesitated. "You must be one of Duff's traveling salesmen. Did you say—menswear? I wouldn't have you think we're rude mendicants who beg from passing strangers, but I wonder if you'd be able to obtain discounts for us. We receive ample supplies of secondhand clothing, most of it in serviceable condition, but shoes and stockings are a problem."

"How many pair do you need?"

"Of shoes, sixteen pair in the proper sizes would give each of us a reserve pair. Of stockings, or socks, two pair for each of us, correctly sized, would be a revelation. It's strange to be thinking of clothing in inspirational terms, but we've been wearing whatever we can get, and the brethren joke that every pair of stockings donated to us is the same size—the one that doesn't fit."

"Make a list of the sizes for me," I suggested. "You'll find me in cabin number one. If I'm not there, you can leave it with Duff. What kind of shoes do you want?"

He raised the edge of his robe to display his heavy work shoes. "Durability is far more important than style," he said with a smile. "Shoes of any kind are expensive, and they've been a problem ever since we came here. With the rough work we do, light shoes wear very poorly. I finally got everyone outfitted with one pair of heavy shoes like these, but some are already badly worn, and what are the brethren to wear while they're being resoled? Could you estimate a price?"

"For sixteen pair? I'll have to check my sources, but I can guarantee you the lowest price you would find anywhere, and since it's for charity, I may be able to find someone willing to pick up the tab for you. I'm pleased to be able to help. A religious community like yours must be absolutely unique in this part of the country."

"Not unique, no. There's another close by in Alabama called the

Brotherhood of St. Giles. Like ours, it's a young order, but I understand it's already earned enormous respect from the neighboring communities. It concerns itself with charitable deeds. My brethren must first learn to help themselves before they can help others. How generous of you to interest yourself in our needs! Jesus himself said, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' May you be richly rewarded!"

He babbled on gratefully. Eventually I made my escape by promising to call another day for a guided tour of the community.

Wholesale prices on almost anything are available to me through Lambert and Associates, but I would have ordered these shoes in any case. The bill would be added to Laurette Johnston's account. It was a small price to pay for making the monks my allies. Not only would Brother Mulberry be properly grateful, but perhaps, when I got to know him better, he would tell me why *he* was carrying a gun. His cowl had been open at the throat, and I was able to glimpse the strap leading to the bulge of his shoulder holster. It seemed like a dubious accessory for a religious leader—even more so than for a female equestrian—but obviously this was a community of oddities.

At least Brother Mulberry was not frightened. A man who has experienced hell is either afraid of everything or of nothing, and he feared nothing. When that kind of man finds it necessary to arm himself, something is decidedly wrong.

I returned to the store and café and went around to the rear door. Duff Schaffer was seated in the kitchen talking with his wife, who was making and baking fruit pies—apple, peach, and cherry—to sell in the store or serve in the café. Those she had just taken from the oven smelled delicious. I suddenly realized it was midafternoon and I hadn't eaten since an inadequate airline breakfast.

May bustled about in alarm when I told her I'd missed lunch. She served up the most savory toasted ham sandwich I had ever tasted, made with homemade bread and country cheese, and delicious homemade vegetable soup. While I feasted, Duff entertained us with tales told to him by his traveling salesmen. Some weren't suitable for mixed company. May filled her pies and trimmed the crusts while tut-tutting and pooh-poohing her husband's stories.

Duff told me his young helper, Tad Williams, had bicycled down to the Village to telephone a message to their son, Eddie, the sheriff's investigator. He expected Eddie about five-thirty. I promised to be waiting.

While I was eating, Brother Mulberry arrived with the list of shoe sizes. Duff hadn't realized I intended to act the part of a traveling salesman so thoroughly, and he was impressed.

Brother Mulberry also brought a shopping list. Duff took him into the store to wait on him, and while he was gone, I reminded May that Miss Kirkland had told her to tell me anything I wanted to know. She seated herself across the table from me and hunched her thin shoulders forward. "What is it?" she asked apprehensively. She, too, was frightened.

"Nothing complicated." I got out my notebook. "I can do better work for Miss Laurette if I know something about her family. Surely she wouldn't object to your telling me things that are common knowledge around here. How long have you known the Johnstons?"

"Ever since they came here. I grew up with the family, and I was a maid at High Acres before I got married."

"Then you should know all about them. Tell me about the General's children."

"There were seven," she said. "Four boys and three girls. Miss Laurette was the eldest, and she never married. She stayed home to look after her father and the younger children—her mother died when she was twelve. Leonora married a man named Wainer, and they had one son, Albert Sidney. She and her husband were killed in an automobile accident when Al was only four, and the General and Miss Laurette raised him."

"I suppose the boy was named after the famous Confederate general."

"Of course," she said, surprised I would ask anything that obvious. "When Al came here to live, the General changed his last name to Johnston."

Family history was a safe subject. May relaxed and began to talk freely. "Then there was a younger daughter, Letitia. Everyone called her Letty. She was the General's favorite. Maybe that was why she

turned out the way she did, wild, always making trouble. She was only sixteen when she got pregnant. The General threw her out and never mentioned her name again."

"Letty?" I mused. "I noticed a place on the map called Letty. It should be just a little west of here. Is that the Village Duff refers to?"

"The General named it after her. When he threw her out, he made them take down every sign that had 'Letty' on it. It's still 'Letty' on the map, but no one calls it that. It's just 'the Village.' "

"It seems odd he didn't have the name changed to something else."

"It would have caused a fuss, and he hates fusses. Anyway, he swore he'd never mention her name again, and he couldn't get it changed without mentioning it—one way or another."

"I see. The Johnstons certainly have an interesting family history. What about the boys?"

"Michael, Millard, Merrick, and Malcolm. Michael was the oldest. He enlisted in the army during World War II, and he was killed in the war. Millard fought a war of his own—with his father. Finally he went to the West Coast to get as far from him as he could. He married there and seemed to be doing well. For a time he was reconciled with the family, but when his son was born, the General wanted the baby named Joseph Egglestone Johnston, after another Civil War general, Albert Sidney Johnston's brother. Millard's wife wouldn't hear of that, and they broke off again. I believe the boy died young. I never heard anything more about Millard or his family."

"It must be Millard's daughter who's coming to visit," I said.

May looked at me with interest. "I didn't know Millard had a daughter."

"Miss Kirkland said Miss Laurette was getting ready for a visit by a niece from the West Coast—one she's never seen and didn't know she had. That must be Millard's daughter."

"I'll swan! I had no idea."

"What about Merrick and Malcolm?"

She shook her head sadly. "Merrick was a fine boy and a fine young man. Always building things. Went to college—Georgia Tech—and got to be an engineer. Then he went off to Asia or somewhere to build bridges and railroads and things and died there. Of some kind of fever, they said."

"The Johnstons certainly have been unlucky," I remarked.

She nodded glumly. "You can say that. Malcolm had a good job in New York. Then he stole money from his employer and went to jail. The General won't mention his name, either."

Duff had returned, and he was listening with silent disapproval.

"Doesn't anyone know what happened to Letitia?" I asked.

May shook her head.

"She could have married and had a large family."

"Or not married and had a large family," May said darkly.

"That was hard on a pregnant girl of sixteen—throwing her out into the cold world that way regardless of how wild she was."

"It wasn't as hard as it sounds. She had some money of her own from her mother. The General's attorney handled it. Steve Malkinson. Letty got a good allowance until she was twenty-one, and then she drew all of it. The other children did the same."

"Did the other boys marry?"

"Michael didn't. He couldn't have been much more than twenty or twenty-one when he died. I don't know about Malcolm. Merrick would have told his father. He got on well with his father."

"What if he'd married an Oriental girl? Would the General have accepted her?"

She stared at me. The possibility had never occurred to her.

"So it adds up like this," I said. "Laurette never married. Leonora married and had one son, Al, before she and her husband were killed. But Letitia, and Merrick, and Malcolm could have had any number of children, and Millard had a son who may have died young, a daughter who is coming to visit, and possibly others. So the General may have numerous grandchildren he doesn't know about. It's even possible that Michael married and had a child. Sudden secret marriages did happen with soldiers."

I drew a line in my notebook. I now knew what Laurette Johnston's problem was even though it might not be the one she had in mind. I had never encountered a family so ideally situated to have unknown heirs converging from all directions to claim shares of an estate. The Johnstons would have to act quickly to compile life histories of the General's children and track down all of his unknown grandchildren

if there were any. Otherwise, his estate could be tied up in litigation for generations.

Duff stirred himself and spoke gloomily. "You called them an unlucky family. I think High Acres has a curse on it. The man that owned it before the General bought it lost all his money in the stock market crash and shot himself. His wife and children were evicted—he'd mortgaged everything to the hilt. The things that happened to previous owners were just as bad or worse—murders, and suicides, and disappearances. Bramwell Johnston bought the estate cheap and bragged about the bargain he got. He's had nothing but misery ever since. First his wife died, and then all but one of his children died or vanished. He's been queer himself for years. Now his only grandson is dead. We've lived here all our lives, and we love the place, but something evil happens to everyone that owns it."

I was waving a hand in protest. "Hold it a moment! Miss Kirkland said the grandson is *missing*. Maybe he just took a trip or went on a bender."

Duff shook his head and spoke with mournful certainty. "I'm sorry about it. The Johnstons have always been good to us. But if anything bad can happen to that family, it will. With the Johnstons, 'missing' means 'dead.' Or something worse. I'll guarantee it."

3

While I was savoring a piece of freshly baked cherry pie, I asked May if she knew why Miss Laurette needed a detective. "I hope it's something to do with Drew Fithie," she said. "He's talking about starting a restaurant."

"He's been talking about that for twenty years," Duff said. "It wouldn't matter. Nobody can compete with your cooking."

"He might hire May," I suggested. "What would the Corners Café do then?"

May burst into laughter. Duff looked at me blankly.

"He easily could offer her more money than you're paying her," I told Duff. May screamed with laughter. Duff's face got very red, and I took that as a signal to leave.

I had a phone call of my own to make, and I wanted to try out the map I had sketched, so I drove west toward the Village. Again the private road meandered through a forest, but it was wide enough here for two lanes of traffic, and the trees had been cut back from the road. As I rounded a curve, a gleaming white mansion suddenly came into view on a mountaintop to the south, its pillared facade rising above the surrounding trees. According to my map, the drive that tunneled into the forest on my left spiraled upward to High Acres, the Johnston mansion, intersecting another private drive to the mansion that connected with Georgia State Highway 353 on the west boundary of the estate.

High Acres looked like a classic architectural masterpiece from Natchez, Mississippi, translated intact to a Georgian mountaintop. The mansion, plus a huge estate, would make an impressive inheritance for Al Johnston, especially if an appropriate chunk of money came with it, and I had no doubt that one did. Laurette Johnston might be a penny-pincher, but people who are strapped for cash do not hire Lambert and Associates. The exorbitant retainer Raina Lambert extracts from new clients leaves no likelihood of a misunderstanding about the probable size of the final bill. Investigative Consultants do not come cheap.

I followed the gravel road until it ended at Highway 353. The double gate there also was marked "Private Road," but this one stood open. Beside it was an arrow pointing back the way I had come and a large sign:

NAPOLEON CORNERS
Corners General Store and Café—Delicious Food
Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner Served Daily
Comfortable Tourist Cabins
Bed and Breakfast
Three Miles

I followed Highway 353 north. After a quarter of a mile, I rounded a curve and came upon the nameless Village. It should have been called Fithie instead of Letty. On the west side of the road, across from the Johnston estate, there were, in close succession, Drew Fithie's General Store—a hulking, ugly, box-like building with corrugated steel sides that made it look like a temporary structure from World War II that someone forgot to tear down; Drew Fithie's Gas Station and Garage, also box-like but larger and uglier; Drew Fithie's Plumbing, Heating, and Construction, located out of sight behind the garage; and Drew Fithie's Plaza, a long frame building divided into shops.

On the Johnstons' side of the road were the tiny brick post office, a brick school house, and a lovely brick church with a graceful steeple and a shaded graveyard that was dotted with modest headstones and one enormous monument that bore the name JOHNSTON. Church, school, and post office didn't belong to Drew Fithie, but neither were they Letty's—at least, there were no names under the signs U.S. POST OFFICE and VILLAGE SCHOOL, and the glass-enclosed announcement board beside the church door (next Sunday's sermon, "Many Are Called") was headed SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH.

The Village had no bank, but Drew Fithie sold money orders in his general store. It had no restaurant, but Drew Fithie ran a Snack and Dessert Bar in his plaza. The only commercial establishment without a Fithie connection was the law office of Malkinson and Borling, a rambling, handsome stone house of the same vintage as the Corners General Store and Café. It also was someone's home; there were children's toys in the yard. It added a touch of distinction—the only one—to the shoddy row of commercial structures. The Village could no more support a law firm than it could a bank or a restaurant, but May Schaffer had mentioned that the General's attorney was named Steve Malkinson. A firm that represented Bramwell Johnston's legal interests would flourish regardless of its location.

Beyond the school's playground, which also served as a roadside park, was a residential section of small houses, all so neat and freshly painted that they had a regimented look despite the fact that they stood on large lots and no two of them were alike. I learned later that the Johnstons rented them to employees or to employees' relatives.

The variegated and widely scattered houses on the other side of the highway, behind Drew Fithie's enterprises, were privately owned. A few looked luxurious; some were as decrepit as the buildings at Napoleon Corners.

I pondered all of this while shopping at Drew Fithie's General Store. In addition to groceries, the store offered a little of everything—appliances, hunting and sports equipment, toys, household items, even furniture. It also rented video tapes. A large notice board carried do-it-yourself unclassified ads for secondhand trucks, motorcycles, assorted autos, bicycles, hi-fi equipment, citizens band radios, rifles, and shotguns. It also announced a Ham Shoot at the Henley farm, the organization of a weekly quilting club for beginners, and bumper crops of pumpkins from several farmers.

I bought newspapers and an assortment of snacks in the hope of learning something from one of the clerks, but the teenaged girl who waited on me made it clear that this was not her day for being friendly to strange men. When I went to the gas station to use the telephone, the two employees abruptly became uncommunicative and furiously busy.

I made a collect call to our New York office, announced my safe arrival at Napoleon Corners, explained my sudden need for footwear, and dictated the shoe sizes Brother Mulberry had supplied. I asked to have a pair of heavy work shoes and two pairs of socks for each size rushed to him.

I hadn't even begun work, and this investigation was already the most awkward I had ever taken part in. I was accustomed to reporting to Raina Lambert regularly by telephone, wherever she was, and receiving her comments and instructions, but the telephones in the Village were too public and too inconvenient. I would have to devise my own pony express system.

I left my purchases in the car and strolled down to see what the shopping potential was at Drew Fithie's Plaza. I was still hoping to find a talkative employee. There was only one vehicle parked there, a sleek, yellow, expensive-looking foreign sports car. The Parthenon wouldn't have looked more out of place. A young male with thick glasses was seated behind the wheel. His owlish appearance was accentuated by an unruly shock of yellow hair that bore a startling

resemblance to ruffled feathers. We exchanged glances; neither of us was impressed.

The barber in the chintzy barber and beauty salon was the strong, silent type who didn't speak to customers; at least, I didn't see him speak to the customer he had. He gave me a sour look as I passed. I moved on and paused to study the photographs of properties listed with Drew Fithie's Realty and Insurance. I had never seen a more uninteresting group of real estate photos. Every piece of run-down property in rural northwest Georgia was being offered for sale through Drew Fithie's Realty. Next door, a shop calling itself a boutique had gifts and crafts for sale, and just beyond that, a shop that dealt in fabrics and sewing supplies was proudly proclaiming, by way of a hand-lettered sign in the window, that a new shipment of calico was in.

Two of the shops were empty, but only one of them displayed a "For Lease" sign. Beyond, at the far end of the plaza, was Drew Fithie's Snack and Dessert Bar. It offered a bright but uninspiring interior with plastic upholstered seats and vinyl-topped tables. I was still savoring the lavish late lunch May had served, and the trite sandwich menu and stale-looking slices of pie on display had no appeal for me, but I seated myself in a booth and ordered ice cream.

The waitress was two or three years older than Kolina Kirkland and her opposite in every other respect—small, with dark hair, a pert face, and a southern accent that seemed as indigenous as the surrounding mountains. She served me with polite indifference.

"Please don't think I'm being impertinent," I said to her. "I really would like to know. What do people around here do for entertainment? In the old days, there were jokes about rolling up a small town's sidewalks at sunset, but I haven't seen any sidewalks."

"People go home and go to bed," she said bitterly.

The innuendo could have been accidental, so I ignored it. "Are there any night clubs?" I persisted. "Bowling alleys? Movie theaters? Restaurants that serve more substantial fare than sandwiches and pie?"

She sat down in the booth opposite me. "Are you one of Drew's stooges?"

"I don't know any Drews. I just arrived a couple of hours ago."

"Where are you from?"

"The East. This is new territory for me. Menswear."

She grimaced. "That's almost worse. A traveling salesman—with a wife and six kids at home. We get them through here all the time. They stop at Duff Schaffer's cabins."

"My story exactly—without the wife and six kids."

"So you say. So they all say. Not many local people eat out except to come here for dessert. The Corners Café has good food, but it does hardly any business except on weekends. As for what people do, the men have hobbies. A lot of them hunt and fish. Coon hunting is big around here. The women don't have time for play, but some of them gossip a lot because they can do that while they sew. Otherwise, I suppose people mostly watch television."

"No nightclubs? No amusement parks?"

She shook her head emphatically. "People can go to Chattanooga to concerts, or theaters, or exhibits, or even to 'See Rock City,' but not many do. More and more of them are buying their own VCRs, and the general store rents movies. So does Mark Wassler."

"What's the big white house on the hill?" I asked.

She grimaced again. "High Acres. The Johnston place."

"What's the matter? Aren't the Johnstons nice people?"

"They're snobs. Not that it's anything against them—they can afford to be."

"I suppose they don't associate with common people."

"Ha! That jerk Al was in here almost every day trying to date me when I first got this job."

"Al Johnston?"

"The General's grandson."

"General? Is he for real, or is a Georgian general merely a highfalutin Kentucky colonel?"

"He pretends he's a Civil War general. Confederate side, which is a laugh. He's about as southern as Portland, Maine."

"The grandson is going to be well off someday. Maybe that was an opportunity for you."

"That jerk isn't about to marry a snack bar waitress," she said.

"Anyway, he's a big nothing—he knows nothing, he does nothing, and the word 'work' isn't even in his vocabulary, but he has very fast hands. He's tried them on every girl in the Village."

"You don't sound like a typical small-town waitress," I said. "How do you happen to be working here?"

"How many jobs do you suppose there are in a place like this?"

"One," I said. "Working for Drew Fithie. What sort of a person is he?"

"Self-made man. He's as bad as the Johnstons. They've got theirs and want to keep it. He's determined to get his. He's a slob of a boss, too. Sends people in to spy on us and make sure we aren't loafing."

"I suppose that explains why the men in the gas station suddenly got busy when I went there to use the phone."

"You'd better believe it. If he walked in and saw me sitting here, he'd fire me. 'Never loaf around in a store,' he says. 'If you haven't got anything else to do, grab a broom.' How many times a day does a clean floor need sweeping?"

"I've had bosses just like that," I said with feeling. "There are Drew Fithies everywhere—but only one to a town. If there were two, they'd cut each other's throats."

She was looking over her shoulder as though making certain no one was spying on her. "I have an aunt and uncle to care for—elderly invalids. If I move them somewhere else, I can get a much better job, but I'll have to pay steep rent and hire day care for them. If we stay here, they own their home and have wonderful neighbors who help out during the day, but there isn't a decent job closer than Chattanooga, and I simply have to work somewhere nearby. So I'm stuck. Catch-22."

I agreed that the situation was deplorable and apologized for not having any advice for her.

"You're the only one who doesn't," she said. "That's the one thing there's plenty of around here—advice."

Voices were raised somewhere nearby, and she went to the door to look out. I had finished my ice cream, so I left a generous but not ostentatious tip for her, paid my check, and wished her good afternoon. Like Brother Mulberry, she might be a useful person to know.

Outside, I almost walked into a fight that was taking place in front

of the empty shop next door. I had never seen a more unequal contest. Both men were in their sixties, but one was short and balloon shaped. He had been armed with a cane, but he unwisely tossed it aside when he decided to throw punches. He wore wrinkled work pants and a flannel shirt with suspenders, and he needed a shave. The top of his head was completely bald, but you instinctively knew he would have a dandruff problem regardless. He looked like a former ditchdigger whose muscles had been replaced with flab. He threw two punches while I watched, missing widely and almost falling over.

His opponent could have passed for a retired defensive halfback who was down on his luck—seedy-looking with a scraggly beard, but tall, excellently conditioned, and mean. He had let the fat man set himself up legally as well as physically. There is no law anywhere that requires you to stand still and let an opponent swing at you all afternoon without retaliating. Now he had a second witness—the owl in the yellow sports car was the first—and he was poised to deliver a bomb the moment the third punch missed.

It did, he cocked his fist—and I intervened. I locked his arms and swung him out of the way, thus placing myself squarely in the middle. For about three seconds, the fat man thought he was going to punch me instead.

"Shame on you," I told him. "I just came out here to invite you to have a cup of coffee with me, and you're trying to hit me."

He glared at me. Then the glare became a sheepish grin, and he dropped his fist.

"What's the trouble?" I asked the tall man.

"He rented an office to me. Then he changed the lock so I can't get in."

"That sounds bad. You can have the law on him for something like that. There's a firm of lawyers down the road, unless—" I turned to the fat man. "Do you do legal business with Malkinson and Borling?"

"Hell, no," he said. "Malkinson is dead, and Borling is Bramwell Johnston's lawyer." He would have used the same tone of voice to tell me Borling had AIDS.

"You're in luck," I told the tall man. "There's no conflict of interest. Trot down there and get yourself a lawyer."

He didn't seem eager to go, so I kept my grip on him.

The fat man said, "A lot of good a lawyer can do for him. He only took a two-month lease, and it's expired. I refused to renew it. I told him a week ago I wanted him out the moment the lease was up, and that was yesterday, but he's still got his junk in there."

"I couldn't get a truck until today," the tall man said plaintively, "and I can't very well move out when I can't get into the place."

"Right," I told him. "This gentleman certainly can't keep you from claiming your own property. On the other hand, you can't continue to occupy his premises when your lease has expired. Both of you have sound legal positions, and that's the stuff lawsuits are made of. The process starts with one of you hiring a lawyer. Then the other has to hire a lawyer. Then the lawyers find some excuse for refusing to talk to each other, which lets them drag things out while running up your bills. That's their way of building a better universe. The more they charge, the more likely it is you'll behave yourselves in the future so you'll never need a lawyer again. If you're interested, I can solve this problem myself, and it won't cost either of you a penny."

The fat man looked at me suspiciously. The tall man had dropped his notion about returning the punches, so I released him. He asked almost politely, "What do you suggest?"

"Do you want the problem solved?" I asked the fat man.

He was still suspicious. "Maybe."

"It's easy. He's here with a truck. Where is it, out back?"

The bearded man nodded.

"Let him into the shop," I told the fat man. "He'll move his stuff out, and both he and the problem will be gone."

"He owes me for an extra day's rent."

"You owe him for the punches you threw and the inconvenience he suffered. He can charge you with assault, and the two of you will spend the next year paying tuition to lawyers. You'd be much better off to let him take his stuff and leave."

"Oh, all right."

He retrieved his cane. Then he stepped up to the door of one of the empty shops and opened it with a key.

The tall man turned to me. "Many thanks. I'm Selwyn Endford. I'm a visiting professor of history at the University of Georgia, and I've been trying to clear up a few minor problems about the Civil War.

I needed a base close to the scene, and Mr. Fithie had these shops empty, so he gave me a cheap lease. I only used the back room—I don't like to work in a fishbowl—and all I have there is a desk, a chair, and a sofa to sleep on if I work late or want to spend a few days here. It's a perfect setup, but when I was ready to go to work, General Johnston refused to let me set foot on his property. I appealed to Miss Laurette, and she finally gave me permission, but by that time the lease was about to expire, and Mr. Fithie decided I was too chummy with the Johnstons to be a tenant of his."

I had already deduced that the fat man was the infamous Drew Fithie. "What are you studying?" I asked.

"Years ago, the General published a crackpot article about a battle—skirmish, really—that took place on what is now his estate after the Battle of Chattanooga, when the Confederates were retreating. I'm sure he was wrong, but I have to go over the land carefully in order to prove it. It's an archaeological problem, really."

"You went at it the wrong way," I told Endford. "Watch me."

We walked together toward the door Fithie was now holding open.

"The professor offers his apologies," I told Fithie. "If he'd known you were a friend of General Johnston's, he wouldn't have leased your shop."

"I'm no friend of that screwball," Fithie said indignantly.

"You must be. The professor is working hard to make a fool of him—in print, no less—and here you are going out of your way to prevent it. Only a good friend would do that."

"I'll be damned," Fithie said. "Is that a fact? Why didn't you tell me what you were doing?"

"I did. I told you I was doing Civil War research."

"I saw you mucking about at High Acres, and I thought you were pals with the General. Are you really trying to make a fool of him?"

"He published a silly article that's full of mistakes. I want to correct them."

"I'll be damned. You should have told me. Hell—I'll renew your lease as many times as you like."

The professor looked at him incredulously.

"Just consider it renewed." Fithie handed him the key. "You can

drop in at the real estate office any time and take care of the paperwork."

Suddenly they were friends. They shook hands. Endford disappeared into the shop, and Drew Fithie turned to me in a congenial mood.

"You're quite a lad. What's your business?"

"Salesman."

"It figures. If I had anything that needed selling, I'd offer you a job. You mentioned coffee?"

Fithie stuck his head in the door of the real estate office and gave instructions about the lease—for a man who carried a cane, he was surprisingly agile—and then we went to the Snack and Dessert Bar. The waitress had been watching the entire performance from the door. She retreated behind the cash register when she saw us coming.

"I'm Drew Fithie," Fithie said as we seated ourselves in a booth.

I said, "Really? This is quite a place you have here. I'm J. Pletcher. The 'J' stands for Jethro."

We shook hands across the table, and I told the waitress to bring coffee.

As she walked away, I said quietly to Fithie, "That's a nice looking waitress you have. Very capable, too. Unusual for a small town."

He nodded indifferently. "She's stuck here. Has to look after relatives. Can't find anything else to do, so she comes cheap."

The waitress brought the coffee and returned to the cash register. We sipped it and Fithie began to talk about the idiotic doings and opinions of Bramwell Johnston.

"From the little I've heard, all of the Johnstons sound loony," I said. "Does mental illness run in the family?"

"Mental illness combined with plain cussedness," Fithie said. "I'm trying to build a town here. The General owns everything on the other side of the highway and big chunks on this side. He won't sell me a square inch of it. He won't even let us name the place."

"It has a name on the map," I said.

"Named after his daughter, but he won't let us use it, and he won't let us change it. People are afraid to cross him, so we're stuck."

"You ought to start calling him 'General Won't.' "

"Ha! That's a good one. General Won't. Where are you headed?"

"Nowhere tonight. I'm staying at the Corners."

Fithie's eyes narrowed.

"Stupid cabins," I said. "They don't have room to turn around in. But there isn't any other place, and I love the country hereabouts."

His head bobbed enthusiastically. "That's it. This is great country. I've spent my life scrapping to make a little money here. Could have done a lot better a lot quicker somewhere else, but it's a great place to live. Of course the Johnstons had it all handed to them."

"They do add a touch of social class, don't they? I heard something about a ball."

"The General has a granddaughter coming to visit," Fithie said resentfully. "They're carrying on like she's a fairy princess, and from the way the stupid people around here are knocking themselves out to get invitations, you'd think that was Buckington Palace up there."

Behind his anger were years of festering bitterness. No Fithie would ever be invited to High Acres, and he knew it; and the Johnstons would never pay the slightest attention to anything he accomplished in the Village, and he knew that, too.

"Someone said it was a Military Ball," I said. "That does seem like overdoing it."

"They're trying to cover up a big stink. They're making a fuss about the granddaughter to take people's minds off this scandal about the grandson."

"Really? A scandal about the General's grandson?"

Fithie nodded and lowered his voice. "Al Johnston. He's disappeared. They're pretending nothing's happened, but everyone knows he got himself in some kind of mess and had to run for it."

"That does seem odd," I mused. "I mean—if they're rich enough, they could paper over almost any mess with money."

"What he got into is so bad it'd take more than money to bail him out. The Johnstons are throwing this ball as a cover-up. I'll tell you something else. Al's dead, and no one will admit it."

"What makes you think he's dead?"

Fithie leaned forward, dropping his voice to a whisper. "I been checking the papers ever since I heard he'd disappeared. Watching for a body to turn up with no identification. First of the week, police fished one out of the Ogeechee River down by Savannah. Man in his

thirties, no clothes, no nothing. I telephoned the GBI—that's the Georgia Bureau of Investigation—and asked if the corpse had a scar just below the left knee. It did. So did Al Johnston, but not many people knew about it. So that's what happened to him, but the Johnstons think they can sit up there on their mountain and throw parties and wait for the stink to go away. It won't."

"Did you tell the GBI who the corpse is?" I asked.

"Nope. Told 'em I'd inform the family of a man I'd heard was missing."

"Did you?"

"I told the Johnstons' stooge lawyer, Leland Borling. He told me to mind my own business. What do you think of that?"

"It sounds as though that particular corpse may never be identified. Of course the identification doesn't have to be made by a member of the family. If someone who knew him were to go down to Savannah and take a look—"

"Not my problem," Fithie said. "Let 'em pretend. The stink will go right on stinking, and sooner or later it'll blow the whole Johnston family to smithereens. I can't wait for that to happen. The air would taste a lot better hereabouts without them polluting it."

4

We finished our coffee. Fithie had got onto the subject of how a self-made man succeeds, and he was much too busy talking to object when I picked up the check. I winked at the waitress on the way out. Her lips twitched, but she said nothing.

Outside the shop, we paused to shake hands and exchange lies. Fithie lied about the job he was going to offer me; I lied about my willingness to accept it. He went back to the real estate office. I started toward the General Store and was flagged down by the

owlish-looking young man in the sleek yellow sports car. I obligingly stopped to see what he wanted. The closer I got to him, the younger he looked.

He spoke through his open window. "You're quite an operator."

"Operator?" I echoed. Then I remembered—he had been watching when I broke up the fight between Drew Fithie and Selwyn Endford.

"Do you have a trick that would get me into High Acres?" he asked.

"What for? Do you want to read the water meter?"

He grinned and ran his hand through his shock of yellow hair, which continued to look like ruffled feathers. "I'm Jerry Collendon. Reporter—Atlanta *Constitution.* I want to interview the General."

"Does the General want to be interviewed?"

"No."

"Then the best procedure would be to have the paper's owner telephone Miss Laurette, the General's daughter, and discuss with her why the paper wants an interview. That might get you in."

"Thanks a lot," he said sarcastically. "There's nothing tricky about that. If the paper's owner has to run interference for me, I'm no reporter. I haven't had this job long. I'd like to keep it."

"Sorry I can't help you," I said. "If I happen onto any bargains in tricks, I'll let you know."

I walked back to my car and found two men examining the Minnie ball holes. "What did that?" one of them asked.

"Mosquitoes," I said. They were not amused.

I paused for a moment to make a note of the reporter's name, Jerry Collendon, and his license number. One should be wary about judging from appearances, as I had told Kolina Kirkland, but this character was unconvincing from any angle. Not only did he look and talk more like a high school sophomore than a reporter, but he was driving a car that only a newspaper owner should be able to afford.

I drove past the private road that led to Napoleon Corners and continued south on Highway 353 to see what the country was like. Around the next curve, there was a neat cement block building with a stone and redwood front. Nearby was a comfortable-looking, single-story cement block house that was beautifully landscaped.

WASSLER'S ELECTRONICS, the sign said. TV—RADIO—COMPUTERS—VCRS. It also rented electronic equipment and videotapes. The store seemed so unusual that I decided to investigate.

The interior was tastefully laid out, with impressive displays of merchandise. In the computer section, the proprietor was demonstrating a spreadsheet to a middle-aged customer who was finding it heavy going. Over in the video department, a vivacious-looking young woman was selecting movies to rent. When the proprietor got his computer customer launched, he went to wait on her.

"Your father-in-law will shoot you," he said.

"No, he won't. He thinks it's clever of me, the way I'm able to borrow movies from my friends. He'll come over and watch them himself."

She had a lovely face framed with flowing brown hair. Her figure was so good that she managed to look stylish in slacks and a bright pink sweatshirt. She sounded well educated. I wondered what strata of Village society she belonged to.

The proprietor wrote out a slip, took her money, and offered her a yellow plastic bag imprinted in bright blue with WASSLER'S ELECTRONICS.

"No, thanks," she said, laughing. "That would be asking for trouble." She stuffed the tapes into a large handbag. "So long, Mark."

"So long, Lana."

When the waitress at the Snack and Dessert Bar mentioned a Mark Wassler who rented video tapes, it sounded like a makeshift business operated out of a converted garage. This was a genuine surprise—a major enterprise in an unlikely location. The proprietor was a surprise, too. He was a tall, stocky, towheaded man in his mid-thirties. No one would have called him handsome, but he had an unmistakable air of competence, and he exuded friendliness.

I told him I was staying at the Corners for a few days, and I wondered whether a portable radio would be a good investment. "Are there any FM classical music stations in the area?"

"There are two," he said. "WSMC, 90.5, is the Seventh Day Adventist station. It broadcasts mostly classical music. WUTC, 88.5, is the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga station. It broadcasts a fair amount."

He offered me four radios to choose from, succinctly summarized the advantages and disadvantages of each, and let me try out the classical music stations on them while he responded to an SOS signal from his computer customer.

Eventually I made my purchase, and as I left, I met a group of six young men and women arriving together to attend a computer class. Mark Wassler's business location no longer looked unlikely to me. In rural areas such as this one, the surrounding communities would be too small to support highly specialized retail firms of their own. Wassler not only was capable, but he also had been enterprising enough to make his store a regional computer and electronics center.

I continued south for a few miles, passing the other branch of the drive to the High Acres mansion before I turned around and went back to the Corners by way of the private road.

I had changed my clothes and was waiting for Duff and May's son when he arrived. His title was "investigator," which meant "detective." Since he was in plain clothes and driving his own car, there was no way to tell whether he was officially on duty. He was about thirty years old and built like his father, but there was no fat on his huge frame. I wouldn't have challenged him to either a wrestling match or a foot race. Neither did I have any intention of calling him Eddie, as his father did. He was accustomed to outdoor work—his face was tanned and weathered-looking. He seemed quietly competent, and I liked him at once.

Duff introduced me as the detective Miss Laurette had hired and explained what had happened. Ed examined the holes in my car, nodded gravely, and said, "Let's take a look at the place."

We headed east on the graveled road, stopping while I got out to open the gates. He had reserved his questions until we were alone. First he wanted my own description of the barrage I had driven through. Then he asked, "What is it Miss Laurette wants you to do?"

"I won't know until I've talked with her. There are odd rumors afloat about the Johnston family, as you no doubt know, but no one has been able to tell me why it needs a detective."

"Miss Laurette and the General are good and generous people," he said. "Those who work for them in any capacity have an enormous affection for them. That goes for my parents—and also for me. I grew

up here, and when I was a kid, I helped the General with his war games. But the Johnstons definitely aren't soft touches. Outsiders who try to get something out of them may be brushed off rudely, and they react accordingly. Over the years, the family has acquired a lot of enemies."

We were zigzagging up the side of the mountain. I asked about the missing grandson, Al Johnston.

"He's a strange one. A loner. Most boys would worship a grandfather who let them fire real Civil War cannon and rifles, but Al wouldn't have anything to do with that. Miss Laurette tried to give him responsibilities. If something seemed to interest him, she would put him in charge of it. Whatever it was, he always goofed it up. Finally she gave up."

"How do you account for his disappearance?"

"I discussed it with Miss Laurette a week ago. She wanted to know whether there was anything she should be doing. I went over Al's rooms carefully. He has a bedroom and a den at High Acres, and I found nothing there to suggest he left for any reason except because he wanted to."

"Miss Kirkland said he often went away without telling anyone where he was going."

"That's true, but he never stayed this long, and he always let the family know when he was leaving and when he expected to come back. He's one of those finicky types who has to involve the entire household in everything he does. He can't just throw a suitcase in his car and leave. He chases the servants all over the house looking for things, opens his luggage, runs back to check this or that, counts his money, tries to talk his aunt into giving him more. Slipping away at night without saying anything to anyone was completely out of character. On the other hand, he is an adult, and I feel if he's finally made his own decision about what to do with his life, and acted on it, it's about time. Miss Laurette agrees with me."

I told him what Drew Fithie said about the corpse at Savannah.

"I didn't know Al had a scar, and I doubt that Drew Fithie knew it. I'll give the GBI a call and get a description."

When we reached the approximate area of the cannon barrage, Ed parked his car, and we walked along the crunching gravel until we

found a gouge made by a cannonball. I showed him another further along the road. "That was the one that landed in front of me," I said. "I saw it bounce twice. Shortly after that, the slug hit the car."

He looked about him and then led the way through the weeds toward a clump of sumac some three hundred yards from the road. He circled it, parting leaves around the perimeter until he found a place where someone had made a comfortable nest for himself and smoked several cigarettes.

"A Civil War rifle has an effective range of half a mile or more, but it's difficult to hit anything at that distance," Ed said. "This place is ideal for popping off shots at a slow-moving car. Who knew you were coming?"

"My question exactly, but I won't know the answer until I've talked with Miss Laurette. There has to be some connection with her problem. Otherwise, why single me out for target practice? I refuse to believe my personality affects people so negatively that total strangers feel compelled to respond with cannon fire when I drive past."

Ed pointed to a path the marksman had left in the weeds when he walked from the distant grove down to the sumac and then back again. We followed it. The slope wasn't steep, but I was perspiring when we finally reached the top.

The trees were sturdy old oaks and hickories, and most of the natural undergrowth had been trampled out of existence. For decades the grove had served as the General's headquarters during his war games, and paths crisscrossed it in all directions. We circled it, and on the far side we found the battery of cannon—four guns in defilade in a shallow runnel at the edge of the grove. They were pointed north. The nearby caissons—ammunition chests—were half-filled with cannonballs.

All four cannon had been fired recently. They also had been moved. The surface was too hard to take footprints, but there were wheel marks where the guns had been hauled out of the runnel and manhandled through the grove to a position pointing south.

"This wasn't a one-man prank," Ed Schaffer said. "These babies may weigh half a ton or more. It probably took three men. They moved one cannon at a time with a man on each wheel and one on

the trail. When they got them lined up, two of the men stayed up here to fire them while the other went down to that clump of sumac with a rifle."

I asked him how many people in those parts knew how to aim and fire a cannon.

"Quite a few," he said. "For more than fifty years, the General has been hiring boys to help him with his war games. That doesn't say how *well* some of them do it. These gunners aimed much too low. The ground is hard, and the cannonballs had already bounced more than once before they got to the road—which is why they seemed to be moving in slow motion. They can look so harmless that Civil War soldiers sometimes tried to catch them. Few survived to tell about it. A twelve-pound projectile has an enormous amount of inertia." He thought for a moment, looking down the slope. "There's a tendency to shoot high when you're aiming downhill. These gunners may have known that and overcompensated. Or they may have been so ignorant that they tried to aim a howitzer like a rifle, and of course the projectile hit the ground far short of their target. On the other hand, they had to guess in advance how fast you would be going and point the cannon at the stretch of road they thought you would reach by the time the cannonballs got there. All things considered, they did aim surprisingly well. Or maybe they were lucky."

"Maybe they fired a few practice rounds," I suggested.

He shook his head. "If they had, they wouldn't have been aiming low when they fired at you. Also, it would have been dangerous. Someone might have heard them. The sound of cannon fire carries a long way, and the General has good ears. There'd be trouble if he heard someone firing his cannon without permission. I wonder why he didn't hear them today."

"Maybe the wind was in the wrong direction," I suggested. "Or maybe he was asleep. Your father said he'd had the flu all week."

"In any case, it would have been impossible for these characters to do much practicing without his knowing it. He raises hell if he finds the guns even a hair out of position, and if they used his cannonballs, he'd miss them immediately. They must have brought their own powder—he never leaves any out here—and if they didn't know the standard charge, which with ordinary black powder is two and a half

pounds, they may not have used enough. Did you see puffs of thick black smoke when the cannon were fired?"

"The road had just taken a sharp bend to the south, and I wasn't looking this way. Afterward, I mostly was watching where I was going."

He was silent while we walked back down the slope. As we approached his car, he said, "I suppose this could be a stupid plot to stir up trouble for the General. He'd be blamed automatically if an outsider had an accident involving a cannonball or a Minnie ball. For years everyone in this corner of the state has been convinced that he's half-cracked. He definitely is not. He's a sane, congenial, highly intelligent man with a hobby, but his war maneuvers are a long-standing joke. People who know him wouldn't be at all surprised to hear he'd aimed a barrage at a passing car, intentionally or not. Tomorrow I'll bring some kids and look for the cannonballs."

"Would anyone go to all the work of moving those cannon just to take a shot at the first car that came along?" I asked.

He shook his head emphatically. "This road is so rarely used that they could wait all day without seeing one. They must have set an ambush for you. They not only knew you were coming, but they knew approximately when."

I turned to look at the clump of sumac where the rifleman had hid. "It's that second rifle shot that bothers me. I've been trying to work out the timing. I'd say about ten seconds elapsed between the shots."

"How fast were you going?"

"Before I hit the accelerator, perhaps thirty miles an hour. I'd just come up that steep grade, and I was admiring the scenery."

"Thirty miles an hour is about eight hundred and eighty yards a minute," he said. "Since you were accelerating, let's say you traveled two hundred yards during the ten seconds between the rifle shots. You'd just come out of a north-south stretch of road, and he fired the first shot before he had a chance to gauge your speed. That may explain why he hit the back seat instead of the front—if he really was aiming at you. By the time he fired again, you were going faster. This road also has a lot of small curves and dips, so you were bobbing and weaving along four or five hundred yards from him. The smoke could have blinded him, too. A rifle produces the same kind of thick, black

smoke that a cannon does. Even so, it may have been a bit of luck that he missed you completely. What bothers you about it?"

"The time between shots. You shouldn't be able to fire a second round that quickly with a Civil War rifle. Do you know the rate of fire?"

"About two shots a minute, but there could have been two riflemen. Shall we look for another hiding place?"

"There won't be one," I said. "I couldn't work this out before because I didn't know how long it would have taken him to reload. Obviously he had two rifles loaded and ready—probably more. I figure it was one rifleman with several loaded rifles. Two men would have fired almost simultaneously when the car was closest to them. If there was only one, he had to lay the first rifle down and pick up the second and aim it. That would mean ten seconds or so between shots, which is exactly the way it happened."

"I see what you mean."

"So it looks to me as though they knew I was coming, and they intended to kill me. I wouldn't even try to guess why. A live detective who hasn't done any work is a minimal danger to anyone. A dead one would cause an enormous amount of fuss—especially a dead one killed by a Civil War weapon—but maybe they wanted an enormous amount of fuss. If they were trying to embarrass the General, that certainly would have done it."

"I agree. A man who waits in ambush with several loaded rifles intends to hit something. Why didn't he?"

"They wanted to give the cannon a chance first. If they'd been lucky enough to hit the car, that would have been far more sensational than killing me with a Minnie ball—but it meant the rifleman couldn't fire until after the cannonballs landed, and by then he was in the wrong position. I was past him and leaving rapidly, and he got off only one good shot."

Ed looked at the sumac where the rifleman had waited, looked at the distant grove, turned and studied the wavering line of the road. "I think you're right," he said. "They meant to kill you. The question now is—will they try again?"

"I hope so. That may be the only way we'll catch them."

Ed stooped over and began stripping small, green seedpods from

his trouser legs. Both of us were covered thickly from knees to ankles. Ed said matter-of-factly, "Damned beggar's-lice." We had to work energetically to make our trousers presentable.

I had never encountered that particular plant pest. At the moment it was the only clue I had, which said something about the case. All I had to do now was find a suspect with a few overlooked beggar's-lice on his trousers and ask him where he got them.

At Napoleon Corners, Ed took his leave of his parents and promised to be back in the morning to look for cannonballs. I climbed a nearby hill and sat looking down at the strange little village and trying again to make sense of what had happened. Darkness and cold finally drove me back to the Corners. The clear sky was flecked with early stars, but the moon, which was in its last quarter, wouldn't rise until later. The two traveling men had arrived. Their cabins were warmly lighted, but the windows of the store and the café had been shuttered as though Duff thought to conserve his privately generated electricity by keeping the light inside. There were three cars in the parking lot, indication that the café already had a few customers. The buildings the monks were using were dark, but dim light from a kerosene lamp or lantern showed in the windows of the little church.

I walked down the rutted road to the church. Brother Mulberry was conducting a religious service, but the exhortations I caught as I stood outside the door sounded more like a pep talk for a sales convention.

Brother Mulberry bellowed, "Get in there and win for Jesus!" The answer was a chorusing shout, "Yeah!" Brother Mulberry raised his voice several decibels. "Get in there and win for Jesus!" The monks chorused, "Yeah!" Brother Mulberry raised his voice again. "Get in there and win *big* for Jesus!" The monks chorused, "Yeah!"

I withdrew quietly and retraced my steps.

As I approached the cabins, a shadow flitted around the corner of one of them and vanished. This happened so suddenly it left me blinking. Had I seen something, or hadn't I? I decided I had, but it was too late for pursuit. I changed into slacks and a sport coat and went to eat.

Another car had just driven up. The café was probably the only place for miles where dating and young married couples could come

for dinner. Things might jump a little on weekends, as Duff had said, but even on a Friday, with four couples plus the two traveling men and myself, the room looked crowded.

The waitress was a blonde, heavyset young woman named Belinda Wassler, who looked as though she could handle a barrel as easily as a tray of dishes if Duff had any that needed rolling out. She was friendly, polite, and very, very capable.

"Are you related to Mark?" I asked her.

"He's my brother," she said, beaming. She had the same instinctive friendliness. She enjoyed waiting on people because she enjoyed people.

That afternoon I had seen May Schaffer stuffing several chickens for the oven. I placed my order in advance, and now I had a marvelously relaxed dinner, eating slowly and savoring every bite. Even if I accomplished nothing else on this case, I was certain to gain weight—such excellent homespun cooking and nothing to do. Afterward, I returned to my cabin, read the newspapers I had bought, and waited for something to happen.

Shortly after nine o'clock, a caller announced his presence with a firm rap on my door. It was a man of forty-five, heavyset and of medium height with a round face and an incipient paunch. His black-rimmed glasses gave his eyes a fierce aspect, but he had a pleasant voice and a mild manner. His suit was much more wrinkled than could be accounted for by a hard day's desk work. He introduced himself and shook my hand gravely: Leland Borling, Laurette Johnston's legal adviser. He wasn't the sort of person I would have expected to find practicing law in a small town in Georgia, but certainly his was not a typical small-town practice.

I made him comfortable in my one chair and seated myself on the edge of the bed. The room was so cramped that our knees were almost touching.

"Would you like to drink something?" I asked. "Duff has good quality beer that he smuggles in from Tennessee—if you don't object to colluding with a law violator."

"There's no law against an individual bringing beer from anywhere he chooses," Borling said. "But no, thank you. I just had dinner."

"Or a mint daiquiri?"

"That's Kolina Kirkland's vice," he said severely. "As far as I know, she's the only one who drinks it, and she drinks entirely too much of it." He paused. "I'm sorry I couldn't see you earlier. I understand you had a thoroughly unsatisfactory interview with Kolina."

"Not because of anything she did," I said. "Merely because she wasn't able to tell me anything."

"She thought you were angry. I apologize for leaving you dangling like that. Because of the confidential nature of this business, Kolina hadn't been told about it. And unfortunately, Miss Laurette has been extremely busy. A relative is arriving tomorrow morning for an extended visit, and lavish entertainment is planned for her. There's to be an old-fashioned Military Ball tomorrow night. High Acres hasn't seen such an extravaganza in years. So Miss Laurette has been busy, and I had a court date in Atlanta today, and neither of us was available when you arrived. However—here I am. I can tell you everything we know about this business, which unfortunately isn't much."

He took a piece of paper from his inside pocket, glanced at it as though making certain he wasn't inadvertently giving me something that had been marked *classified* by the U.S. State Department, and then handed it to me. "On Wednesday of last week, Miss Laurette received that in the mail. Please read it. Then I'll tell you the problem."

It was a letter written in a sprawling, stumbling hand that several times had crossed out words and once deleted an entire sentence. The cheap stationery carried the logo of the Cumberland Motel and an address on Market Street in Chattanooga. The ballpoint pen the writer used probably came from the same place—it had skipped frequently. "Dear Aunt Laurette," the letter began. "Mother always told me I should write to you and remind you of the puddle kitten if I was ever in trouble or needed money. I'm not in trouble. Right now I have plenty of money. I'm a certified mechanic, and if you know anyone who runs a garage in Chattanooga and can give me a job, I would appreciate that, but even if you don't, I would like to meet my mother's family." It was signed, "Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy."

My surmise about missing heirs had been dead on, and I sat there

for all of ten seconds savoring that fact. Here was one come home to roost, and from the attorney's solemn expression, the legal complications were potent regardless of Joe Murphy's disclaimer about money.

Borling waited silently while I copied the letter into my notebook. I handed it back to him. "Does 'puddle kitten' have any significance?" I asked.

"It does. Miss Laurette is confident that only her sister Letitia could have told him that. It was a secret between the two of them when they were children."

"Is Miss Laurette willing to accept him as Letitia's son with no other evidence?"

"She is."

"Please continue."

"When the letter arrived, she discussed it with me. I was most anxious that she shouldn't make any kind of commitment without more proof."

"Most anxious" was a gross understatement. His middle name would be "Caution," and he would wrap the simplest legal matter in a blitz of paper more appropriate to an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. Not only was it safer that way, but it also gave the impression he was earning his retainer.

"I thought she should demand a birth certificate, former addresses, family history, and all the rest so a competent investigator could verify his identity," he went on. "That's how the problem looks to an attorney. I don't know how a detective would see it." He shot me a defiant glance. When I offered no challenge, he went on, "Miss Laurette felt that anyone could get hold of a birth certificate, and the fact that he knew a secret that only his mother could have known was far better proof."

That depended on whether Letitia or one of her children was a blabbermouth. In Miss Laurette's place, I would have wanted to meet this man immediately if only to find out whether he looked like Letty or anyone else in the family. It wasn't proof of anything if he didn't—he had, after all, a complete family tree of people to take after on his father's side—but if he did, family resemblances are far more

difficult to counterfeit than birth records, especially for someone who doesn't have access to family photographs.

"In any case, Miss Laurette insisted on seeing him," Borling said. "She thought there was nothing dishonorable in his looking for a job or wanting to meet his mother's family, and she wrote to him on Thursday, promising to help him if she could. She asked him to meet her for lunch on Monday at the Knowlton House in Chattanooga. It's a rather ordinary family restaurant, and she selected it for that reason—its atmosphere would be unlikely to make him uncomfortable. He was to mention her name to the hostess, who would show him to her table. She kept the appointment, but Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy did not. Miss Laurette waited two hours for him.

"She didn't know whether to feel angry or worried. Finally she telephoned a friend, a Chattanooga businessman, and told him the whole story. He promised to find out what he could. He called her back that evening after she had returned home. First he had gone to the motel. A man using the name Joe Murphy had been staying there, but he checked out early that morning—shortly before five o'clock. Her friend then talked with someone he knew in the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department. He learned that a man had committed suicide that morning at Point Park on Lookout Mountain by jumping off a cliff. There was no identification at all on the body—no money, no personal effects, no nothing—but medical attendants had found a name printed on his underpants. It was 'Joe Murphy.' "

I turned a page of my notebook and read the letter again in an attitude of overwhelming skepticism. I could understand why Laurette Johnston felt disturbed. The man who wrote that letter had not been contemplating suicide. "Was Miss Laurette's friend able to find out any more about him?" I asked.

"A little, but it's been a complicated mess. Point Park is federal territory. The park rangers are in charge, but they aren't equipped to chase all over the county performing a formal police investigation, so the sheriff's detectives are handling that. At first appearance, Joe Murphy was an impoverished derelict, and his death was a commonplace suicide. The few things they were able to learn about him at the motel didn't help them much. He stayed there for almost a week, he

paid in advance, he was friendly and well behaved, and he checked out suddenly on the morning he died. He was fully paid for another night, but he didn't even ask for a refund—no reason why he should if he intended to die. He tossed his key on the counter, said he was in a hurry and didn't need a bill, and rushed off. I have no doubt that some crisis in his own life caused him to forget all about his alleged family connections. An unhappy love affair, perhaps, or fear of apprehension for a crime he had committed."

"Did he have a car?"

"As far as I know, he did not."

"Point Park should be some distance from a motel with a Chattanooga address. How did he get there?"

"I have no idea. I believe there's a bus service."

"At five in the morning?" I asked.

"The detectives may know. Or they may not. Since his death was a suicide, how he got there may not be important."

"How old a man was he?"

"The report said about thirty."

"Is it known whether he actually received Miss Laurette's letter?"

"He did. A motel clerk confirmed that. It arrived with the Saturday mail. It was the only letter he had during the time he stayed there."

"But it wasn't found on his body," I mused. Borling remained silent. "What is it that Miss Laurette wants me to do?"

"She wants to know all about this Joe Murphy, and she especially wants to know why he suddenly decided to end his life on the day he was supposed to meet her. I took her to the Erlanger Medical Center in Chattanooga, where the morgue is located, so she could see the body. She feels certain he was her nephew. She says he looks exactly like her brother Malcolm. She has offered to pay his burial expenses and have him interred in the Johnston plot in the Village cemetery as soon as the authorities release his body." He added solemnly, "Even though he looks like Malcolm, there's no question of his being Malcolm's son. Malcolm couldn't have known about the puddle kitten. I inquired."

"I'll go to Chattanooga in the morning," I said, "but there may not be much to investigate there if Joe Murphy was only a visitor. The problem will be finding some kind of link to where he came from.

Without that, we may be in for a protracted search. His photograph and description will have to be circulated and missing-person reports checked. Unfortunately, results are rarely proportional to the amount of digging that has to be done on a case like this."

"I understand that," Borling said. "I think myself that the Johnstons have far more important things that need investigating. For example, another nephew of Miss Laurette's has disappeared, and I'm extremely concerned about him, but she refuses to file a police report—yet she engages a private investigator over an alleged nephew she never met, and she's making a simply enormous fuss over a visit from a niece she never knew she had." He shook his head resignedly. "But this is what she wants, and whatever she wants, she's accustomed to getting. Please proceed. She expects to have more free time after tomorrow, and you'll be able to report directly to her. Preparations for the ball will keep her busy right up until it begins."

He got to his feet. I told him I was pleased to know, finally, what my job was, we shook hands, and he took his leave of me.

I transferred myself to the room's one chair and thought the situation over. I owed Kolina Kirkland an apology. I no longer disparaged her gossip—instead, I cherished every item of it: The sinister-sounding disappearance of Al, the potshots at the General, Miss Laurette's car being forced off the road, the ghosts, the arson, the nails on the drive.

Every detail would have to be investigated because the threat to the Johnston family was far grimmer and far more urgent than I had imagined. I ticked off the known facts about Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy: His letter; his claim that he had plenty of money, verified by his ability to pay a week's motel bill in advance when he arrived; his strangely abrupt departure at an incredible hour; the condition of his body when found—no identification, no money, no letter from Miss Laurette, no personal possessions at all.

He had dashed off to meet someone, and that someone had murdered him and stripped the body of anything that might serve to identify it. Only the coincidence of the name on his underwear, where the murderer hadn't taken time to look, and Miss Laurette's inquiry had kept Joe Murphy from an anonymous grave.

A scratching sound came from the direction of a window. I pulled

a curtain aside and found myself staring at a face that vanished immediately. I jerked the door open and sprang outside, but there was no one there.

The face had been flattened against the window and squinting through a crack between the curtains, which gave it an inhuman look. Probably it belonged to the prowler I had seen earlier, but on the basis of two fleeting glimpses, I could not have said whether the person had been young or old, or even male or female. Borling and I had talked quietly. I wondered whether the eavesdropper overheard any of it.

I returned to my cabin, made certain that neither pair of window curtains gaped, and resumed my review of Kolina Kirkland's gossip. I ticked off another set of facts. A grandson of the General's had disappeared. A presumed grandson had been murdered. An attempt had been made on the life of his daughter. Finally, in a diabolically clever use of the old man's Civil War mania, an assassin disguised in a Yankee uniform had inserted himself into one of the General's war games and attempted to kill him. Someone was plotting to wipe out the entire Johnston family and had actually begun to do so.

5

I awoke from a sound sleep thinking I had heard a bugle call. Then I heard it again. The LCD clock on my new radio said five minutes after two. I located my slippers in the dark, went to one of the windows, and looked out. The old farmhouse obstructed my view directly ahead and to my right. On my left, where the gravel road would have been visible in daylight, I saw nothing.

I opened the door and stepped outside, and the chill night air breathed icicles on me as I walked toward the parking lot. The moon had added its pale silver to the starlight, and there seemed to be a faint shimmer of fog. In that eerie dimness, a squad of ghosts came

marching along the graveled road from the direction of the Village. I could only make out silhouettes, but the forage caps and caped overcoats of Civil War uniforms were evident on each of them. It was too dark to distinguish whether they were Federal or Confederate. Except for the bugler and the drummer, all of them carried long rifles, but there were no bulges indicating knapsacks, haversacks, or other accouterments. Apparently the riflemen didn't expect to reload. The bugler still held his instrument to his lips, but now it was silent. The drummer was drumming vigorously, but I heard no beat. I counted ten men marching two by two, and their twenty feet should have been crunching gravel with every step—I remembered the racket Ed Schaffer and I had made when we walked on it—but there was no sound.

I went back to the cabin and slipped into my robe. When I came out again, the ghostly squad was passing in front of the store and café. I hurried toward the road, moving quietly and resisting the temptation to dash in pursuit and seize one or two forage caps and the bugle as souvenirs. I'm willing to take on a few ghosts any time, day or night, if they really are ghosts. If there's a chance they aren't, certain precautions are in order.

I had closed the white gates myself when Ed Schaffer and I returned from the mountain meadow. Now that dim barricade loomed ahead of the spectral soldiers as they crossed the intersection.

They floated through it. They moved straight ahead and disappeared into the shadowed darkness beyond, and the gates stood as they had before, still closed. Staring, I walked toward the intersection.

Suddenly someone seized my shoulder and whirled me around. "And just who might you be?" a voice rasped.

"Good evening, Brother Mulberry," I said, rubbing my shoulder. The man had a grip. "Or perhaps I should say—good morning. Did something disturb your sleep?"

"Oh, it's you," Brother Mulberry said. "If I'd known those varmints were coming, I'd have had the brethren waiting for them—with clubs."

I adopted a high moral tone. "Violence solves nothing."

"It'd put an end to this ghost nonsense," Brother Mulberry said grimly. "I don't know what those playacting characters are trying to

accomplish, but my brethren are being blamed for the vandalism they commit."

"Is that so? I wasn't aware of that."

"After they paraded through here a couple of weeks ago, they sneaked back and set a house on fire." He pointed. "They've done the same thing elsewhere. People think we're responsible. While we strive to make our peace with God, those varmints are getting us in bad with our neighbors."

"Do you think they may sneak back tonight?"

"That's what I'm watching for." He raised his hand. The dim light glinted on an automatic. "And I'm ready for them."

"No, no," I said quickly. "That's entirely the wrong approach."

"Don't I have a right to shoot if I catch them committing a crime?"

"I don't know what the local laws say about that, but moral law says your right to shoot depends on whether another human life is threatened."

"I see." He was silent for a moment. "Yes, that does seem—yes." He slipped the automatic back into his shoulder holster.

At least I had found out why he carried a gun—for ghostly varmints. I still didn't know what Kolina Kirkland had armed herself against.

"But what if they shoot?" Brother Mulberry demanded.

"Then another human life is threatened. Yours."

"Isn't that rather late to start defending oneself? I suppose honorable men are always at a disadvantage."

"Always," I agreed. "And if it's fire you're concerned about, a gun is the wrong weapon anyway. What you need is a fire extinguisher."

"We have two," he said. "I'll get them."

"I'll see whether Duff has any."

He hurried away, and I went to the rear door of the store and café and knocked gently. Duff responded almost at once—the bugle had awakened him, too. I explained Brother Mulberry's project. "Probably nothing will happen," I said, "but as long as we're up anyway—"

"Sure," Duff said. He went for his own fire extinguishers, and I returned to my cabin, shivering, to put some clothes on. Even with a robe, pajamas are not the most suitable uniform for ghost hunting on a chill October night in the Georgian mountains.

Brother Mulberry returned, a massive shadow that moved with surprising, catlike quiet and quickness. Duff cast a substantial shadow of his own, and I walked between them feeling like a midget. We found a position behind a collapsed porch from which we could see the entire length of the rutted road. Duff brought boxes from a nearby shed, and we sat on them and waited.

"Are you bothered by any other kinds of prowlers?" I asked them.

They hadn't noticed any. I told them about the shadow I'd seen sneaking around the cabins and the face at my window—presumably the same person. They both promised to watch for him.

Time crawled slowly. When my watch said three-thirty, I began to wonder whether I would be in any condition for work when I got to Chattanooga.

May came padding up in her slippers with a robe over her nightgown. "Etta called," she told Duff. "That old tool shed is burning."

"Do they need help?" Duff asked.

"She says no. She says Art is spraying water on it, and it's almost out."

"That means they won't be back tonight," Brother Mulberry said. He sounded genuinely disappointed. "They've done their deviltry elsewhere."

"Etta and Art saw the soldiers," May said. "When the dead walk, a death or a fire follows. Always."

Brother Mulberry growled angrily. "If they come through here again, we'll put the heat on them. This nonsense has gone on long enough."

He took his fire extinguishers and stomped away.

I walked back to the store and café with Duff and May. Both were strangely quiet. At the back door, Duff turned to me. "People argue about whether those haunts are real or not. Thousands of men died in these parts during the Civil War—at Chickamauga, and Chattanooga, and all through here. You couldn't hardly ask for a better place for ghosts, and some of the things I've seen them do—"

"Like floating through a closed gate?" I suggested.

"You saw that?"

"I also saw how it was done. A couple of their confederates were waiting for them. When the 'ghosts' had almost reached the gates, the

confederates opened a gap just wide enough to let the marchers through and then closed it immediately. In the dim light, it produced a perfect illusion of a ghostlike march through closed gates. The marchers also muffled their feet with something to cut down on the noise."

"I don't care one way or another," Duff said with a shrug. "I figure they'll do more damage if we bother them than if we leave them alone, so I'd rather leave them alone."

"If they're connected with Miss Laurette's problem, and I suspect they are, they're going to be bothered," I said.

I returned to my bed and was awakened two minutes later by a conspiratorial tap on the door. I stared at my new radio's clock in disbelief. It was six o'clock.

The tap came again. I turned on a light and opened the door. Tad Williams, the young black boy who worked for Duff Schaffer, flashed a toothy grin at me. "Miss Laurette wants you," he said.

After spending a frustrating day trying to find out what my job was, I now was being told more than I needed to know. "Are we walking?" I asked.

"We can ride part way. We could ride all the way," he added. "There's a drive. But Miss Laurette doesn't want anyone to know she's meeting us."

"Will we be walking across country?"

"There's a good path."

I dressed appropriately—I put on a suit to show proper respect for the client, hiking shoes out of concern for my feet, and a topcoat to fortify myself against the lingering night chill. It was still dark out. There was a light in May Schaffer's kitchen, but neither of the traveling men were up. I locked the cabin door and unlocked the car. Tad climbed in and waited while I stripped frost from the windows. When we reached the road, he pointed west.

"Are we going to High Acres?" I asked as I made the turn.

"Nope. To Nell Troppit's."

"Who's Nell Troppit?"

"A witch," he said matter-of-factly.

"That's nice," I said. After a night full of ghosts, a witch was just what I needed to get the new day started.

"She is nice," Tad agreed. "She teaches me about medicines."

When I failed to comment, he went on, "I'm going to be a doctor."

"Good luck to you," I said. "That's a tough haul, and it's expensive."

"Miss Laurette said I could." He spoke as if that settled the matter, and probably it did.

Half a mile past the drive to the mansion, I pulled off the road at Tad's direction and parked. Tad cheerfully led me along a forest path. It wasn't wide enough for us to walk side by side, so I followed him and quickly got left far behind. There was very little light in the woods, and the path had enough irregularities to keep me stumbling and enough intersections to make me appreciate my guide. Tad stopped occasionally and waited for me to catch up.

The path began to climb steeply. My topcoat suddenly felt insufferably hot. I got a stone in my shoe, tried to walk on it, and finally had to take my shoe off and extract it. Tad had vanished into the thinning darkness. I was untying my shoe when someone rounded the curve behind me and almost collided with me. I snatched and felt a flapping sleeve pull through my fingers. The figure darted out of sight almost before I caught a glimpse of it. My fleeting impression made it too large to be child and too small for an adult, but I still couldn't guess the age or sex.

Tad returned for me while I was retying my shoe. I slipped my topcoat off and carried it, and we started off again with Tad confidently threading his way past forks and intersections. Now the cool air felt delicious. Eventually we took a turn to the right and increased our pace as the path began to level off. One more sharp curve, and I saw lighted windows at the end of the tunnel. We emerged in a clearing occupied by a small house.

To my considerable disappointment, it looked like an ordinary suburban cottage. My experience of witches' houses is limited, but I had expected something suitably scary or at least mystifying.

Then the innocent-looking cottage began to play tricks on me. A gravel path led directly to the door, but we turned onto a cement walk that circled the building. The cozy doorway, framed by lighted windows, slipped out of sight around the corner as we walked, to be replaced by an identical cozy doorway framed by lighted windows.

We continued to walk. The second doorway slipped out of sight to be replaced by a third.

When the fourth identical doorway appeared, Tad led me toward it. It opened as we approached, and the witch was there to greet us. I suppose my subconscious was expecting a venerable, toothless crone in a pointed hat who would scream curses and scratch strange symbols on the dirt floor of an incense-choked hovel. This was an attractive-looking woman in her sixties with pure white hair and impeccable grooming. She wore a flowered skirt and a white blouse. Her only jewelry was a gold wedding ring on her left hand. She looked like a contented housewife who took great pleasure in welcoming guests to the pleasant suburban home I thought I had seen.

Her home had turned out to be unique, and probably the witch would, too. I kept my eyes on her, expecting something startling to happen.

She greeted us with a smile. "Morning, Tad. Morning, Mr. Pletcher. Miss Laurette hasn't arrived yet. Won't you come in and make yourselves comfortable?"

Her witchcraft began to work immediately. I stepped inside and looked around for Tad. He had disappeared.

"He'll find himself a book to read until you're ready to leave," Nell Troppit said. "That boy always has his nose in a book."

"Yesterday he was Duff Schaffer's assistant, and I was wondering when he went to school. Now I'm wondering when he sleeps."

"Tad is everyone's assistant," she said.

"Doesn't he attend school?"

"Occasionally. He's brilliant, and he stays so far ahead of his class that the teacher gives him days off. Please sit down. Miss Laurette will be here soon. Would you like some coffee?"

The small room was a triangle with one apex truncated by a fireplace with a door on either side. Comfortable-looking, old-fashioned wood furniture was arranged in a semicircle facing the fireplace. There were plants everywhere, forming masses of green that filled corners and lined windows, but very few of them were flowering. I settled myself on a cane-bottomed rocking chair. The witch placed a cup of coffee on a low table and took the chair opposite.

I sipped the coffee, which tasted wonderful, and then I announced, "This is a strange house."

Her face crinkled into a smile. She was charming. In fact, she was bewitching. "Actually, it isn't," she said. "A witch's house would only be strange if it weren't strange. This certainly is a remarkable place. It is octagonal, which is unusual enough, but the builder compounded that by making each of its eight sides an identical front of the house. I don't suppose anyone remembers what his purpose was, or if he had one, but it's a wonderful house for a witch. Originally it was named 'Round House,' probably because 'round' is easier to say than 'octagonal.' No one calls it that now. It's the Witch's Circle because of the encircling walk. Some of my most loyal clients walk completely around it two or three times when they visit me, and they try to enter a different door each time they come."

"How does one get to be a resident witch?" I asked.

"I don't suppose there is an established procedure. In my case, I left home when I finished high school, went to Atlanta, got educated, got a job, got married, and prospered. Then my health failed, my job failed, and my marriage failed. I came home fully intending to die, and I probably would have if it hadn't been for Miss Laurette. It took her just one shrewd glance to understand what I really needed, which was an interest in life. Old Goody Gump had died recently. She'd been the local witch as long as anyone could remember, and Miss Laurette thought she served a useful purpose, so she'd let the Gumps live in a run-down shack on High Acres property. She'd also given Goody an allowance and seen to it that no one bothered her. 'We can't get along without a witch,' Miss Laurette told me. 'Take Round House and see what you can do.'

"Round House was the High Acres guest house when the General entertained frequently, but it hadn't been used for years. I said, 'I don't know anything about witchcraft.' 'Good heavens, child,' Miss Laurette said. She's my age, but where maturity and authority are concerned, she's always been the adult and the rest of us children. 'Good heavens. You have intelligence, you can read up on it, can't you? Old Goody was a moron, and she managed. Go up to Round House, hang out your shingle, and try to help people.' So I did. My married name

was plain Eleanor Smith. Miss Laurette wisely ruled that no witch could succeed with a name like that. I reverted to my maiden name and became Nell Troppit. That was almost thirty years ago. I do believe I've helped people, and I've enjoyed every bit of it."

"Are witches a standard institution in rural Georgia?"

"They certainly aren't standard. I suppose one survives here and there. Goody Gump's mother and grandmother and maybe great-grandmother were witches, so the tradition is strong in this neighborhood."

"Don't you feel squeamish messing around with eyes of newts and things like that?"

"Pshaw. That's just mumbo-jumbo. The first thing I did was strip all that away. What's left is sound herbal medicine and psychiatry. The Village has never had a doctor. Years ago, when travel was difficult, people were inclined to try the local witch for anything but the most serious illness rather than take that long trip to a doctor's office. Now they have cars, but a lot of them still feel the same way. As for psychiatrists, my clients would laugh at the notion of paying a doctor who didn't even give them pills, but a witch is taken seriously. Miss Laurette was right. She usually is. There's nothing backward about this part of Georgia, but it simply couldn't get along without a witch. Let someone wake up with a pounding headache at two in the morning, and he's likely to drive up here to see what I can do for him."

"What can you do?"

She smiled. "There are numerous time-tested home remedies, and I know them all. Poultices of horseradish or mustard leaves, for example. Sometimes crushed onions are used, or ginseng roots. It depends on what's available. I'll also administer a cup of strong tea—sassafras or mint—and if the headache is an unusually severe one, which it will be if someone comes up here in the middle of the night, I'll add two aspirin tablets or maybe three and give him an ice pack. People have great faith in my remedies. Here's Miss Laurette."

She went to the door and opened it, and I got to my feet as Laurette Johnston entered. She was tall, robust—without an extra ounce of fat—and folksy in manner while remaining authoritative in her every gesture. The thing that impressed me most was her total

lack of vanity. Her gray-streaked dark hair would never experience a color rinse. She surrendered her heavy jacket to Nell Troppit and looked superbly poised and businesslike in slacks and a turtleneck sweater. After thanking the witch for the use of her sitting room—which was Johnston property—she turned to me with a smile.

"I hope I haven't mystified you completely, Mr. Pletcher, but Miss Lambert gave me precise instructions, and I'm following them as meticulously as I can. Let's sit down." She led me to a charming antique wood settee. As I seated myself, I noticed that Nell Troppit had worked her witchcraft again. This time, she had disappeared.

Miss Laurette spoke softly. "I assume Leland Borling told you about the suicide of that unfortunate young man, Joe Murphy."

"He did." I kept my own voice low. "I intend to go to Chattanooga today."

"I feel certain he was my nephew, Mr. Pletcher, and I want to know everything you can find out about him. I asked you to come here because I have something to tell you that you may not learn in Chattanooga. He did *not* commit suicide. He was murdered."

The previous day had been a strange one—from Miami to Napoleon Corners, from the cannon barrage to the marching ghosts—and now I was starting the second day with a client who was already a jump ahead of me.

I felt resentful. "I know he was murdered," I said.

She said wonderingly, "That's what Miss Lambert said. She knew instantly. I had a strong feeling about it the moment I heard how he died, but I couldn't explain it. I didn't like to question Miss Lambert on the telephone, but I can ask you. How do you 'know'?"

"From the circumstances—all of them. The missing luggage and personal effects, for example. The nature of the letter he wrote to you—it would be difficult to imagine anything less suggestive of suicide. The timing—why kill himself when he was about to meet someone who could have been his benefactor? The connection with other unlikely events. Coincidence may occasionally run rampant, but I have to see it and investigate it before I'm convinced."

"What other events are you referring to?"

"For one thing, the mysterious disappearance of another nephew of yours. For another, an experience of my own." I described the Civil

War barrage I had driven through. "It was a deliberate attempt on my life," I said. "There are several possible explanations, but the one I'd choose first is that someone doesn't want a detective looking into these things."

"And—you're willing to continue?"

"Of course. It's my job to be shot at occasionally, and the cannon were a new experience. Your attorney thinks you should hire a detective to investigate Al's disappearance instead of wasting money on the death of a stranger who may be an imposter. I think both should be investigated—along with the potshots taken at the General, your car being forced off the road, the marching ghosts, the arson, and all of the other strange events that have been happening around you. I have to consider them part of a pattern even if they seem to be totally unrelated."

"Where did you hear about those things?" she demanded.

"While I was waiting for someone to tell me something, I spent several hours talking with people. Detectives have a knack for picking up information. Who knew I was arriving yesterday afternoon?"

"Both Mr. Borling and Miss Kirkland knew. It was Kolina who gave your New York office the directions for finding Napoleon Corners. It does seem odd that she had you drive over the mountain, though. I'll ask her why she did that. Highway 353 is a much better route. Anyway, your office gave us your approximate arrival time, but Leland had to be in Atlanta, and I was swamped with arrangements for a ball, so Kolina met you."

"I see. Do the telephones that you and Miss Kirkland use have extensions?"

She smiled. "That was the first thing Miss Lambert asked me. She refused to discuss my case with me until I called her on a phone with a guaranteed private line. I drove to Chattanooga to do it."

"She has a phobia about telephone extensions and switchboards," I said, "based upon bitter experience. But Miss Kirkland didn't drive to Chattanooga to talk with our New York office, did she?"

"No."

"And there are extensions?"

"Of course. I want no misunderstanding about this, Mr. Pletcher.

All of our servants have been with us for years. They are completely trustworthy."

"Sometimes those are the worst kind. Just because they *are* trustworthy, they're trusted too much."

"I'm aware of that. I never tell them more than they need to know."

"What about your attorney?"

"Steve Malkinson was my father's friend and legal advisor for almost fifty years. Toward the end of his life, he made Leland Borling his partner so there would be someone to carry on the business. Leland has been here for four years, and he's been our legal advisor since Steve died two years ago. We miss Steve's friendship, but Leland is a much better lawyer. We pay him an annual retainer, and the only problem I have with him is that sometimes he tries too hard to earn it."

"What about his office help?"

"His wife Madge acts as his secretary. She's a sweet girl, but she's completely wrapped up in her children, and I doubt that she's much help to him beyond answering the telephone. I suppose he does most of his office work himself. Attorneys don't need legal secretaries to type documents the way they used to. They have it all in a computer. If Leland gets really rushed, there's a local girl he hires for part-time work. Her name is Doria Vinick. Everyone calls her Dori. She works in Drew Fithie's Snack and Dessert Bar."

"A small, dark girl?"

She nodded.

"How long has Miss Kirkland been with you?"

"A little less than a year. I've found her completely trustworthy, but I had no reason to tell her about Joe Murphy, so I didn't. I've done so now because Miss Lambert thought she would be excessively curious as to why I'd hired a private detective if I didn't give her a plausible explanation."

"Very well. I'll start with Joe Murphy and bring in the other elements of this conspiracy as quickly as I can. I want you to be extremely cautious until I've had an opportunity to discuss this with Miss Lambert. Tad and I will walk back to High Acres with you. You

aren't to go anywhere alone until the case is resolved. The same applies to the General. He'll hate it, but it must be done."

"If you really think it's necessary, we'll take every precaution."

"About your other nephew, Al. You want no public fuss, I take it."

"I want no fuss of any kind."

"I agree with your attorney that something should be done. If you can find me a recent photograph of him and provide a detailed description of his car, I'll see that the investigation is kept confidential."

"All right. That shouldn't be difficult."

"Since I'll be in Chattanooga today, why don't you leave the photo and the car description with Duff?"

"I'll do that," she promised.

"What about the monks?"

"What about them? Surely they can't have anything to do with this!"

"What do you know about their backgrounds?"

She was silent.

"I'll have to give them a careful look," I said. I told her about the donation of shoes and socks I had arranged.

"The reason I haven't given them more assistance is because it would defeat the purpose of their community," she said. "Do whatever you think necessary, but please don't spoil them. They need the sense of achievement that comes with solving their own problems."

She got to her feet. "And now I must get home. This is going to be another exhausting day."

"I'd forgotten about your ball this evening. Are May and Duff coming?"

"Of course. Saturday and Sunday are their busy days, but today most of their customers will be at the ball. Belinda can handle any tourists who happen by."

"I'd like to attend this ball myself. If I were May's visiting cousin, would that give the Schaffers an excuse for bringing me?"

"May is a native here, and people know all about her close relatives, but I suppose you could be the son of a distant cousin and use your own name. I'll put you on the guest list, and you can tell May about it."

Whimsical impulses are a weakness of mine, and sometimes one slips out before I can collar it. If I were a scientist, I probably would blow up the lab once or twice a week just to make life more interesting for the neighbors. "Did you invite Drew Fithie and his wife?" I asked.

She straightened with a jerk and gave me a look of profound astonishment. "Drew Fithie? At High Acres?"

"Before Mr. Fithie leaves for work this morning, I want you to telephone him. This isn't a job for Miss Kirkland. You'll have to do it yourself. Apologize for the oversight of not inviting him—plead how rushed you've been—and beg him to come. With his wife, of course, and adult children if he has any. Surely a few more guests won't matter."

"I never thought I'd see the day. You have a reason, I suppose."

"Of course. I suspect him of being responsible for this conspiracy we're investigating."

"Yes," she said slowly. "Yes. He certainly has hated us for years. We give him the response he deserves—we ignore him."

"Which accomplishes nothing except to feed his hatred. With a little tolerance, you could have made a friend of him."

"Who wants a friend like that? Do you know the man?"

"I met him yesterday. I'd much rather have him as a friend than as an enemy. His potential either way might surprise you. Call him this morning. One more thing."

I pointed a finger and spoke sternly. "You're filling the house with people tonight, and it would be child's play for an uninvited guest or two to slip in. I'm sending you some security guards to patrol the grounds and act as spare servants. I'll guarantee their competence. If nothing else, they'll make your party run much more smoothly. If there's trouble, they'll know how to handle it."

We took our leave of the witch, and Tad and I walked Miss Laurette home and left her at a rear door of the stately High Acres mansion. I took a quick look around the grounds, and while we made the long walk back to my car, I thought about how to make the most effective use of the security guards I was going to hire for the ball.

The person who murdered Joe Murphy and arranged the disappearance of Al Johnston would have an equally good motive for

murdering a newly found granddaughter. The attempts on the lives of the General and Miss Laurette were certain to be repeated. It would be small credit to me if I solved the case after the General and all of his heirs were dead. I wanted to make certain no one took advantage of the confused social whirl to stage an assassination or two.

6

After breakfast, I went to the kitchen and introduced myself to May as her new cousin. She thought the idea hilarious. Then I drove north to the Chattanooga area on Highway 353, which was indeed a much simpler and quicker route than the zigzagging private road over the mountain.

I first stopped at a shopping center parking lot where I could use a telephone in the privacy of my car. The phone in Raina Lambert's Toronto apartment rang unanswered; personnel on duty at the firm where she was working as a consultant thought she would be in later. I left my name and promised to call again. I next telephoned our New York office and handed it the job of tracking down the history of Joseph E. Johnston Murphy, the certified mechanic. I could offer no clue as to which state or states he might be certified in. Since I had no telephone where the office could reach me or even leave a message, I promised to call back regularly for progress reports. Already communications had become a major problem.

My third call, a long one, was to a security firm in Atlanta. I specified what I wanted, demanded the best men available, and stubbornly persisted until I was assured that High Acres would be properly protected both during the Military Ball and afterward.

A detective prefers a certain anonymity in the car he drives. This is difficult to achieve when an outsized bullet has punched holes in it. I visited the office of my rental car firm at Lovell Field, the

Chattanooga airport, and exchanged my mutilated car for a model that was reasonably intact. A Civil War Minnie ball sounded even less plausible to me than mosquitoes as an explanation for the holes, but the girl at the rental car agency accepted it without blinking. She must have heard some very strange stories in the course of a day's work.

The history of the Civil War is written indelibly on the Chattanooga landscape. The looming bulk of Lookout Mountain, which Fighting Joe Hooker's men captured in their legendary "Battle above the Clouds," was framed in my car windows wherever I went, a humped protuberance dotted with houses that looked precariously balanced and about to tumble off its arching crest. Its steeply slanting roads can intimidate modern motorists.

The city of Chattanooga has engulfed the small park that contains Orchard Knob, the site from which General Ulysses S. Grant watched one of his most celebrated victories unfold, but it is still possible to stand on it and look across at Missionary Ridge, as Grant did, and wonder how his army managed to storm the steep five or six-hundred-foot slope through a hail of gunfire to rout Bragg's Confederates in the "Miracle of Missionary Ridge."

The Chickamauga battlefield, where one of the bloodiest battles of the Civil War was fought, and where General George H. Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga," grimly held his line in place and prevented defeat from turning into catastrophe, is a few miles south of Chattanooga.

I drove up the tortuously steep, winding road to the top of Lookout Mountain and visited Point Park, where Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy's body had been found. The town of Lookout Mountain, not content with the unceasing flow of money from tourists, was using parking meters to exact an additional stern tribute—twenty-five cents for each fifteen minutes, enforced seven days, making this out-of-the-way location more expensive to park in than a major city business district. While I was counting change and trying to estimate the time I would need, a kindly passerby directed me to the free parking lot behind park headquarters. I left my car there and strolled through the park's castellated gate.

As with many former battlefields, it is an utterly peaceful place.

The imposing Peace Monument, whose shaft rises from a circular colonnaded base, dominates the upper level. Cannon mark the sites where Confederate artillery was placed. The view is spectacular. Twenty-one hundred feet below, the westward coursing Tennessee River makes an abrupt southward turn after it passes the city of Chattanooga. At the foot of Lookout Mountain, a hairpin loop appropriately named Moccasin Bend sends the river north again, after which another sharp turn takes it around the next eminence, Raccoon Mountain. This stretch of river was the setting for one of the most colorful incidents of the Civil War. Early on the morning of October 27, 1863, Federal troops loaded into boats at Chattanooga, floated in darkness around Moccasin Bend, and landed at the foot of Lookout Mountain, where a sharp battle cleared Confederate troops from the main Federal supply route.

Chattanooga is now a sprawling city strung out on a web of interstate highways, and the TVA has harnessed the Tennessee River, but water still flows peacefully around Moccasin Bend. Nothing remains in that lovely scene to remind one of the high drama enacted here except the various monuments, plaques, and cannon placed about the mountain to commemorate the military units, both Federal and Confederate, whose men fought and died here.

The battles have long been enshrined in history, the casualties enumerated, the dregs of that carnage tucked away in military cemeteries. Death seems indescribably remote from this tranquil place, but I was convinced that a murder had taken place here.

Point Park is part of the Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park District, and it is administered by the National Park Service. Ultimate local authority rests with the district's superintendent, whose office is at the Chickamauga Park. If the problem had seemed serious enough, he could have called in the FBI, but the suicide of an unidentified vagrant hardly rated that. I wanted to examine the location where the death occurred, so I talked with the staff at Point Park Headquarters.

Everyone was distressed about what had happened. The park is a low-crime area, and the most exciting events anyone could remember were a mentally retarded girl getting lost from her touring group—she was found unharmed—and a suicide note that turned out to be

a fake. Rock climbing is a popular sport in the park, and falls have resulted in death as well as serious injury, but this can be dangerous anywhere—which of course is why people do it. Tourists who keep to the paths are safer in the park than they would be crossing the streets outside.

The park employees were friendly and cooperative, and the First Ranger was extremely helpful, but he could tell me very little. The park was supposed to open at nine, but usually the gate was unlocked earlier than that. Joe Murphy must have arrived shortly afterward. In mid-October there were few people around at that hour, and he may have had the entire park to himself. No one saw him until tourists from Kentucky found his body at the foot of the Point Lookout palisades about ten-thirty, when he had been dead for more than an hour.

A park ranger escorted me to the place where Joe Murphy had jumped or fallen. At the bottom of steps descending from the upper level, an asphalt path led to the Ochs Memorial Museum and Observatory, named in honor of Adolph S. Ochs, the Chattanooga newspaper publisher who conducted the drive to acquire the Lookout Mountain property for the public. The museum, a small stone structure, was situated on Point Lookout, a narrow projection with a steep drop on three sides. The building had a magnificent observation deck with a stone parapet. Not only did it offer a superb view of Moccasin Bend, but it provided a sweeping panorama of the entire area, from McFarland Gap and the Chickamauga Battlefield in the east to Raccoon Mountain in the west.

The path ended at the museum, where it was blocked by a five-foot woven wire fence and a padlocked gate. A sign on the gate read, "Closed—Dangerous Ledge." The dangerous ledge began long before the path reached Point Lookout, however, and west of the fence it was guarded only by a row of steel posts with two lengths of cable. This was where Joe Murphy had gone over the cliff. Park personnel hadn't noticed any sign of a struggle, but detectives from the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department had searched the area carefully, the ranger said. Doubtless they could tell me more about it.

We descended the palisades by way of a long, somewhat rickety steel staircase. A path that led to various Lookout Mountain attrac-

tions—with distances marked for those who like to stroll up and down mountains—ran near the foot of the cliff, which here had a sheer drop that I estimated at fifty feet. There was a jumble of fallen rock, shrubs, and hardy weeds where the body landed. Further along the path, and directly below the Ochs Museum, were plaques that commemorated the feats of several Federal army units in scaling the rock face.

Trees sheltered the scene on all sides, and only the most incredible coincidence would have provided a witness. Any evidence had already been picked up by the detectives. There was nothing more for me to do.

Time spent in such a perfect natural setting is an investment in tranquility, and I deeply regretted that I couldn't stay longer. I thanked the ranger and reluctantly turned my back on the spectacular views. Before heading for Chattanooga, I visited the bookstore at park headquarters and purchased beautifully illustrated booklets on *The Battle of Chickamauga* and *The Battles for Chattanooga.* If the threat to the Johnstons was somehow connected with the Civil War, it behooved me to read up on the local history.

Detective Raymond Alven, of the Major Crime Division of the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department, was a most pleasant surprise. He was a gaunt, scholarly-looking man with rimless glasses. He also was a thorough police professional and no fool. He already knew Joe Murphy had been murdered.

"A man who commits suicide by diving off a cliff doesn't scrape the rock face on the way down," he said. "If he falls off, he doesn't land headfirst at the base."

Murphy had been carrying a suitcase when he checked out of the Cumberland Motel, and Alven was as intrigued as I was about his missing luggage and personal effects. The motel staff and guests who were acquainted with him had scoffed at the notion that this relaxed and easygoing man would commit suicide. He seemed adequately supplied with money though he didn't flaunt it. He drank nothing stronger than beer and little of that. He enjoyed life thoroughly, and those who knew him thought him very good company.

He had no car, but he was such a likable person that a couple staying at the motel had taken him sightseeing with them for several days. They

had ridden the Lookout Mountain Incline Railway, seen the Chattanooga Choo Choo model railway display, cruised the Tennessee River, and visited the Tennessee Aquarium, the battlefields, and other tourist attractions along with a scattering of museums.

A young lady named Rosemary Chambers, a clerk at the motel who seemed to have known Murphy better than anyone else, said he liked Chattanooga very much and was thinking of staying if he could find a job. The two of them had gone sightseeing on Sunday, using her car, and they'd had a date to drive over to Signal Mountain on the following Wednesday, before she went to work at three o'clock, to see the Grand Canyon of the Tennessee River. She was genuinely upset over his death. Unfortunately, she hadn't been on duty when he made his abrupt departure, or she certainly would have tried to find out where he was going and why.

Alven had turned up no evidence as to why anyone would have wanted to murder such a likable and thoroughly harmless person, but murdered he certainly had been. The cause of death was a vicious blow on the head that crushed his skull. His body had been slid over the cliff head first in the hope that injuries received in the fall would obliterate the death blow. They hadn't; instead, the injuries that occurred after death were further proof of murder, but the investigation was already in limbo because the police had no idea where Murphy came from, there were no suspects, and no one had seen him with another person the morning he died. No witness had seen him at all after he dashed away from the motel—alone—carrying his suitcase.

The detective listened wide-eyed while I described Murphy's possible connection with the wealthy Johnstons of High Acres. If the anonymous traveler was heir to a fortune, and if his death was part of a massive plot against the Johnstons, the case suddenly acquired cosmic overtones. Alven promised to start over.

He supplied me with copies of a photo of Murphy that Rosemary Chambers took on their outing. Leland Borling had said the dead man was about thirty, but he looked like a teenager. He had a handsome face and a mop of dark hair, and his grin radiated friendly good humor.

Alven also had a copy of the registration form Murphy had filled

out when he arrived at the motel. He had given "Pittsburgh, PA" as his residence, but he left the street address blank. He explained to the clerk that he had lived in Pittsburgh for the past year but was relocating. The motel required a valid ID, such as a driver's license, and Murphy had none. Simply because he seemed like a congenial, straightforward person and was willing to pay for a week in advance, the clerk let him have a room. This wasn't illegal, but there was an air of irregularity about it.

"Motels have problems with local men who rent rooms for drug parties or even put a prostitute in a room and bring customers to her," Alven said. "That's why they require identification. This Murphy must have had an attractive personality."

I told Alven I wanted to find out whether there was any investigating left for me to do, and I would check back with him later.

The Cumberland Motel was a rambling conglomeration of one- and two-story units. It faced Market Street; a deteriorating side street led to the run-down residential neighborhood in its rear. Unfortunately, neither of the two employees I wanted to talk with—Rosemary Chambers, the clerk who had dated Murphy, and Jake Gepp, the night clerk who had checked him out—was on duty. I telephoned Miss Chambers at home and arranged to drive over and talk with her.

She lived on Woodlawn Drive, and this was my second experience of a Chattanooga peculiarity I had already noticed when I looked for the Sheriff's headquarters on Walnut Street. There are several Walnut Streets in the Chattanooga area. There also are several streets named Woodlawn. I finally found the right one, a narrow street that ran along the side of Missionary Ridge—not the steep slope that Grant's army charged up, but the easier grade down which the Confederate army fled in what General Bragg himself called a shameful retreat. Along the ridge's crest were elaborate homes with expansive lawns and unusual lawn ornaments—Civil War cannon and plaques marking places where men fought and died. The Woodlawn Drive houses were more modest. On the north side, they were elevated above the street and built into the wooded slope. On the south side, they were slightly lower than street level, with an abrupt, wooded incline behind them. The address Miss Chambers gave me was a white bungalow with a broad porch, vintage 1920.

She was a pleasant, nice-looking girl in her early twenties who was living with her parents and taking classes at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Jobs were scarce for university students, and the low-paying motel job had been the best she could find. She seemed to have a great deal of common sense, and she definitely was not the type to form romantic attachments with casual motel patrons. She had never dated one before, but Joe Murphy was a thoroughly nice young man, and she had liked him. On their Sunday afternoon date, she had driven him to Reflection Riding, the nature center on the other side of Lookout Mountain.

"You didn't take in Point Park along the way?" I asked casually.

"He'd already been there with the couple who took him sightseeing."

She was certain he was a complete stranger to the area. He hadn't talked about his family, or where he came from, and he definitely hadn't mentioned having relatives nearby.

"On your visit to Reflection Riding, did he say or do anything that suggested he was worried or despondent about something?"

Her "No!" was vehement. They'd had a very pleasant afternoon, and they both were looking forward to the drive to Signal Mountain on the following Wednesday.

"I still don't believe he committed suicide," she said. "That's silly. His death must have been an accident." She wasn't yet aware that the nice young man had been murdered.

I next went looking for the clerk who had been on duty when Joe Murphy checked out at five in the morning. Jake Gepp lived in a run-down little house in St. Elmo, an aging subdivision at the foot of Lookout Mountain where deterioration had a long head start on restoration. Gepp was a small, furtive-looking man in his fifties with a pronounced limp. He needed a shave, but I couldn't fault him for that. He worked nights; his "morning" was still a half-day away, and I had interrupted his sleep.

He had very little to tell me, but I didn't need his stammering account to envision the scene in the motel office at five A.M. when Joe Murphy checked out. Gepp would have been sitting comfortably behind the counter, reading or watching TV. Suddenly Murphy bounded in carrying his bag. Before Gepp could get out of his chair,

Murphy had dropped his key on the counter, spoken his piece about not needing a refund, and dashed out. Gepp had to scramble to find Murphy's account and verify that no money was owed. By the time he had done that, Murphy was already out of sight, and Gepp had no further interest in him. He had to take care of the paperwork of closing an account, something that rarely happened at that time of day, and it had thoroughly disrupted his TV watching. Just thinking about it made him grumpy.

I returned to the Cumberland Motel, and along the way I made a startling discovery. I was being tailed by two men in an old Plymouth with a red, rust-streaked body and a Confederate flag for a front license plate. I had to drive around a block to convince myself it was happening. A car so conspicuously colored and labeled wouldn't be my choice for that kind of work, but sometimes one has to take what is available. The behavior of the two men in the car was even more curious. I had never been tailed with such diffidence. The car hung back almost out of sight, speeding up only when it had to, and I never got a good look at the driver and his passenger.

At the Cumberland Motel, the clerk on duty—who was a friend of Rosemary Chambers—willingly searched records for the information I needed and lent me a key to the room Joe Murphy had occupied.

Motel business in Chattanooga drops off after Labor Day, but weekends are usually busy, and touring groups of senior citizens take up some of the slack. The customers from the previous week who might have had some contact with Murphy were no longer around. Rosemary Chambers had given their names to the police, and I knew that Ray Alven had talked with all of them, either in person or by telephone.

Murphy's room was unoccupied, but it had been rented three times since he left. I went through it perfunctorily, expecting to find nothing. I found nothing. One of the adjacent rooms also was vacant. The other was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Calvin Rick, elderly tourists from Ohio who had arrived Sunday afternoon, the day before Murphy's death. Murphy left early the next morning, so it seemed unlikely that they'd had much contact with him. This made them unpromising witnesses, but they were all I had.

Sometimes the fickle Goddess of Luck bestows grudging rewards for patience and tenacity. It happens just often enough to keep me going. The Ricks, a garrulous gray-haired couple, remembered Joe Murphy well. They had talked with him for an hour on Sunday evening. He had been friendly and extremely helpful, telling them about things they should see. They were startled and distressed when I told them he was dead. They had heard something about a tourist having an accident at Point Park, but they hadn't paid much attention.

After a week in a Chattanooga motel, they seemed sufficiently bored with their own company to jump at the opportunity to talk with someone else, even a detective. They were packing to leave the next morning, and the beds were cluttered with souvenirs and dirty laundry. Mr. Rick was a lifelong Civil War enthusiast who had never visited any of the famous battlefields. He had enjoyed Chattanooga enormously, and he couldn't think why he had waited so long to come here. Mrs. Rick's enthusiasm for battlefields seemed tempered.

I asked routinely whether either of them had been up early enough to see Murphy when he left on Monday morning. One doesn't expect vacationing tourists to be awake at five A.M., and at that hour it had been dark, but Rick said he always got up early and took a short walk. He had been returning to his room from a circuit of the motel grounds when Joe Murphy dashed out of the motel office carrying a suitcase. "I called to him, 'Leaving? Good luck to you,' " Rick said soberly. "He was going to die in a few hours, and I wished him luck." Murphy had called something in return and dashed off down the side street half walking and half running and swinging his suitcase. It seemed like odd behavior to Rick. If a person checking out of a motel at five in the morning has no car, he will arrange a ride with someone or call a cab. City buses ran on Market Street, but even if they operated that early, the bus stop was in the opposite direction from the one Murphy had taken.

Odd or not, it was none of his business. He returned to his room and—having dutifully performed his early morning exercise—went back to bed.

"He had a visitor," Mrs. Rick said. "I heard them talking."

"Now Martha," Rick said reprovingly. "I'm always up before you, and I would have heard them." He turned to me. "This motel has thin

walls. Even at our ages, what you hear next door is sometimes an education, but the young man you're asking about never made any noise at all. I didn't hear a thing that morning."

"You were still asleep," Mrs. Rick said.

She had been awakened by someone knocking very quietly on Murphy's door. After Murphy let him in, she heard hushed voices for some time. She recognized Murphy's voice; the other had been a man's voice without any special distinction. She heard the door open and close when the visitor left, followed by noises that could have been made by Murphy packing. After her husband awoke and went for his walk, she heard Murphy's door open and close again. That would have been Murphy leaving. A short time later, she heard her husband's voice outside their own door, and then he returned.

I still hoped against hope to find someone who had seen Murphy with the murderer. "Was there anyone else around that morning?" I asked.

Rick snorted. "At that hour? Of course not. There never is."

I agreed resignedly. In mystery fiction, there always is one astute character with the eyes of an eagle and the memory of an elephant who by astonishing coincidence looks out of a window at the precise moment when a witness is needed. In real life, people are in bed and sleeping at five in the morning with the curtains drawn. They wouldn't stir themselves for a bleary squint outside unless someone set off a bomb across the street.

The Ricks' ardent pursuit of Civil War history had made them difficult to catch, and the local detectives hadn't talked with them. I told them the police would want formal statements from them before they left for home, and they agreed resignedly. I was about to leave when Rick blurted, "Say—there is one person who's usually up at that time."

"Who is that?" I asked.

"Don't know. I've never seen him, but his light is on when I take my walk."

He indicated the largest house in the group behind the motel and pointed out the windows where he usually saw a light, but he couldn't remember whether he had seen it on Monday morning.

I thanked him and went to investigate the early riser. According to Rick's testimony, Joe Murphy had come out of the motel office and hurried off down the side street. The side street led nowhere in particular, and there was no reason for him to walk in that direction unless someone was waiting for him in a car parked out-of-sight around the corner.

The large house had been remodeled into apartments. A helpful woman who lived downstairs told me the tenant of the apartment above her was a cab driver named McIver who worked unbelievably long hours. He usually was gone by half-past-five in the morning and never got back before ten or eleven at night. He was quiet and rarely bothered anyone except that he used to wake them up when he started his cab in the morning. He parked it behind the house right under their bedroom window. Finally she spoke to him about it, and now he parked it on the street in front of the house.

Monday morning? She couldn't remember anything at all about Monday morning.

I went back to the motel office and telephoned Ray Alven. He promised to send someone to take statements from the Ricks, and he thought he could arrange an interview with the cab driver. He called back fifteen minutes later and directed me to Stanley's Place, a restaurant out on Broad Street. McIver would meet us there.

Alven sounded excited. His case had gone nowhere for the best part of a week, and suddenly things were moving.

A block from the motel, the old Plymouth swung out to follow me, but it still hung so far back that I couldn't get a good look at its occupants.

Stanley's Place was an old-fashioned diner with a new front. The cab driver was already there, disgruntled because he was losing work time. He was almost grotesquely thin. He had the look of a fat man who had lost weight enormously and was working and also starving himself to death. He was a widower with a crippled grandson who required expensive nursing care and a granddaughter he was helping through college, and he drove a cab for as many hours a day as he could stay awake. He was up at five—or earlier—and he stayed on duty at night as long as there was any possibility of a fare.

"You look tired," I told him. "A short break now and then is healthy for you." I ordered coffee and then persuaded McIver to have a sandwich.

I had no intention of preempting his testimony. Instead, I got him talking about himself. By the time Alven arrived, McIver was in a relaxed and friendly mood and eating a piece of pie with his third cup of coffee. Alven muttered an apology—something had come up that had to be taken care of.

He began his questions, and for one brief shining moment, I thought the case might turn into a piece of mystery fiction after all. McIver *had* happened to look out the window the previous Monday morning, and he *had* seen Joe Murphy hurrying toward his apartment building. Alven passed Murphy's photo to him, and he nodded. That was the man he had seen.

"My cab was parked out front," he said. "I thought maybe he saw it and wanted a ride somewhere. I was about to raise the window and tell him I'd be down as soon as I got my clothes on, but he went on around the corner. Then I thought maybe he hadn't stopped because there was no driver in the cab, and I hurried to the side window to call to him from there."

He paused. "And?" Alven prompted.

McIver shook his head. "I heard a car start up. When I got to the window, he was gone."

He hadn't even seen the car drive away.

So much for the verities of real life.

We thanked McIver and let him go back to work, and I told Alven about the Plymouth. "Drive east when you leave, and I'll hang back and get the license number," he said. When I drove off, the Plymouth pulled out of a parking lot and followed me. I ignored it and looked for another telephone so I could make my round of calls again. Raina Lambert was still not available. I gave the New York office the information that Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy had claimed Pittsburgh for his most recent address. Then I sat in my car and thought for a full five minutes.

I was experiencing no glow of satisfaction for my day's work. The small amount of evidence I had collected made it conclusive that Joe Murphy had been murdered, but I already knew that. It would be up

to Ray Alven to search for someone who had been at Point Park shortly after it opened that Monday morning and could have seen Murphy with his murderer. If by a fluke of luck Alven found a witness, the odds were very long that this person wouldn't remember anything. Until the instant when the murder blow was struck—and the murderer would have taken pains to make certain no one saw that—Murphy and his companion would have been a couple of unobtrusive visitors at a popular tourist spot.

Nor would it advance our case an iota to know where Murphy came from. We might be able to confirm his relationship with the Johnstons, but the solution to the murder lay somewhere in the vicinity of High Acres.

I headed for Napoleon Corners. The Plymouth followed me for a short distance, but when I turned south to connect with Highway 353, it continued west. The driver and his passenger were just looking me over, thanks. They were window-shopping, studying my habits and maybe planning to give me special attention later.

But now they were gone, and I could concentrate on another puzzle that had been nagging at me all day when I had more urgent things to occupy myself with. The directions I received for finding Napoleon Corners had been preposterous. Not only had they taken me a meandering back way over the mountain when a far better and more direct route was available, but they led me into an ambush that could have killed me.

Those directions came from Kolina Kirkland. I was as interested in her background as I was in Joe Murphy's.

7

When I reached the Corners General Store and Café, I found the large forms of Duff Schaffer and Brother Mulberry sprawled in deck chairs on the wide porch. They looked at me quizzically as I approached them.

"Got yourself a different car, I see," Brother Mulberry remarked.

"The other one was giving me trouble," I said. "Fortunately it was a rented car, so it wasn't my trouble. I exchanged it."

"I have no faith in mechanical things," Brother Mulberry said gloomily. "If God had meant for us to drive cars, He would have given us eyes in the backs of our heads and longer attention spans. We've been talking about those varmints. We can't figure out what they're up to."

"Have they burned anything valuable?" I asked.

"No," Duff said, "but people hereabouts are getting nervy. Ghosts aren't supposed to behave like that. We're afraid they'll start burning buildings that have people in them."

"Is there a local tradition for the way ghosts are supposed to behave?"

"We have plenty of local haunts, if that's what you mean. There are two little pioneer burial grounds right here on the Johnston estate. In the old days it was difficult to transport corpses, especially in winter, and traveling to funerals wasn't easy, either, so people got buried close to home. There are tales about those old cemeteries—especially about a woman buried in one of them who's supposed to have been murdered. Old timers talk about chains clanking, and strange lights, and babies crying, and headless corpses, and bodies flying through the air, and I don't know what all."

"What about Civil War ghosts?"

"I never heard tell of any around here until this funny business started. There are stories about a ghost on the Chickamauga battlefield, though."

I was interested. Most people who try to fake occult happenings have limited imaginations. They don't invent; they use something they have already heard about. "What does the Chickamauga ghost do?" I asked.

"It doesn't *do* anything. It's a blue light that dances around the Wilder Tower."

I knew about the tower. Colonel John T. Wilder commanded an Ohio brigade of mounted infantrymen armed with repeating rifles. Because of their rapid fire, they had a tremendous impact on the Battle of Chickamauga wherever they appeared. The tower marked the

point where the brigade stopped a Confederate breakthrough and saved the day for General Thomas. I had never heard of the blue light.

"Has anyone actually seen it?" I asked.

"People claim to have seen it. High school students go out there for a lark so they can say they saw a ghost. There are rumors about satanic rites at Chickamauga, too, and witches doing funny business there, but I don't know when that's supposed to happen."

I asked how many local people had seen the marching ghosts, and Duff mentioned several names. All of them lived and worked on the Johnston estate or had been visiting there.

"The General saw them, too," he said, "so they must have marched all the way up to the mansion at least once. No one else saw them that night, but the General sleeps lightly, and I suppose the bugle woke him up. He took after them in his nightshirt with a cane, but by the time he got outside they were gone. The servants found him halfway down the drive looking for them. He didn't call them ghosts, though. He said they were dratted Yankee foragers. That was the first time anyone had seen them, and we were afraid the General had got completely unhinged. We don't think that now, though."

"Has the General seen them again?" I asked.

"If he did, he kept it to himself. Wouldn't blame him after the fuss that was made the other time."

Tad walked past. "Are you going to the ball?" I called to him.

He nodded, grinning. "I help out," he said.

Of course he did. It was difficult to imagine anything happening around there without Tad having a hand in it.

I asked Brother Mulberry the same question, and he was astonished. The possibility that he might take part in such frivolity hadn't even occurred to him. He was likable, and sincere, and I wished I could trust him and his brethren. I could have made good use of them, but men I couldn't trust absolutely were better left out of it.

After Brother Mulberry left, Duff handed me an envelope from Miss Laurette and a note from Ed Schaffer. The envelope contained three different snapshots of Al Johnston and information about his car. Ed's note read, "Al has dark hair and brown eyes. The unidentified body has sandy hair and blue eyes. It's two inches taller than Al and

forty pounds heavier. Too bad you didn't talk Fithie into driving down to Savannah to identify it."

Duff told me that Ed and the boys he recruited had found two of the four cannonballs. They probably were the General's.

I made a quick trip to the Village and telephoned the Stickells Detective Agency in Atlanta, a venerable and highly regarded firm I had worked with in the past. I described the problem to Cecil Stickells, dictated the information about Al Johnston's car, and promised to send him one of the photos. Then I called Ray Alven in Chattanooga.

"The Plymouth had an Alabama plate," he said. "Registered to a R. N. Renkle, 4810 Woods Road, Norville. Nothing known about him. What do you suggest?"

"File him," I said. "If the name pops up again in this case, then something will be known about him."

The post office was closed on Saturday afternoon, but I remembered seeing a stamp-vending machine in Fithie's General Store. I bought stamps and a package of envelopes, and then I crossed to the post office and mailed one of Al Johnston's photos to Cecil Stickells. When I returned to the Corners, May had gone upstairs to primp for the ball, and Belinda Wassler was in charge of both kitchen and dining room. Even though few customers were expected, May had made individual casseroles with her own version of lasagna. I was tempted, but Belinda cautioned me that the Military Ball's buffet would be lavish. "The Johnstons' guests always eat well," she said.

"You're going to miss it," I told her.

"No, I won't," she said good-naturedly. "I can close at eleven and still get all the dancing I'll want after being on my feet all day."

I consulted Duff about my dress. He agreed with me that a tuxedo would be overly conspicuous, so I opted for a dark blue suit. Before I entered my cabin, I examined the exterior carefully. There was no sign of a prowler. I changed, and then I read about the battles of Chickamauga and Chattanooga until it was time to leave for the ball.

I drove Duff and May myself, pretending to be their chauffeur. Duff was spiffied out in light blue with a red scarf for a tie, and with his size and volume, he looked spectacular. May, in a hoop skirt,

looked even more so. I was startled enough to ask her, "What's a Military Ball?"

"It's what the Johnstons give," May said.

She was right. Whatever it may have been elsewhere, the Johnstons had their own unique version of it.

Darkness had settled in, and the long, steep, winding climb up the mountain was nerve-wracking to one driving it for the first time. We made it to the top, finally, popping out of the forest onto level ground, and I had my first close look at the front of the mansion. It blazed with electric light, as did the surrounding gardens, and the impressive facade was floodlit. That seemed like overdoing it a bit even for a Military Ball, but Duff told me the floodlights were turned on every night until midnight. The mansion was visible for miles, and the General was proud of the fact that visitors were taken to distant observation points to see it.

The branch of the drive that led to the mansion was lined with lights. We circled through lawns and a small formal garden with low hedges to the pillared entrance, where I brought the car to a halt just in time to witness an altercation. A tuxedoed servant whom I recognized—he was one of the security guards from Atlanta, and I had worked with him before—was escorting a bespectacled, owlish-looking young man down the steps with a firm grip on his arm. It was Jerry Collendon, the alleged reporter, and the guard was carefully explaining to him the rights inherent in the ownership of private property. Collendon was feebly pleading the freedom of the press but with very little conviction. The green-coated outside guard who had been opening car doors for the arriving guests hurried over to take Collendon's other arm. They marched him around the house to the rear where cars were being parked.

I took advantage of the green coat's absence to spring out and open the door for Duff and May, which convulsed them. They swept up the steps, and I drove around behind what had once been a stable but now was a huge garage with upstairs apartments for married servants. Another green coat directed me to a vacant parking space. Probably Collendon's foreign sports car had just vacated it. I saw him disappearing down the exit drive, closely followed by another car driven by the

first green coat. He was being escorted completely off the property, thus making certain the General's rights remained inviolate.

The green coat who had the parking concession was a very sharp operative—surprisingly so for that humdrum job. When I got out of the car, he spotted my shoulder holster—which is not conspicuous—and he was about to evict me, too. He said, patting it, "Excuse me, sir, but—"

I made myself known to him and asked how things were going. "That jerk we just threw out claimed to be an invited guest," he said. "When it turned out his name wasn't on the list, *then* he claimed he was a reporter. Other than that, nothing, except that someone's snooping around in the woods."

"Smallish-looking character?"

"Could be. I didn't get a good look. This is a devilishly complicated place to guard. All these outbuildings and gardens, and the forest growing right up to them."

He and the five other green coats stationed behind the mansion seemed to have things well in hand regardless, so I strolled back to the front and counted another four. There would be two more around somewhere, plus half a dozen formally dressed pseudo servants inside. Old Mac, the Johnston's decrepit, hard-of-hearing butler, who had been with them for donkey's years, would have very little to do except look important and pretend to supervise.

Having assured myself that the security was being handled properly, I gave my attention to the ball. I heard the babble of voices and the strains of music long before I reached the doorway. I was precisely on time, but I had the strange sensation of being the last to arrive. The explanation was a simple one—everyone else had come early.

An orchestra was playing at the far end of the large vestibule, serenading the arriving guests. I counted the violins, noted the total absence of guitars, and opined that we wouldn't hear a bar of rock music all night. We didn't. The musicians were strong on Stephen Foster and such later classics as "Tennessee Waltz" and "After the Ball"—no doubt the General's favorites. "Sweet Georgia Brown" was played, but no one called for "Marching Through Georgia."

There were guests from communities in eastern Tennessee, west-

ern Alabama, and all across northern Georgia, with substantial delegations from Chattanooga and Atlanta. Locally, almost the entire Village had been invited. I could understand Drew Fithie's rage at being arbitrarily classed with the pariahs.

Costume rental establishments in three states had done a rush business. Every male guest who had access to one wore a military uniform complete with sword if one was available. The war or the nationality seemed irrelevant. The only requirement for women was that the gown suggest the nineteenth century. There were hoop skirts, flowing skirts, bustles; silks, satins, velvets, brocades of every conceivable kind; trimmings of fur, of lace, of embroidery; a rainbow of colors. The variety of bodice ornaments would have fascinated a historian of women's fashions. There were fichus—scarves that covered the shoulders and attempted, usually without much success, to provide a veneer of decency for low-cut gowns. These were trimmed with lace, or with embroidered silk, or with braid and tassels, or with ribbons, or with whatever came to hand. Women without fichus made do with elaborately ornamented ladies' neckties or bows with various trimmings. In addition, some women wore sleeve frills or long gloves. Many carried fans. It was a colorful gathering. About a third of the guests were in ordinary clothing, and these unfortunates looked like tourists who had come to gape at the others.

My first stop was the reception line in the drawing room where arriving guests met the new granddaughter. Bramwell Johnston, fully recovered from his touch of the flu, stood on one side of her with Miss Laurette on the other. The ball provided the General with an opportunity to appear in all of his lieutenant general trappings, and he had made the most of it. With his neatly trimmed gray beard, he looked like a taller, slenderer Robert E. Lee. Miss Laurette wore a dress later described by May as being of plum-colored silk, with large flounces and trimmed by a plissé, and having flower ornaments formed of ribbons. Despite her stocky build, the voluminous skirt could have contained three of her.

Standing in the reception line beside Miss Laurette was a frizzle-haired, spinsterish type, a Miss Celisse Wadeson, who introduced anyone the hostess hadn't met and supplied names she couldn't remember—always after a sadistic pause. Miss Laurette took it good-

naturedly, but when my turn came, she slyly waited for the spinster to falter before she introduced me as May Schaffer's visiting cousin.

My own carefully worked out program for the evening was derailed the moment I glimpsed the General's newly discovered granddaughter. She was remarkably beautiful. She had flaming red hair, and she was dressed in a stunning creation of green velvet with a billowy, floor-length skirt. Most of the women present were unaccustomed to such dresses and wore them awkwardly. The granddaughter wore hers with style. The moment I saw her, I stopped worrying about her safety.

She was being introduced to the guests as Miss Raina, last name Johnston, but she was Raina Lambert.

She already had acquired a train of smitten swains. So many males had met her in the reception line and refused to leave that the drawing room was becoming crowded.

The Johnstons hadn't entertained formally for years, and no one knew when it would happen again, so the guests seemed grimly determined to make the most of it. The buffet in the dining room was prodigious in its extent and variety, and the punch had genuine punch. There was conversation in the library—which had hundreds of books about the Civil War and few about anything else—and in several adjacent rooms. The rooms were exquisitely paneled, and they had been furnished with good taste and considerable expense at some remote time when money could still buy quality.

When the last of the guests had been coaxed through the reception line, the orchestra moved upstairs, and there was dancing in the stately second floor ballroom with a row of electric chandeliers highlighting the gold trim of the décor. The General, erect and surprisingly agile despite his years and gray hair, elegantly danced the first dance with his new granddaughter and then claimed her for a second while the unattached males panted with envy.

There seemed no possibility of my dancing with her, so I took advantage of the opportunity to become familiar with the house. I treated myself to a second—much larger—glass of punch, and then I explored the first floor systematically, studying the layout of rooms like a vacationing general surveying the countryside on the chance that some future battle might be fought there. At the end of a hallway

I happened upon the General's den, which was furnished like a private museum. There were cases with Civil War mementos, and weapons were displayed on the walls along with prints and paintings of Civil War scenes. I was studying the prints when I heard a footstep behind me.

It was the General. He hurried forward to greet me as a fellow Civil War enthusiast and was brought up short when he suddenly realized he didn't know who I was.

I offered my hand. "Good evening, sir. I'm J. Pletcher, May Schaffer's cousin. One of the many faces that floated past you in the reception line. The 'J' stands for 'Jefferson'—as in 'Jefferson Davis Pletcher.' "

"Ah ha!" He smiled and shook my hand warmly. His home was crammed with intruders, and I was the only one who had shown the slightest interest in the Civil War. That gave me instant status.

"I've been admiring your Winslow Homer prints," I said. "He was a splendid artist. It's a great pity he saw nothing of the war except for those few visits to the Army of the Potomac. Think what he could have done with the Battle of Chattanooga!"

"Exactly," the General said. In the reception line, he had seemed shy and retiring, but the moment the Civil War was mentioned, his voice boomed with authority. "The East receives the main focus of historical attention merely because of Washington and Richmond, but the war was decided in the Western Theater, the nation's heartland, and this is where the really interesting action occurred. Won't you sit down?"

My rapid skimming of Civil War booklets paid immediate dividends. At the first opportunity, I risked the opinion that General Bragg had received unfair blame for the defects of his subordinates.

"Leonidas Polk should have been shot," the General trumpeted. "Bragg did prefer formal charges against him, but nothing came of it. D. H. Hill should have been shot, too. Bragg won the battle of Chickamauga in spite of them, but it was a near thing. Hill could have wiped out a portion of the Federal army when Rosecrans stupidly divided his command, but he failed to attack. He had specific orders, and he ignored them. So did Thomas C. Hindman. On the second day of the battle, Bragg ordered a dawn attack, and Hill and Polk between

them kept things so muddled that nothing happened until ten o'clock. They never did attack. When they finally moved, they simply blundered forward. Rosecrans's army should have been wiped out. But it could have been wiped out after Chickamauga if Bragg had followed up his victory."

"He had no confidence in his commanders," I said. "And they had none in him."

The General agreed. "He and his officers squabbled among themselves when they should have been fighting Yankees. And that, sir, is why the South lost the Civil War."

He talked on; I interposed a remark now and then, marshaling the facts I remembered and rationing them out to keep the conversation going. He received them with courtly courtesy, agreeing with enthusiasm or interposing corrections with gentle consideration. I had expected a befuddled, senile old man, but on any topic pertaining to the Civil War, his mind was razor-sharp, and where battles were concerned, he could call every cannon shot and didn't hesitate to do so. He was in the way of being a considerable scholar himself. Selwyn Endford, the history professor, wasn't going to have an easy time challenging him.

We had been chatting for more than half an hour when one of the maids poked her head into the room. The General said irritably, "What is it, Becky?"

Becky was a plump, good-natured, middle-aged woman with an unlikely Irish accent—further evidence of a Boston connection. She greeted me with a discreet wink, reminded the General of his neglected responsibilities as host, and firmly led him back to the ballroom. As they went out the door, I heard him remark, "That young man is an authority. He's far more knowledgeable than Miss Laurette's stupid professor."

I went back to the ballroom myself, found a chair, and watched the dancing, wondering who people were and pondering relationships. Leland Borling was dancing with a woman I hadn't met. The business suit he had been wearing the previous night had looked slept in; now his ill-fitting military uniform looked fought in. Mark Wassler was dancing with Lana, the pretty young woman who had rented the video tapes, he in a suit, she in a rather sedate, knee-length gown.

They looked like fugitives from the wrong century, but they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Duff, with a noticeable absence of enthusiasm, was dancing with Celisse Wadeson, the all-knowing spinster. The General was dancing with Nell Troppit and listening politely to whatever witchcraft she was expounding. Kolina Kirkland dashed hither and yon on errands. I wanted to dance with her but couldn't catch her.

I claimed May for a dance, hoping for inside information about some of the guests, but all she wanted to talk about was the General's new granddaughter. She wondered where Miss Raina's red hair had come from. There was none in the Johnston family that she had ever heard of—none at all. She made it sound scandalous, and she refused to consider my suggestion that Miss Raina might have a whole procession of redheaded ancestors on the non-Johnston side.

Everyone was talking about the new granddaughter, which was frustrating when I was trying to conduct an investigation. I resumed watching the dancers. Suddenly I found the vivacious Lana standing in front of me.

"Are you available?" she asked.

"Always," I said, and we danced away. The floor was so crowded that the fire marshal, had there been one present, would have hosed everyone down as a precaution. Those bustles and hoopskirts and swords added cubic feet to their wearers' dimensions.

Lana danced well, but just as I was about to forget I was a detective and enjoy myself, she announced, "I'm Lana Fithie. I wanted to thank you."

"Thank me? For what?"

"For getting us invited. Kolina Kirkland told me it was you who persuaded Miss Laurette to invite the Fithies. I don't know how you did it—either you're the world's greatest diplomat, or you personally know every one of the skeletons in the Johnstons' closets. I'm even more puzzled as to *why* you did it. I'm an outsider. I met my husband at the University of Georgia, and I knew nothing about this part of the state until I came here. It seemed so silly to suddenly find myself involved in an enormous feud that had nothing to do with me. Among my friends here, I was the only one who'd never been invited to High Acres. Now the feud had been canceled, at least for one

night, and I'm having a wonderful time. I'm very grateful. So is my husband. So is my father-in-law, though he'd never admit it. Are you a candidate for sainthood, or do you make a perverted hobby of doing favors for total strangers?"

"I advocate peace and goodwill toward everyone," I said. "Sometimes I even practice that. You aren't quite total strangers, though. I met your father-in-law yesterday and liked him. He has some admirable qualities."

"He does," she agreed. "He's a dear person, and we get along well. Unfortunately, he also has negative qualities, and usually those hit people first and make him so actively disliked that they never find out about his good points."

"What did you study at the university?"

"Botany. I was going to be a college teacher. Now I'm a housewife with the best garden in six counties. But I may be a teacher eventually. If Desmond decides he doesn't care for a business career, we'll go back to the university for graduate study."

"Have you danced with the General?"

"Heavens, no! Miracles do have limits, you know."

"Do you know anything about the Civil War?"

"My great-great-grandmother lived through the siege of Vicksburg as a child. Unfortunately, she never wrote her recollections down. A historian called once wanting to know whether any of her letters survived. As far as my mother knew, she never wrote a letter in her life. A few tales got passed along, mother to daughter, but that's all."

"Oral history is fashionable these days. Just concentrate on remembering everything that was passed along to you, and I'll show you how to extend a miracle."

When the dance ended, I led her over to the corner where the General was holding court. His face lit up when he saw me coming; he was wistfully hoping for a chance to escape the boring multitude and talk about the Civil War again. The crowd parted respectfully when he stepped forward to greet me.

"General, this is Lana Fithie," I said. She made him a sweeping curtsy. He smiled and bowed deeply. "She's a very, very good

dancer," I went on, "and she has new information about the siege of Vicksburg—guaranteed private and unpublished."

"Indeed!"

She was telling him about her great-great-grandmother when the music started. They danced away.

I watched them for a time, and then I gave my attention to a small drama that was unfolding on the sidelines. Mark Wassler went up to Doria—or Dori—Vinick, the waitress from the Snack and Dessert Bar, who was seated in the row of wallflowers. He spoke to her. She shook her head firmly. He stood looking down at her for a moment, and then, with a wooden face, he walked away. A moment later, I saw him dancing with someone else.

I danced with Nell Troppit, wondering what sort of witchery she would work on me, but she was fresh out of enchantments. While we danced, she talked about the Johnstons.

"The General always did enjoy entertaining," she said. "Years ago, his Military Balls were a monthly event. It's sad to think that this may be his last."

"He seems to be enjoying it," I said.

She shook her head. "He's failed noticeably. Sometimes his speech is affected. Perhaps only those who know him well notice it."

"I just talked with him for more than half an hour," I said. "He impressed me as both intelligent and knowledgeable."

"What did you talk about?"

"The Civil War."

"Ah!" She smiled. "He has the Civil War memorized. He'll always be intelligent and knowledgeable about that. Try talking with him about something else. Anything else." She heaved a sigh. "It's a pity. He's such a kind person. He's done so much for so many people."

"I don't suppose you have a magic potion for the symptoms of old age."

She shook her head regretfully. "Not even for my own."

Drew Fithie danced past with a dumpy little woman. Without his cane, he moved like a three-legged horse trying to canter. The witch frowned and muttered, "What *is* that man doing here?" I was about to mention that he was dancing and having a good time like everyone

else, but she immediately changed the subject to the General's lovely new granddaughter.

I danced with May again and then managed to claim Raina Lambert in a "change partners" dance. I had to push three rivals out of the way to do it.

"One of these days," I murmured into her ear as we danced away, "you'll saw the limb off before I'm able to improvise a ladder."

"What's the trouble now?"

"Why didn't you get word to me that *you* were the newly found granddaughter?"

She came to an abrupt stop, and four couples waltzed into us before we started moving again. "Miss Laurette didn't tell you?" she asked incredulously. "I suppose that was my fault. I told her to behave exactly as though I genuinely were her niece and not tell anyone I wasn't, but it didn't occur to me that she'd keep it a secret from you."

"She took you at your word. Sometimes you affect people that way. How do we communicate on this job? By carrier pigeon?"

"I don't know. We'll have to have a place to meet."

"We can't. If word gets around that you're secretly meeting a male admirer, your reputation will be ruined. Also your effectiveness with all of these mooning suitors. Look at them. They make me feel self-conscious, and they aren't even watching me."

I summed up my Chattanooga investigation and asked what I was supposed to do next.

"We're looking for a murderer," she said. "He killed Joe Murphy. He may have killed Al Johnston. He tried to kill the General and Miss Laurette."

"I know about that."

"He must be somewhere nearby. He keeps tabs on everything that happens. Look how quickly he picked up a lead on Joe Murphy."

"Look how quickly he picked up a lead on me." I told her about the Civil War barrage.

"Let the New York office work on Murphy's background," she said. "For a few days I want both of us taking close looks at everyone who has any kind of a connection with High Acres. See what you can learn about the monks. Find out who eats regularly at the Corners Café. Check on Duff's traveling men—all of them. Do your usual stuff

with the local residents. Get any kind of a line you can on this thing."

"Is the murderer present tonight?" I asked.

"If he isn't, I'm certain he's capably represented."

"What's his motive? Money, or is someone working off a big hate?"

"With an estate the size of this one, it's always money. Tomorrow night's social event is a coon hunt."

"Are you going?"

"Of course. It's in my honor."

I whistled silently. "That won't be easy to control."

"That's the idea. Hopefully this character will see it as an opportunity that may not come again and act before he's ready. If he takes the bait, he'll save us a lot of time."

"Do you want me along?"

"In the background as an observer. Keep your eyes open."

"In the forest at night, with a faint moon, you're expecting me to observe?"

"That's why you'll have to keep your eyes open."

The "change partners" gong rang again, and one of the swains claimed her. There was no unattached female nearby, so I took a quick sighting on the row of wallflowers and performed a deep bow in front of Dori Vinick. I expected the same terse brush-off that Mark Wassler had received, but she got to her feet willingly—snickering at my bow—and we edged our way onto the crowded dance floor. She was wearing an ordinary Sunday dress, which seemed drab compared with the flamboyant gowns around us, but she looked very nice in it, and I told her so.

"I noticed you got along well with the siren," she said. "She talked with you. Mostly she lets the man talk while she leads him on with her mysterious smile. What'd she find so intriguing about menswear?"

"I'm multi-dimensional," I said. "I can be eloquent on at least three subjects. I've traveled in two different states, and once I read a book."

"What was the book about?"

"I don't remember. Who's that charming Civil War ingenue with blue eyes and long blonde curls?"

"That's Madge Borling. The attorney's wife. She's too sweet and innocent for this world and too stupid for any other."

"I heard you sometimes work for Borling," I said.

"A few hours now and then when he gets behind."

"Does he pay better than Drew Fithie?"

"Everyone pays better than Drew Fithie, but Borling doesn't pay much better. It means extra money, though, and I can work either before or after my snack bar hours. But it doesn't happen very often."

"Speaking of Fithie, there he is." I smiled and nodded at him as he stumbled along awkwardly, still dancing with the same dumpy little woman.

"All the guests are wondering how he got invited," she said.

"Is that Mrs. Fithie?"

"Of course. Who else would dance with him?"

"The Guest of Honor would."

Dori snorted.

"Guests of Honor have obligations," I said. "That's why she danced with me."

"I'm really surprised to see the Fithies here. Surprised they came but more surprised that the Johnstons asked them."

"Perhaps an amnesty was declared in honor of the newly found granddaughter. I find it interesting that a character like him, who surely knows what it's like to have a tough boss and a meager salary, should treat the people who work for him so obnoxiously."

"He wasn't an abused employee very long. He quit and went into business for himself, and he thinks his employees would do the same if they had any gumption. Since they don't, they deserve whatever they get."

"Tell me who some of these people are. That white-haired gentleman—his Confederate uniform fits him as though it were made to order."

"Probably it was," she said. "I heard he's a rich coot from Atlanta. He only dances with young girls in low-cut formal dresses."

"Not with you?"

"I'm much too old for him, and I'm not wearing the right dress. It's one of the few times in my life I've felt lucky to be overlooked."

Leland Borling was now dancing with the frizzle-haired spinster, Celisse Wadeson. I asked about her.

"Descendant of the first family to settle here, or so she says. She not only knows all the current gossip, but she has encyclopedic knowledge of every local scandal of this century. At one time it was thought she might marry the General. At least, she thought so. She's rumored to be a distant cousin of his. I don't believe that, either, but she's traded on it for years."

"How long have you lived here?" I asked.

"A little less than five years, and it seems like a lifetime. My aunt and uncle have lived here all their lives, and they know almost as much gossip as Celisse Wadeson does. They made me come tonight so I can tell them all about it afterward."

"What do people do for a living around here?"

"There's a scattering of farmers, of course. In the Village, a few people are retired. They have pensions and raise as much of their own food as they can. The others work for the Johnstons, or for Drew Fithie, or they commute somewhere."

The dance ended. We went down to the dining room, sampled the buffet and the punch, and seated ourselves by the door so we could see as much of the coming and going as possible. She seemed to take fiendish satisfaction in delineating the local residents for me. I wondered what her reaction would have been if she had known I was looking for a murderer.

"By the way—what are you doing here?" Dori demanded suddenly.

"I'm rumored to be a distant cousin of May Schaffer's. I traded on that, and here I am."

"Go on!"

"It's the truth. May wrangled an invitation for me. I've never been to a Military Ball before."

"You still haven't. Have you danced with Miss Laurette?"

"I haven't even spoken to her since the reception line, but she sent one of the maids to interrupt a conversation the General and I were having about the Civil War. Evidently he'd escaped from the ballroom when she wasn't looking."

"I'm surprised she didn't send the servant after you. You probably got the invitation because she wanted another man to dance with.

She's as partial to youth and good looks as that old coot from Atlanta. You'd better get back upstairs and take care of your social obligations."

"Nope. My invitation said nothing about working my way. Of course if you're eager to get rid of me—"

"Certainly not. This is much better than sitting there like livestock waiting to be auctioned."

"Now that," I said, "is a compliment. For both of us. But in your case it isn't true. I saw Mark Wassler asking you to dance."

Her face went stony.

"What's the matter with Mark?" I asked. "I was in his store today. He seems personable and very capable."

"He is. All of that."

"Then why not dance with him?"

"He wants to marry me."

I stared at her. "That's the strangest excuse for not dancing I've ever heard. A girl refuses to dance with someone because he has halitosis, or his deodorant offends her, or he has a bad habit like stepping on her corns or drooling on her shoulder. She doesn't usually take offense when a man merely falls in love with her."

She shook her head. "I'm not going to saddle someone else with my responsibilities, and I don't want him to keep asking me."

That closed the subject resoundingly, so we went back to the ballroom and danced. The General had vanished for a time, perhaps to take a nap, but now he was dancing with Madge Borling. She was talking with animation, and he listened with an occasional, courtly nod. Obviously he was partial to young and pretty faces himself.

I got Dori Vinick's commentary on the current dancers. Then we took the conservatory walk, supposedly to admire the flowers but actually because she wanted to see which couples were hiding out there. We visited the buffet again, we looked in on all of the rooms that were open to the guests, and we took a chilly walk in the formal garden that the library's French doors opened onto. Then we returned to the dance floor. By that time I had compiled a mental directory of the guests with names and capsule identifications. It served to pass the time, and such information sometimes proves to be useful.

Raina Lambert was still the center of a crowd of admiring young

men. "An heiress who's also beautiful has an unfair advantage," I remarked.

"An heiress has an unfair advantage no matter what she looks like," Dori said.

Belinda Wassler made her belated appearance, danced with her brother, and then danced with the General. As a new dance was about to start, Mark Wassler appeared beside us and firmly claimed Dori, saying—I suppose to both of us—"Please." I gave Dori a smile and an encouraging nod and stepped aside. They danced away, and I went looking for Belinda. She was surprisingly light-footed for a heavyset woman. Mark and Dori continued their conversation through the next dance, so I danced with Lana Fithie again.

"The General introduced me to Miss Laurette," Lana said ecstatically. "We had a long talk. She's an enthusiastic gardener herself. She's coming to tea on Monday with Miss Raina to see my houseplants. I can't believe it. Are you sure you aren't a candidate for sainthood?"

Lana introduced me to her husband, Desmond, a quiet type who was good-looking, friendly, and totally unlike his father. For the Fithies, the ball was a social triumph. For a working detective, it was a washout. Nothing interesting had happened since the ejection of the reporter. It had been useful to have most of the local population on parade and also to advertise the arrival of another of the General's grandchildren, and it gave Raina Lambert an opportunity to dangle herself as bait, but I noticed no suspicious characters among the swains she attracted. I doubted that she did, either.

I found Dori seated among the wallflowers again, and I danced with her until two A.M. when she had to get back to her aunt and uncle. I had begun to feel the effects of my own twenty-four-hour day, from the Saturday morning ghosts to the Sunday morning ball, so I drove Dori home to a small cottage behind Drew Fithie's General Store. We parted with a good-night handshake at the top of a broad wheelchair ramp, and I returned to High Acres for May and Duff Schaffer. They came sweeping down the curving stairway from the second floor ballroom, trailing clouds of euphoria. Tad Williams was hovering near the door, waiting to help anyone who needed it. I winked at him. He grinned.

During the ride home, Duff and May talked regretfully of other years and other balls. Probably most of the guests did the same. If one of them was a murderer, my most diligent professional scrutiny had failed to identify him.

8

Any ersatz ghosts that marched that night wasted their energy. Ditto for prowlers. Almost everyone in the county went to bed late and slept soundly. Mine was the only cabin occupied.

At breakfast, I asked May if she would be serving coon the next day.

"They don't figure to catch any coons," she said. "A coon hunt is just a contest for dogs."

I had never heard of such a thing.

"When a coon is treed, the first dog to the tree gets points," she explained. "Then they look for another coon."

"That doesn't even sound like fun for the coons."

"I wouldn't cook one anyway. Possum, now—that's something else. We really like possum."

I had a hunt of my own to worry about. My plan was to explore the Johnston estate, covering as much ground as I could on foot and sketching a new map that would be as detailed as I could make it.

Shortly after I started out, I encountered Professor Selwyn Endford, who was at work on his own map. He hadn't attended the ball, so probably he got a much earlier start than I did. He was working a surveyor's transit, and a boy Tad's age was helping him trace contour lines.

I made a detour to avoid walking across his line of sight, but the professor was the type who never passes up an opportunity to stop work and talk. He greeted me as an old friend and asked whether the General had ever sold any of the High Acres timber. I had no idea.

"Trees can be an excellent source of information for military history," he said. "Right down to the end of the last century, sawmills in this area wouldn't accept pine from the Chickamauga battlefield. It was so loaded with Minnie balls, and grapeshot, and shell fragments, that it ruined the saws. Of course the skirmish fought here didn't produce anything like that volume of fire, but a few bullets or a little shot is all I need."

I doubted that the General would be willing to sacrifice a splendid stand of old trees on the chance they might contain a stray Minnie ball or two, but I kept the opinion to myself. It was Endford's problem.

He enlarged on it, treating me to a lecture on the archaeology of battlefields. Finally his helper got bored and went to sit on a nearby log, reminding the professor that he had work of his own to do. He returned to the transit, and I resumed my explorations.

I first mapped the various paths and drives that led to and from and around the High Acres mansion, with special attention to grounds and outbuildings. Several of the old structures hadn't been used for years and belonged in museums. There was a nineteenth-century icehouse, really a conical pit for storing ice; a corncrib where someone, probably a servant, was housing what looked like a rock collection; an old smokehouse that hadn't been used for so long that it no longer smelled smoky; and an underground storage room where food probably had been kept fresh before the days of refrigerators. It was reached by an outside stairway. I gingerly descended the crumbling stone steps and tried the warped door, which was made of vertical boards. It was locked or wedged shut and looked as though it hadn't been opened for years.

There were several small gazebos scattered about the gardens and one Victorian monstrosity at the rear of the large formal garden behind the mansion. It was actually a screened pavilion with pillars and an ornate roof. The entrance was at ground level on the mansion side, but because it was perched on a slope, there was a drop of four feet at the back where the garden met the forest. It looked like an ideal place for a rendezvous with Raina Lambert. She could repose in apparent solitude in the pavilion while I crouched out of sight behind the drop. I sketched all of this in my notebook, devoting two facing

pages to the mansion and its grounds. Then I wrote a note to Raina, telling her about the large gazebo. I sealed it in one of the envelopes I'd bought the day before and asked a servant to hand it to her.

I moved on, and eventually I happened upon the Witch's Circle. The eight-sided house was just as intriguing in broad daylight as it had been in the darkness of early dawn, and I now saw something I had missed before: It was surrounded by greenery. An immense herb garden filled every vacant niche of the clearing, and even the forest beyond had a cultivated look.

Nell Troppit, dressed in slacks and a sweater and armed with garden tools and a bale of straw, was doing whatever one does to harvest herbs or prepare the plants for winter. I like plants—especially flowering plants—but I haven't the botanical mentality. The cellular structures and mating habits of floras have never interested me; nor have I ever had the slightest urge to memorize Latin names or get down on my knees and interfere with root structures.

Nell greeted me warmly and handed me paper towels to mop my perspiring face. "There's a lot of 'up and down' to walking in this part of the country," she said. "Not many visitors enjoy it."

"I've been enjoying it, but probably by the time I get back to the Corners, I'll be thinking I could have enjoyed it just as much by sitting and looking at it."

She laughed merrily. "The Cherokee Indians had their own charming legend about the origin of these mountains. In the beginning, when the ground was still soft, the other animals sent the Great Buzzard out to see if it could find a dry place. By the time the bird reached Cherokee country, it was tired. It swooped lower and lower, and its wings began to strike the ground, digging the valleys and piling up dirt and rocks. The other animals quickly called it back, but the rugged Cherokee country remained as the Great Buzzard made it."

I congratulated her on her garden, and she began telling me about herbs and their medicinal uses. "But you aren't studying medicine," she said, breaking off apologetically. "I'll save my lectures for Tad—though he already knows almost as much as I do." She added seriously, "Our lives should be guided by principles of natural beauty, and what better examples are there than herbs and flowers?"

"And trees," I suggested, indicating the few whose leaves had already turned. "I'm looking forward to seeing an entire mountainside in full color."

"That may happen soon, but trees are beautiful the year around. The seasons make them beautiful in different ways."

She told me where the various paths went, and I walked on.

The path I had chosen curved into the forest and began to climb. Eventually it leveled off and curved again as it entered a small clearing. Suddenly the trees fell away on my right, and I found myself looking down on a narrow slice of the High Acres rear garden. About a third of the large gazebo was visible. No one was in sight. Probably the garden was infrequently used these days because the General seldom entertained.

It was the only place I had found where I could look down on High Acres. I marked it on my map and walked on.

Shortly before noon, I worked my way through to the Village. I crossed the highway to Drew Fithie's Snack and Dessert Bar, thinking I would grab a light lunch there, and I found it closed. Somehow that seemed unnatural. When one has money to spend, one expects the Drew Fithies of the world to be available.

The gas station was open, so I was able to telephone Cecil Stickells in Atlanta. "Anything on Al Johnston's car?" I asked.

"The police have no information about it or him. I won't be able to check the title until tomorrow."

"Do it first thing tomorrow. Do you know anyone at the Atlanta *Constitution*?"

"Of course."

"I need some background on a reporter, one Jerry Collendon."

"What do you want to know about him?"

"Just for a start, I'd like to know whether he exists."

"That shouldn't be hard to find out. What if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll need to know a lot more about him. I'll call you tomorrow."

The congregation was emerging from the Village church across the highway, resplendent in formal Sunday dress. The Johnstons led the way, and the young minister seemed as taken with the newly found granddaughter as swains at the ball had been. After a brief conversa-

tion with him, Miss Raina followed the General and Miss Laurette down the steps, chatting familiarly with Madge Borling. If the attorney's young wife was as featherbrained as Dori Vinick claimed, I wondered what they had to talk about.

Raina was behaving the way a well-brought-up visiting granddaughter was expected to behave, but the little .22 automatic she was so wickedly accurate with would be strapped to her arm regardless—since she wasn't carrying a purse—and immediately accessible. I also noticed three security guards—of the six being kept on at High Acres—mingling sedately with the congregation. Even in church, Raina believed in being prepared.

I had to walk back to the Corners for lunch. Some of the churchgoers got there ahead of me, and the café was crowded. The day wasn't quite warm enough for eating outside, but people were sitting on the porch waiting for tables. Belinda Wassler and Duff dashed back and forth between dining room and kitchen. I had a quick lunch in the kitchen, where May seemed to enjoy conversation while she worked.

Tad Williams looked in to see whether he was needed. I wondered how he had missed being hired by Professor Endford, and that gave me an idea. "Going coon hunting?" I asked him.

"Might tag along," he said.

"Good idea. Could you find six or eight friends who'd be willing to tag along with you?"

"Guess I could."

"I want boys I can rely on to follow orders—if possible, some who've helped the General with his war games. Tell them to keep their mouths shut and meet me here at sundown."

"For money?"

"Of course."

Tad brightened. "Sure. I'll find 'em."

I wrote a note for him to take to Miss Laurette, informing her that he and his friends would be joining her hunting party. The boys would know their way around the estate, and with eight or nine sharp-eyed assistants, I could feel a trifle less anxious about the coon hunt. I also told May to expect a crowd of hungry boys for an early supper.

Tad started for High Acres to deliver the note, and I headed north

to perform the next lap of my survey. As I passed the monks' headquarters, Brother Mulberry intercepted me and insisted on introducing his brethren—all fifteen of them. Brother Willow was the young Oriental. Brother Spruce, a thin, elderly white man, was bravely trying to shape a new life after years of excesses. Brother Oak was a sturdy, middle-aged black man with an infectious smile. Brother Pine, a young white man with dark, curly hair, looked like a teenager and probably was.

Brother Ash and Brother Maple were the hefty ax men I had seen on my arrival. Brother Birch and Brother Poplar were Brother Mulberry's assistants and wore cowls. Brother Juniper, a shy Mexican, could have been any age between twenty-six and sixty. He had difficulty remembering his adopted name, and everyone except Brother Mulberry called him José. There also was a Brother Rowan, a Brother Hemlock, a Brother Hickory, a Brother Catalpa, a Brother Sumac, and a Brother Cedar.

I asked Brother Mulberry if the order would have to restrict membership when he ran out of names. He laughed and said there were more kinds of trees in the world than most people imagined, and they could always switch to shrubs or flowers.

He was as incurious a man as I have ever met. High Acres had just experienced its most momentous social event in years, and everyone else in that corner of Georgia was talking about it. Brother Mulberry's disinterest was total. He hadn't given it a thought since the previous evening when I asked him if he were going. He thought about it now only because I mentioned it again. At the moment his attention was centered on a complicated formula involving the monks' enormous woodpile and the approach of winter. He anxiously asked how long I thought the wood would last. I had no idea, but I agreed that they certainly had sawed and chopped a lot of it.

The Johnston estate was far too large to be covered on foot in one or even several days, and all I hoped to do was make myself familiar with the area where the mansion stood and try to sort out its drives and paths, identifying which ones connected with the highway and Village, which with the Witch's Circle, which with the stable where the riding horses were kept, which with the Corners, and which with the two nearby tenant farms. This gave me a fairly complete picture

of the land between Napoleon Corners and Highway 353. I didn't approach the General's battleground, and I had to be content with Duff's descriptions of the tenant farms to the north and the estate's rugged land in the south.

By midafternoon I had accomplished most of what I intended. Following a meandering path through a forested area north of the church, I paused at a fork to consider my next move—and heard, very faintly, footsteps on the path behind me. I hadn't seen anything of the prowler since the morning of my meeting with Miss Laurette, though I knew he, she, or it had been glimpsed by a security guard when people were arriving for the ball.

There was a convenient bush near the fork. I slipped behind it and waited. A figure came padding along the path. At the fork it paused as though listening for footsteps and trying to decide which way I had gone. I pounced—and found my hands full of slashing nails and snapping teeth.

When finally I quieted it, I identified my captive as a small female of indeterminate age, dressed in the cast-off jeans, the threadbare flannel shirt, and the badly worn tennis shoes of former owners who had been far larger than she. Both the girl and her clothing were caked with dirt. Her black hair was a tangled mess. On one side, a long braid was partially undone; on the other, the braid had vanished, giving her a lopsided appearance. Her face, which had had no recent association with water, was pale beneath the dirt, and she looked pathetically thin and sickly.

"Who are you?" I asked.

She answered sullenly. "Tisha Gump."

The name "Gump" rang a bell. "Are you related to Goody Gump?"

"I guess."

"Why are you following me?"

A sly smile suddenly suffused her face and transformed it. "I seen things. I could tell plenty, I betcha."

I felt baffled. Her age could have been anywhere from fifteen to thirty. I wondered whether anyone was responsible for her. "Where do you live?" I asked.

She gestured with a jerk of her head.

"Who do you live with?"

"Granny."

"Let's go see Granny."

We started off. I kept a firm grip on her arm, expecting her to be rebellious, but now she seemed indifferent and totally submissive. I gradually relaxed my grip and finally released her, though I continued to watch her warily. At forks and path intersections, she indicated the way with a jerk of her head.

After a time, she said, "Granny's sick."

"We won't disturb her long," I promised.

The forest thinned out as we approached Highway 353. We turned aside to descend into a draw where a tiny stream flowed through a culvert. There was an old, old house down there—so overgrown with trees and brush as to be almost indiscernible. Here one corner protruded; there the nub of the chimney could be seen. Windows and doorway were concealed by thick vegetation. Tisha ducked under a branch, pushed another out of the way, and led me inside, which was like walking into a darkened room.

She called, "Granny!"

There was no response. I got out my penlight and flashed it about the room. Three wood boxes were arranged in one corner like chairs and a low table. Two more were stacked nearby as though to serve as a cupboard. They were empty. In the far corner was a huddle of blankets and rags. I went to it and looked down on the shriveled body of an elderly woman.

At first I thought she was dead. She *looked* dead. There seemed to be no way that pathetically thin, wrinkled body could be alive, but it was—barely.

"Your Granny needs a doctor," I said. "Is there one who looks after her?"

She gazed at me blankly. It was a silly question even when I rephrased it and asked, "Does anyone doctor her?"

"She doctors herself," Tisha said. "She's a witch."

Of course she was. She was related to Goody Gump. Perhaps she was her daughter. Nell Troppit had mentioned that Goody's mother, grandmother, and probably great-grandmother had been witches. Her daughter would be one, too, even if unofficially. Miss Laurette had tried to break the chain by giving the job to Nell Troppit. The

Gump family certainly had resented that. I doubted that Granny had been taking potshots at the General or running Miss Laurette's car off the road, but who could say what deviltries of her own she might be capable of? It was one more complication that would have to be sorted out later. Right now the old woman might be dying. The question was what to do about it.

I said to Tisha, "Your grandmother must have a doctor. I'll telephone from the Village. You keep watch here. Do you have a stove?"

She showed me the pit outside the door where they cooked over a wood fire. There was no food in the house except for a few diminutive, shriveled raw vegetables—potatoes, turnips, beets—that local gardeners hadn't thought worth gathering. I said, "See if you can heat some water. The doctor may need it." Probably he wouldn't, but it would give her something to do.

I hurried away.

It was at least a mile to the Village. I called High Acres; Miss Laurette and Miss Raina were out, and I didn't know who else to explain the problem to.

I tried the County Sheriff. The dispatcher knew who I was, which helped. He also knew all about the Gump family.

"Miss Laurette moved them out of there some time ago," he said. "She found them a place where someone could look after them. They must have run away. You say the old gal looks bad?"

"Very bad."

"I'll send an ambulance."

"Is the girl non compos mentis?"

"It's hard to say. She might have been normal in a different environment. When Miss Laurette moved them, she thought maybe the girl could be straightened out with a decent place to live and decent people to associate with. Obviously it didn't take."

"How old is she?"

"I don't know. Just a moment."

He asked someone, and there was a rumble of discussion in the background. "She must be at least twenty-five," he said finally.

"Send the ambulance," I said. "I'll go back and wait."

Tisha was outside watching for me. She had a fire going under a gallon tin can of water. I told her to sit by the road and flag down

the ambulance when it came—the place would be difficult to find for someone who didn't know exactly where it was. Then I went to the cabin with my penlight, knelt by the old woman, and tried to find a pulse in her thin wrist. I couldn't, but occasionally her chest heaved slightly as she inhaled.

There are medical traumas I can handle almost as competently as a doctor caught without his black bag, but I couldn't think of a thing to do for this old woman. She needed someone with both knowledge and equipment.

It took more than half an hour for the ambulance to get there. For a rural area, that probably was very good time. The crew took over, moved the old woman outside on a stretcher where they could see properly, did the necessary, and carried her up to the road. Tisha watched stony-faced.

The driver said to her, "Do you want to come along?"

She didn't answer.

I said, "They'll take you to the hospital with your grandmother if you want to go."

"I'll stay with you," she said.

The driver shrugged and turned away. As the ambulance drove off, I sat down on the bridge abutment and studied Tisha, wondering what I had on my hands now. It was the first good scrutiny I had given her. She met my eyes for a moment, and then she looked away.

Her eyes were as black as her hair, and they looked unusually large in her thin, begrimed face.

"Have you been to school?" I asked.

"Some."

"Can you read and write?"

"Some."

"Can you do arithmetic? Work with numbers?"

"I can count."

She was something entirely outside my experience—an adult with the mind of a bright child and an unbelievably neglected upbringing.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"When did you eat last?"

Another shrug.

"*What* did you eat last?"

"Taters."

"Raw?"

She nodded.

"All right," I said. "Come along. If you associate with me, I'll see that you eat well, but you'll have to get yourself cleaned up and wear clean clothing."

I tried to talk with her during the walk to the Corners, but she responded with shrugs or grunted monosyllables. I took her around to the rear door of the General Store and Café and stated the problem. May regarded her with horror.

Fortunately Belinda Wassler was there. Meals were served all afternoon and evening on Sunday, but the café wasn't busy at the moment. Belinda knew the girl, and she took charge of the situation with warm firmness. She hurried her up the stairs and began running bath water. I strolled over to the monks' headquarters for a talk with Brother Mulberry. I explained the problem to him and asked if there had been any donated clothing in sizes too small for the monks to use. He gave me an armful—work pants, shirts, underwear, even two pair of shoes. All of it was masculine, of course, but Tisha wouldn't care what the gender was.

I gave the clothing to May to take upstairs, and then I went to the dining room where Tad and the eight boys he had recruited were already assembled. May had served their suppers, and they were eating enthusiastically. She had a perfect understanding of boys' appetites. Not only was she feeding them lavishly, but without my suggesting it, she also was putting up snacks for them to take along.

While the boys ate, I gave them their instructions and selected two of them to act as bodyguards for Miss Laurette and Miss Raina. My main concern was to make certain no stranger joined the hunt. With a crowd of people milling about in the forest at night, it would be easy for an outsider to slip in among us if no precautions were taken. I wanted the boys to keep careful track of everyone in the party. If they even suspected an intruder, they were to walk up to him boldly and say, "I'm helping Miss Laurette. Who are you?" If they failed to get a satisfactory answer, they were to shout for me immediately.

Belinda proudly brought down a transformed Tisha. The layers of

dirt had been removed. Her hair was rebraided. She had on clean clothing. Probably all the boys knew her, but they had never seen her looking like this. They stared open-mouthed. She looked at me shyly.

"That's splendid," I said. "Now what are we going to do with you? Where will you stay?"

"With you," she said. "I'm coming with you."

Much of one's success in life depends on an ability to turn liabilities into assets. It already had occurred to me that Tisha probably knew the High Acres estate better than any of the boys—or any adult, either. She certainly could move about unobtrusively, day or night. She might be highly useful if I could make her understand what I was trying to do.

"All right," I said. "You can come with us tonight." I asked May if she could stay in one of the cabins until someone decided what to do with her. They rarely had all of their cabins occupied.

"If she keeps it clean," May said. "No filth and garbage, mind you. I know all about the way she and her grandmother lived before Miss Laurette sent them away."

We carried the spare clothing to the cabin next to mine. I made certain she could operate the key and knew how the toilet and electric lights worked. Then I took her back to the café for some supper. She ate very little, which was wise. Probably she had been eating very little all her life.

When she finished, I marched my troops to High Acres. Tisha walked by my side. I left her and the boys behind the former stable while I went to the house to talk with Miss Laurette.

I described what had happened.

"Heavens! I had no idea," Miss Laurette exclaimed. "They were supposed to be staying with relatives down by Summerville. I arranged it for them more than a year ago. They must have walked back, and it's *miles*! What have they been eating?"

"Not much," I said.

She telephoned the Tri-County Hospital to ask about the old woman's condition. "Alive and stable," she reported. "They think maybe they can bring her out of it, but she'll need nursing home care when she leaves the hospital. That's no problem, but what are we going to do with the girl? Won't she be a nuisance?"

"Tonight she may be useful, but obviously her future will require some thought. Her grandmother may have tyrannized her. She didn't seem displeased when I sent the old woman away. Is there any work she can do?"

Miss Laurette gestured wearily. "I have no idea. I've tried to help her before, but she wouldn't leave her grandmother. Or perhaps the old woman wouldn't let her leave. I'll think about it. I'm so glad you happened onto them. It would have been a terrible thing if the grandmother had died with no one to look after her."

I went back and told Tisha her grandmother was very sick but probably would live.

"Granny always gets well," Tisha said.

"She'll have to go into a nursing home."

"She won't stay."

For a long time she would be too weak to leave even with help, but I didn't bother to explain that.

The boys were gathered a short distance away, talking and joking. I said softly to Tisha, "Have you seen strangers poking around High Acres?"

"Some," she said cautiously.

"Have you see the ghosts?"

She nodded.

"Where did they come from?"

"A truck."

"Did it hide in the forest and wait for them to come back?"

She nodded.

"We don't want any strangers around tonight," I said. "No strangers, no ghosts, no nothing. Miss Laurette and the General's new granddaughter, Miss Raina, are going coon hunting, and strangers might try to hurt them. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Your job will be to look for strangers. Make sure no one gets close to us. Shout if anyone does. Okay?"

She gave a nod. "Okay." It was a job she could understand.

We sat back and waited for the hunt to begin.

9

It was completely dark when the coon hunters tore themselves away from their pre-hunting festivities. We joined them and found four dogs on leashes; their owners; a hunt judge; Miss Laurette and Miss Raina; three of Miss Raina's smitten swains from the previous evening, still acting smitten; three security guards carrying picnic hampers as a disguise; Leland Borling and the young minister; and three of the guests from Atlanta, including the rich old coot I had discussed with Dori Vinick. One private detective, nine boys, and Tisha were poised to trail along as outriders. It was a serious misnomer to call this motley crew a hunting party. We could have staged a motion picture mob scene.

Miss Laurette took Tisha aside for a brief conversation, patted her on the shoulder, and returned her to me. I told the boys to do their best and reminded them about their assignments. Then we were off, and Tisha, taking her job seriously, immediately disappeared. She ranged far ahead of us, circled widely on either side, and then dropped behind before returning to me to report—nothing. As far as she could tell, no one was trying to stalk the hunting party.

Most of the guests had been coon hunting before. The young minister was an enthusiast. Leland Borling, dressed in a leather jacket and jeans he may have bought for the occasion, was not. He floundered through the forest as though this were one more unpleasant chore he had to undertake to earn his legal retainer.

Coon hounds, I learned from one of the owners during a break, mostly come from a few favored breeds of hound—Bluetick, Black-and-tan, Walker, Redbone, and English. A French poodle lover wouldn't care for any of them because they are neither cute nor cuddly, but they are admirable animals if you have a coon that wants tracking. They are trained for that and nothing else, and they can pick

up coon trails with surprising quickness. They take part in coon hunting competitions, and superior dogs win large prizes and collect hefty stud fees.

The bloodcurdling yowls of a banshee would pale beside the wails a coon hound makes when it strikes a trail. It continues to howl until it reaches the tree where the coon has taken refuge. Then it tries to jump up or climb. The judge searches the tree with a flashlight; if the beam picks out a raccoon's gleaming eyes, points are awarded to the dog—or subtracted if there is no raccoon.

As a spectator sport, coon hunting ranks in the same category with watching a machine pull taffy in a store window or looking into the porthole of an automatic washing machine. The one significant difference is that those watching a coon hunt have the discomfort of stumbling about in the forest at night. As an exercise in bodyguarding, it is nerve-wracking. Everyone spreads out among the trees, and keeping track of anything or anyone quickly becomes impossible.

There were no incidents until the hunt was almost over. We treed coons; the party stopped twice for refreshments, mostly liquid, and my boys drank pop and ate sandwiches. Even Tisha was caught up in the excitement and became friendly enough to eat a sandwich and try to tell me about a dog she had once owned. Then we treed more coons or perhaps they were the same coons—there was no way to keep track, and no one seemed to care. The incident occurred when the top dog by a considerable margin, Corduroy—so named because of his odd-looking fur—suddenly lost interest in the hunt. The other three dogs picked up a hot trail. Corduroy sniffed around in the brush, whimpering, and refused to play. Such a thing had never happened before. His puzzled and profane owner finally hauled him away.

I waited until the hunt had swept out of sight—but not out of hearing; it probably was heard by half the county—and then I went to investigate whatever it was that had upset Corduroy. Tisha had remained behind with me, and she watched alertly. My flashlight picked out a mound of last year's leaves beneath the undergrowth. I brushed a corner of it aside and inspected the ground beneath it. Then I tied a handkerchief to a bush and tried to establish the location in my mind as well as I could in the dark.

"Know where we are?" I asked Tisha.

"Yes."

"Will you be able to find this place again?"

"Yes."

"All right. We'll come back later and see what was bothering Corduroy."

We hurried after the hunt.

The dog owners would have kept it up all night, but everyone else gradually lost interest. Finally Miss Laurette announced that she'd had enough, thanked those taking part, and rewarded each dog with a perfunctory pat. The party headed for High Acres and a post-hunt banquet. I took the boys as far as the gravel road, which was their shortest route home, and paid them off. I paid Tisha at the same rate, and she accepted the money with astonishment.

"I have another job to do," I told Tad. "Want to help?"

He nodded eagerly. He had grasped two important points about me—I paid well, and my jobs tended to be somewhat unorthodox. The three of us, Tad, Tisha, and I, walked back to the Corners where I consulted Duff.

"Tools?" Duff said perplexedly. "What sort of tools?"

"A rake and a shovel," I said. "I also could use something smaller like a trowel. And I need three or four good flashlights and a few gunnysacks if you have any."

"What are you digging up at this time of night?" Duff demanded.

"I don't know. If anyone asks you, just say I got tired of coons and switched to moles."

He supplied the tools, four flashlights, and an armful of gunnysacks. He wanted to come along, but he was reluctant to suggest it himself. Since my spasms of curiosity produce more misses than hits, and I already had enough help, I didn't invite him. We set off. The darkness had thoroughly disoriented both Tad and me, but Tisha led us unerringly to the bush I'd tied my handkerchief to.

I gave them two flashlights apiece and positioned one of them at each end of the mound of leaves I'd found. I marked the mound's corners, using sticks for stakes. Then I raked the entire mound aside and started digging, carefully piling the dirt on a gunnysack. I was down only about six inches when I struck something. I tossed the shovel aside and began to work carefully with the trowel.

It was a man's shoe, and it had a foot in it.

Tad was jumping with delight. "It's a body!" he exclaimed.

"Now listen carefully," I said. "I want you to go to High Acres just as fast as you can run. Say you have an urgent message for Miss Laurette from Mr. Pletcher. Insist on seeing Miss Laurette. You aren't to say a word about this to anyone else—understand?"

He nodded. He was shivering with excitement.

"Tell Miss Laurette what we found. She's to do two things—tell Miss Raina, and telephone Ed Schaffer. I want you to wait there for Ed and bring him back here."

He took one of the flashlights and darted off through the woods. I wedged his remaining flashlight into the fork of a sapling and showed Tisha where to point the two she was holding. Then I went to work at the other end of the mound with the trowel, again carefully piling the dirt on one of the gunnysacks. Tisha watched with fascination.

When I had cleared the dirt away almost down to the body, I began digging with my hands. A hasty exhumation can seriously damage a corpse and lose or destroy the evidence a grave might contain. I'd had lessons from a master, who taught me the necessary expertise while undermining my confidence with horror stories about clues lost and evidence blunderingly ruined through carelessness. For that reason, I approached the head with extreme caution, and I was still excavating around it when I heard footsteps approaching.

Miss Laurette was in the lead; Raina Lambert followed. Tad had guided them within sight of my flashlights and then returned to High Acres to wait for Ed Schaffer.

Miss Laurette knelt down beside me. "Is it Al?" she asked.

I had been asking myself that question ever since I noticed that the odd mound of leaves suspiciously resembled the shape of a human grave.

"I don't know," I said. "I haven't got far enough. This has to be done slowly and very, very carefully, and I'm saving the dirt so it can be sifted again in better light."

"I understand," she said.

She had two flashlights of her own, and she moved around to the

other side and pointed them at my excavation. Raina got down on her knees to help me dig.

After a time Miss Laurette couldn't contain herself. She knelt beside us, keeping her flashlights on the form that was taking shape under our careful fingers and murmuring again, "Is it Al?" We resisted the temptation to hurry. Finally we got the head and shoulders cleared, and Raina gently brushed the last dirt away.

As the face came into view, Miss Laurette exclaimed, with enormous relief in her voice, "No, that isn't Al. I've never seen that man before."

Despite death and decay, it was immediately evident that the corpse was much younger than the missing Al Johnston. His hair was dark but decidedly curly; Al's was straight. The corpse's face was much thinner.

I was up to my elbows in the stench of death and more than ready to quit, but I had to keep going. A dark, blue-caped coat had begun to appear, and I continued until I had stripped away enough dirt to reveal a Civil War uniform of the Federal army. The forage cap was lying on the chest as though thrown into the grave as an afterthought.

I stepped back and brushed the dirt from my hands. I had an answer to the most pressing question—whether the corpse was Al Johnston. The multitude of other questions could wait for better light and expert assistance. "Now it's a job for the police," I said.

Miss Laurette shook her head. "It's a job for all of us. Just because it's here."

Ed Schaffer arrived, treading on Tad's heels in his hurry. He stood staring down at the body, his face expressionless.

"Do you know him?" Miss Laurette asked.

Ed shook his head. "Help will be along shortly," he said.

"Miss Raina and I will wait at the house and send it along to you," Miss Laurette said. "There's nothing more we can do."

They took Tad with them so he could guide Ed's reinforcements when they arrived. We watched their lights vanish into the forest. Ed shot a curious glance at Tisha and then turned to me. "How'd you happen to find him?"

I described Corduroy's strange behavior.

"How long do you figure he's been dead?"

"Weeks."

"Strange. Al has been gone for about a month. I wonder if there could be a connection."

"Miss Laurette thought it might be Al. To tell the truth, so did I. It seemed like a simple one-equals-one proposition—a man missing and a man found. Are you suggesting Al killed him and then took a powder?"

"Al isn't the sort of person who would keep his head in a crisis."

"The uniform is the puzzler," I said.

Ed nodded. "There must be a reason for it."

"There must be a reason for burying him in this particular place. If someone had a body to dispose of, there's plenty of unused land around here that's easily accessible by car. Why carry it a couple of miles and put a Civil War uniform on it first? Under normal circumstances, who'd have a Civil War uniform available?"

"Under normal circumstances, who'd pick a burial place on the edge of the General's battleground?"

"Is that where we are?"

"Near enough. If the cannon barrage you drove through was a plot to embarrass the General, this could be more of the same."

"I don't think so," I said. "In that case, why bury him? A hidden corpse isn't going to embarrass anyone until it's found, and this body might never have been found if it hadn't been for Corduroy." I studied the dead man's face again. From one angle it looked oddly familiar; from another, the decay made it a total stranger. "I don't know this man, but he vaguely resembles someone I've seen recently."

"Who?" Ed demanded.

"It's a very slight resemblance. I'm wondering whether it justifies getting people out of bed. If there really is a similarity, it'll still be there in the morning."

"I suppose."

"On the other hand, the quicker you know everything there is to know about this character, the better. I'm finished here anyway, so I'll see what I can do for you."

I left the tools and sacks and my spare flashlights for Ed's reinforcements to use. I walked back to the Corners with a silent Tisha keeping pace with me. The moon was out, and it looked just a mite thicker and brighter than it had when we laid our ambush for the ghosts.

"Have you ever seen that man before?" I asked Tisha.

She was silent. I asked again, shining my flashlight at her.

"I seen him," she said.

"Were there others with him?"

She reflected. "There was four." She thought this over for a moment and then she said again, "Four. Him and three others." She was proud of her ability to count.

"What were they doing?" I asked.

"Messin' around."

"During one of the General's war games?"

"Yes."

"Was this man shooting at the General?"

"One of 'em was."

"With a rifle?"

"Yes."

"Modern or Civil War?"

She knew the difference. Probably everyone in the vicinity did. "Modern," she said.

"Did you see this man get hit?"

"No," she said. After a time, she added, "I saw three of 'em leave. There was four, and then three of 'em left. They walked back to the road. To a car that was hid."

"What kind of a car?"

That sort of information was beyond her.

We approached the Crossroads from the north, along the rutted, unnamed road that ran past the monks' church. I had no notion which reclaimed house Brother Mulberry was sleeping in, so I walked up to the door of the first one I came to. It opened quietly before I could knock, and a flashlight beam hit me in the face and then shifted to Tisha. The monks had sentries posted. They were taking no chances on a case of arson directed at them.

The light went off. A soft voice said, "May I help you?" It was Brother Willow, the Oriental.

"Would you please tell Brother Mulberry I need his help?"

"Of course."

He padded away, leaving the door open. In about thirty seconds, Brother Mulberry appeared. He took it as entirely natural that someone should be asking for him at three in the morning. He was fully dressed and ready to go wherever he was needed.

"Shall I wake the brethren?" he asked.

"No. First, you should hear what the problem is. Is there a place where we can talk?"

We went across the rutted street to the steps of the church with Tisha tagging after us. The three of us sat there while I briefly told him about the corpse.

"You say it's a young man?" Brother Mulberry asked. He sighed. "What a pity. So many years of life lost. What is it you want me to do?"

"The dead man resembles your Brother Pine, but it's difficult to say how strong the resemblance is with a body that's been buried for several weeks. Do you know whether Brother Pine has a relative who looks like him?"

"I know nothing at all about him. I don't even know his name. He's simply Brother Pine—a man with a future. His past doesn't concern me."

"How do you select the brethren?"

"I don't. There are several agencies in large cities who know the very special qualifications we require. When they find someone who meets them, they inform me. If I can accommodate him, I send for him."

"In that case, I'd suggest you take a look at this dead man yourself. If you see the same resemblance I see, then we can ask Brother Pine to look at him."

Brother Mulberry was silent for a moment. "My friend, I saw the bullet holes in your car when you arrived. Now you've found a corpse. Violence seems to seek you out. On the other hand, I know you're a good man and a caring man. You don't want to needlessly involve Brother Pine in this tragedy, but you fear he may be involved already. If the dead man is his relative, both he and the police should know. We'll take him with us. No harm will be done if it's a stranger

to him. If the worst has happened, he has his brethren to sustain him."

He hurried away before I could comment. He returned with the young monk, Brother Pine, and the four of us set out. Tisha again led the way, marking the trail with a flashlight. I followed, and the two monks came last, talking quietly. After a few minutes, they lengthened their strides and overtook me.

"Brother Pine has two brothers at home in New York City," Brother Mulberry said. "He's confident that neither of them would come here. Why should they? His family doesn't even know where he is. He writes regularly, but the letters are sent to our sponsoring charity, which remails them."

"Probably the resemblance was compounded of my imagination and the poor light," I said, "but with a problem like this, every small thing must be considered."

"We understand. Brother Pine is eager to see this dead man and resolve your uncertainty."

Ed Schaffer came to meet us. More than an hour had passed since I left him. The police had finished the excavation I began, and the body had been moved to a shed belonging to one of the High Acres tenant farms. It was being kept there temporarily just in case I found a witness. Then it would be taken to the Tri-County Hospital in Ft. Oglethorpe for a formal autopsy. Ed led us off in another direction—through the forest, over a fence, across a field, over another fence. The "shed" was an enclosed building that had electricity, and a doctor was there examining the body.

Ed's captain went in and spoke to the doctor, who motioned the two monks forward. I stood by the door to watch. The doctor pulled back the sheet that covered the dead man's face. Brother Pine stared, gasped, cried, "No!" and burst into sobs.

I quietly retired. Ed Schaffer was waiting outside. Tisha had faded into the background, but she was taking everything in. I had no intention of divulging to the officers her tale of the four men who were "messin' around." The interrogation that followed would be bad for everyone concerned. The police could deduce as much as they needed to know without her evidence.

Ed said, "I gather the 'no' meant 'yes.' Odd, isn't it?"

"Very. Brother Pine comes from New York. His family isn't sup-

posed to know where he is, but one of his brothers turns up here dressed in a Civil War uniform—"

"And killed by a Minnie ball, the doctor thinks. Fired from a considerable distance. It didn't pass through his body, but it still had enough momentum to tear up his insides. A Minnie ball is a nasty slug."

"He bled considerably?"

"Enormously. It probably got his spleen."

"So the ground must have been soaked with blood. It'd be interesting to know whether Corduroy could still catch that scent after all this time or if it was the body he smelled. It was a very shallow grave. Either way, he instantly lost all interest in coons."

Ed's captain came out, closing the door on Brother Pine's sobs. He was a heavyset man in his fifties, and he obviously was missing his sleep. "There's one thing I'd like to ask you," he said to me. "How'd you know there was a body there?"

"I didn't."

He stared at me. "You saw a dog acting funny, so in the middle of the night you walked several miles, borrowed flashlights and a shovel, and went back and dug up a dead man. I could understand your coming back the next day and poking around a little, but to immediately collect tools and start digging suggests you knew something."

"I suppose I did. Knew or strongly suspected."

"So how did you know?"

"Look. I'm just a city boy. Out here in the country, you may have a standard two-by-six template for privy holes, or garbage pits, or for burying worn-out farm machinery. I don't know anything about that. To me, a two-by-six hole is an ideal fit for a human body. First I noticed the dog's behavior, which certainly was unusual. Then I saw an oddly shaped mound of old leaves that looked like a grave. It seemed peculiar that anyone would collect leaves and pile them up like that in the middle of a forest, so I checked. The ground in the forest is hard, but under the mound, it was soft—meaning that it'd been spaded or a hole had been dug and filled in. By coincidence, there's a man missing at High Acres. I have the nasty, cynical kind

of mind that always suspects the worst, and that's all I needed to start me digging."

"Lucky thing it did," Ed said.

"I can give you something else," I went on. "I know exactly how this man was killed. This is one of those pestiferous Yankee sharpshooters who were taking potshots at the General. When one of them put a bullet through the General's sleeve, that seemed like bad sportsmanship—definitely outside the rules for war games—so the General set his boys to shooting back. Or maybe the boys did it on their own. Hence the Minnie ball. Because of the extreme range, the General's troops weren't aware that one of the Yankees was hit. The Yankees scattered when they came under fire, and by the time the others noticed that one of their number was missing, it was too late to do anything for him. They probably came back after dark and made a quick job of burying him."

"I had it figured pretty much the same way," Ed said, "but we're both wrong. I asked Tad if the General had been using live ammunition lately. He said no—not since summer. He was certain about that, and Tad is as reliable as they come. No doubt you're right about this being one of the Yankee sharpshooters and about them shooting at the General, but the Minnie ball came from somewhere else."

10

Tisha and I ate a late breakfast together with May and Duff hovering over us to hear about our adventures. May was shocked. Duff was resentful.

"You should have taken me along," Duff complained.

"To do what? As soon as the body was discovered, it became a police matter. We spent the rest of the night twiddling our thumbs or running errands, and I had to explain over and over why it was

I had an itch to dig when I found something in the forest that looked like a grave."

"How sad for Brother Pine," May said. "What a terrible thing to be called out in the middle of the night to look at a dead body and see your brother. Especially when you think he's safe hundreds of miles away. Is there anything we can do?"

"Attend the funeral, I suppose. Express our sympathy. As Brother Mulberry said, 'So many years of life lost.' I like his choice of words. He didn't say 'wasted.' The dead man didn't waste the fifty years or so of life denied to him. He lost them."

"Yes," May said sadly. "He lost them. We had a son who lost most of his life. Eddie's brother. He died very young. Does it disturb you to find a body like that?"

"Of course it does, but my viewpoint is different from Brother Mulberry's. I worry more about the living than the dead. The dead I can't do anything for."

After May and Duff returned to the kitchen, I had a lopsided conversation with Tisha. I was certain she had been spying and eavesdropping on everything that happened around High Acres ever since she and her Granny returned to the old shack. She was a very sharp girl in matters that interested her, and I urgently needed to know what she could tell me. Unfortunately, she was in no hurry to talk. She kept her large eyes fixed on mine and gave me her complete attention whenever I said anything, but she volunteered nothing at all and deftly avoided my questions. Eventually I understood what was bothering her. During the coon hunt, I had made her a partner in my investigation, and that won her confidence—but only temporarily. I would have to keep doing that, and it would take time.

"May will find work for you," I told her finally. "If you do it well, you'll have a nice place to stay, and plenty to eat, and even some money. You'll also be able to work with me if you want to. I need your help. There are strange things happening around here, and I have the feeling you know all about them."

Perhaps it was only my imagination that a smile flickered across her face. She continued to watch me solemnly.

When we finished eating, May took charge of her. I went back to bed and slept for another two hours—and still felt shortchanged on

my night's sleep when I woke up. I also felt impatient to be doing something. It was Monday, I had been on the job since Friday afternoon, and in spite of everything that had happened, the case seemed as befogged as it had in the beginning.

When I surfaced again, I found Tisha at work cleaning cabins. She was bustling about energetically. She said happily, "Miss Laurette says if I do good I can help at High Acres."

I should have been pleased to see her adjusting so well, but for some reason I felt sad for her. I couldn't think of a better solution—the girl was of an age where she simply had to assume responsibility for herself and earn her own living—but it still seemed like caging a wild bird.

I drove to the Village and telephoned Cecil Stickells in Atlanta. "Have you turned up anything on Al Johnston's car?" I asked.

"It was sold three weeks ago to a used-car dealer here in Atlanta, and the dealer has already resold it."

"Ouch!" I said. "Tell me about the procedure for transferring ownership."

"The old owner signs the appropriate place on his title and also signs his tag receipt. The new owner presents these at a tax office, along with proof of insurance, and the tax office types an application for a new title. Application, old title, and tag receipt are sent to the State of Georgia Motor Vehicle Division, here in Atlanta, which issues papers in the name of the new owner."

"Is the old owner's signature notarized?"

"No."

"I'll ask for some samples of Al's writing. The signatures on the title and the tag receipt may be forged."

"Do you think the guy was murdered and someone disposed of his car?"

"That certainly is a possibility. As far as we know, he had no reason to be selling it himself. Have you found out anything about my reporter?"

"Only that he isn't. At least, his name doesn't appear on the *Constitution*'s payroll. He could be a small-town stringer—maybe one with a tentative appointment who's trying hard to get something accepted."

"Yes," I mused. "That does sound possible."

"Do you want me to dig into that?"

"Not now. If he keeps making a nuisance of himself, I'll take another look at him."

When I returned to the Corners, Tad Williams was waiting with a message from Miss Raina. "She wants to see you," he said. He, too, had fallen in love with her, and his resentful gaze implied that I wasn't worthy of this honor. "One o'clock at the big ga-za-bo." He accented all three syllables. "I'll take you if you don't know where that is."

Raina had told me she would arrange a meeting there if she could manage it. "I can find it myself," I said. Tad looked so disappointed that I had to explain a basic fact about secret missions: the fewer people involved in them, the better. He nodded wisely, but he still looked disappointed.

As I had already noted, the location was excellent for a meeting, but there was one severe disadvantage. I made certain to be there early so I could tell Raina about it before she got settled. She arrived with a folder of writing materials under her arm and started to seat herself at a table in a rear corner.

"Hold everything," I said. "Please move that table a dozen feet toward the northwest corner before you sit down."

"What's the matter?" she asked. "I've come out here to write letters. One of the security guards is keeping an eye on me."

"There's a clearing on a hilltop west of here that would give a sharpshooter with a telescopic sight a perfect view of about a third of this place. So keep to the other end."

"How can we carry on a confidential conversation when we're fifteen feet apart?"

"I have good ears. Move the table."

While she was getting herself settled, I told her about Al Johnston's car. "The signature on the title will have to be checked," I said.

"I'll ask Miss Laurette for samples of Al's writing. How is Tisha doing?"

"She's happily at work—I think. Maybe all she needed was to get away from her grandmother. I suspect she's a whole lot smarter than people think."

"Miss Laurette will be pleased to hear that. She's worried about the

girl. She wants to know if Tisha has the self-discipline to take a job and stick to it. Her upbringing was terrible. Her grandmother, Goody Gump's daughter, should have been certified years ago. Her mother was just as loony, but she died when Tisha was a child. At one time there was a court order to take Tisha away from Granny, but the old woman hid the girl. Finally they compromised—she got to keep Tisha, but she had to send her to school. She did, but only sporadically. Tisha didn't want to go to school any more than Granny wanted to send her. The other children were brutal to her. Finally she dropped out completely. Miss Laurette thought she'd solved the problem when she arranged for Granny and Tisha to stay with relatives. The relatives never said anything when they left—probably they weren't sorry to see them go. Fortunately none of this is our problem."

"But it is. Tisha could be our most important witness. She's been wandering about the High Acres estate at all hours, and as she said herself, 'I seen things.' For one, she saw four men in Yankee Civil War uniforms—those pestiferous sharpshooters without a doubt. One was firing at the General with a modern rifle. Later, she saw only three of them leaving. She also saw the ghosts arriving and leaving in the truck that transported them. She may have other important information, but extracting it will be a problem. What did you want to see me about?"

"We need to bring each other up to date. Also, Miss Laurette would like to know how you managed to find a buried body in a deep, dark wood at that time of night. I'm curious myself."

"What a suspicious bunch of people you are! Ed Schaffer's captain didn't come right out and say so, but he thinks I couldn't have found it if I hadn't buried it myself."

I told her about Corduroy and the conclusions Ed Schaffer and I had reached.

"Something like that must have happened," she said.

"It's the Minnie ball that creates the problem. If the General and his troops weren't firing, who shot him?"

"I've talked with the General about those sharpshooters. His memory is unaccountably fuzzy on the subject. This is surprising because he's been amazingly sharp about almost anything else I've discussed

with him. He couldn't or wouldn't tell me what weapons the Yankee sharpshooters were using, but he has a thirty caliber hole in his sleeve, from which I conclude that Tisha is right—it was a modern rifle."

"That means the dead man couldn't have been shot accidentally by his buddies. If the General's troops didn't shoot him, who did?"

"Of course the General's troops shot him. All of those boys would lie about it if the General asked them to."

"What else is new?"

"Miss Laurette wants to hold a funeral for Joe Murphy and bury him. The Hamilton County Sheriff is reluctant to release the body because it's the subject of a murder investigation and hasn't been formally identified, but Miss Laurette says nonsense, she's identified it herself. The detective in charge of the case is understandably skeptical about that because she never saw the murdered man alive. She ordered Borling to get the matter settled."

"They might as well let her have him," I said. "There isn't any other claimant, and she'll save them the cost of his burial. Surely they've extracted all of the body's secrets by this time."

"I've been discussing family trees with Miss Laurette. The murderer is either a descendant of Bramwell Johnston or is acting for one. Obviously there has to be someone involved in this who stands to benefit from the deaths of the known heirs. That brings up the subject of the General's will."

"Indeed it does. Has the General let anyone know what's in it?"

"The original is in Borling's safe. Miss Laurette has a copy, and she let me read it. The terms would horrify most lawyers, but Steve Malkinson, who drew the will, was fond of all the General's children, and they adored him. He was a bachelor and a kind of adopted uncle to the family. Miss Laurette thinks he did his best to ameliorate the spiteful attitude the General had toward the children who misbehaved. The General was determined to disinherit not only the banished children but all of their descendants in perpetuity, and Malkinson persuaded him that would get the will broken. What they settled on was a generous provision for Miss Laurette, who by that time was the only child who was neither dead nor disgraced; dismissal of the banished children with a dollar each and a cup of venom; and—after that—an equal division of the General's estate among

'descendants of my children whom I have known personally during my lifetime.' For years the only known descendant was Al, who would have got the whole bundle if no other claimant appeared.

"The wily Malkinson realized he could do nothing at all for the banished children, and he was trying to provide a loophole by which their children, the General's grandchildren, could establish a claim to their rightful inheritance. Because the General was so vehement, that was the best he could manage. The General accepted it as a way of excluding the offspring of the disgraced children without expressing malice toward them. He was confident none of the descendants of children he had kicked out would ever be known to him personally."

"Just a moment," I said. "Is the word 'legitimate' used to describe those descendants?"

"Nope. Malkinson drew it in such a way that even Letty's illegitimate baby can share—provided he, she, or it will somehow manage to get to know the General personally. Miss Laurette thinks Malkinson kept in touch with all of the children, and he intended to manage things so their children would be known to the General, one way or another, in accordance with the terms of the will, but he died suddenly. Do you see the implications?"

"Of course. Once the will is probated, the estate will have hordes of claimants pretending to be grandchildren. But now there's a new and much better lawyer who isn't sentimentally involved and who should be placing the general's interests and wishes first. Why hasn't he written a new will and put an end to that nonsense?"

"There we have a different kind of problem. The General is a celebrated crackpot, and the entire countryside believes he's mentally unbalanced. The cannon barrages, Yankee sharpshooters, and marching ghosts prove it. Did you hear how he went after the ghosts with a cane? Even people closely associated with him, old friends and servants, regard him with affection but are sincerely convinced he's cracked. He genuinely is an elderly eccentric, of course, and anyone who worked at it could easily present ample evidence of an unsound mind. A new will wouldn't stand a chance if someone decided to challenge it."

"I hadn't thought of that. What's the legal position with regard to the old will?"

"The first question a probate judge will ask is whether it's a valid will. The General was handling all of his own affairs twenty years ago when it was drawn. He was just as much of a crackpot then, but he was active in politics, and writing articles, and working for various public causes, and his sanity at that time seems invulnerable. The judge certainly will accept the will for probate. After that, whatever he might think of the will's phraseology, he'll make a conscientious effort to carry out the General's intentions. There'll be a non-jury trial, and any claimant will be required to present evidence on the two critical points—he'll have to prove he actually is a descendant, and he'll have to prove he was personally known to Bramwell Johnston during the General's lifetime. If he fails on either count, he'll have the right of appeal—first to the Superior Court, where there'll be a jury trial, and then to the Georgia Supreme Court. What's the matter?"

"The Yankee sharpshooters," I said. "They don't make sense. A descendant who wanted the whole estate for himself would be extremely careful of the General's health and safety until he'd eliminated the other heirs."

"There are angles to this thing I haven't begun to figure out. In some ways we seem to be contending with stark irrationality. In other ways, it's cold, crafty intelligence we're up against. We don't yet know whether Joe Murphy really was a grandchild, but we know someone thought he was and murdered him. That's our starting point. In order to profit from such a murder, the murderer, or the person the murderer is acting for, must be an heir himself in terms of the General's will. Therefore he'll be known to the General personally. His antecedents may be vague, but at some time or other he must have had a close connection with High Acres—as a friend, servant, social acquaintance, service man, delivery man, insurance collector—anything that would have enabled him to get close enough to the General to be personally known to him. The first possibility is Kolina Kirkland. Nothing at all is known about her ancestry. She came recommended by an employment agency in Boston. So I'm having her checked."

"If you didn't, I would," I said. "She's the one who directed me into the cannon barrage."

"Then we have Leland Borling. He's a bit old for a grandchild, but

since he's a newcomer to the area, I looked into his background—which is easy to do with a professional man. His family seems to have been very well off. His father graduated from Emory University in Atlanta, met the daughter of a country doctor on a trip east, married her, went to medical school, and took over his father-in-law's practice. 'Country doctor' is misleading—the grandfather owned his own hospital, which Borling's father and mother inherited. Borling also attended Emory University. He graduated from the law school there, which has an excellent reputation, and he practiced law in Atlanta until he became Steve Malkinson's partner."

"He's an open book," I said.

"All the way. The same goes for his wife, Madge. She also is from Atlanta. Both of her parents are still living there, and they visit back and forth regularly. She seems to get along well with them, and they dote on their grandchildren. Her maiden name is Narlander. The one oddity about her is that she was only fifteen when she married Borling, and he must have been in his forties, but the marriage seems to be a happy one."

"But she should be routinely checked anyway," I said. I was taking notes. "So should Borling. It looks as though I have a trip to Atlanta in my future. Who else?"

"Lana Fithie."

"Lana—*Fithie*? Are you actually suggesting that a Fithie might be related to the Johnstons?"

"Fithie's son, Desmond, met his wife at the University of Georgia."

"I know. I met Lana at the ball. I introduced her to the General myself—thereby enabling her to be personally known to him, so I suppose she now has fulfilled that stupid legal requirement. She's a charming young lady, and she's also highly intelligent."

"The General was overwhelmed by her. It had something to do with the Battle of Vicksburg. He introduced her to Miss Laurette, and we're having tea with her this afternoon. Calling on her was my idea. If I can eliminate her as a suspect, she may be useful. She's a trained botanist."

"Useful how?" I asked.

"Use your head. Lana is popular with the younger set and the center of whatever mild social whirl exists in these parts. She seems

to be a thoroughly nice person, but the little that's known about her past includes an orphans' home. Also, she's an 'L'."

"An 'L'? Ah—yes. In the tradition of Laurette, Leonora, and Letitia. I would point out, however, that 'Lana' is an 'L' of a different color. It belonged to a popular movie star, who had a lot of girls named after her, but I suppose we must look into Lana's past. The university would be the place to start."

"Atlanta is where I want you to start, and the University of Georgia is at Athens. We'll leave Lana Fithie for later. Next come the Wasslers, Belinda and Mark. They're from Atlanta, too."

"And Mark is an 'M', but like 'Lana,' an 'M' of a different color. One syllable instead of two, and a blunt, everyday sounding name instead of the fancy nomenclature inflicted on the Johnston boys. What about the Wasslers' ancestry?"

"There doesn't seem to be any secret about it. Their father and mother visited them here when the house and store were under construction. They were poor people and very proud of their children's accomplishments, Miss Laurette says. Their father was an invalid. He died shortly afterward, and their mother moved here and lived with them until her death."

"But they should be routinely checked anyway. Tell me what's known about them."

She did, and I wrote down what I needed. The chief mystery about the Wasslers was financial. Mark was doing very well. Not only had he made his electronics store a regional computer center, but he even had a clientele in Chattanooga. There was no mystery at all about him now, but no one could figure out where he got the money to build his house and store when he first arrived. Belinda kept house for him, worked part-time at the Corners, helped Mark in the store, and was a dynamo, as I already knew. Everyone loved Belinda.

"Who else?" I asked.

"Doria Vinick. She's almost suspiciously devoted to her aunt and uncle, but she had very little contact with them while she was growing up. Suddenly she was living with them and assuming full responsibility for them. Everyone speaks highly of her—the old people need loads of nursing care, and they absolutely couldn't get

along without her. Neighbors help out, but Doria does most of it herself in addition to working whatever menial jobs she can get to help meet expenses. She's bright, and pretty, and wasting her life here—that's the consensus."

I said bitterly, "If her aunt and uncle were rich, people would say she was only doing it to inherit their money. Since they aren't, she gets mistrusted on general principles. In a Christian community, nothing is regarded more suspiciously than a Christian act."

"Doria also comes from Atlanta, but nothing else is known about her."

"She's Dori to me, and if she ever needs a character witness, I'll be happy to oblige. Making a martyr of herself is her own decision, and she refuses to impose it on anyone else." I told her of Mark Wassler's interest in Dori. "Any other martyrs on your list?" I asked.

"Becky Barret, the Johnston's maid. She's an orphan, too."

"She's another import from Boston, I betcha. She speaks Boston Irish."

"She was working for friends of Miss Laurette's in Atlanta, and Miss Laurette met her on a visit there," Raina said. "They got along so famously that Miss Laurette virtually abducted her. Either Becky is a remarkably crafty female, or she's a wonderfully friendly person. Or both. She's the right age, and she certainly has managed to get herself personally known to the General. Another is Ollie Kidgell, the Johnston's groom. He's also the right age and an orphan."

"Half the people in northwest Georgia must be potential Johnston heirs. What kind of an epidemic produced all these orphans?"

"It's Miss Laurette's doing. She'll always favor an orphan over other job applicants. Because she lost her mother when she was a child, she knows only too well what it's like to be one. One of the General's tenant farmers, Joel Reggs, is another, and there are two interesting possibilities living in the Village."

"Both personally known to the General, I suppose."

"Right. One of them developed a sudden and suspiciously blatant interest in the Civil War and managed to discuss it with the General several times. The other, a woman, joined a quilting club Miss Laurette belongs to and got herself invited to High Acres when the

group met there. Because she brought her three children with her, the children are personally known to the General, too. There are several others whose ancestry is obscure enough to merit a careful look."

"This is a farce," I complained. "It won't be a case, it'll be a career. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather consider the obvious possibilities before I address myself to the world at large. But wait—the person we're looking for had to be in close contact with High Acres during the past two weeks. Otherwise, he wouldn't have known about Joe Murphy. How many of these people qualify?"

"We don't know. We don't even know that he had to be in close contact. Obviously he has confederates, and if he isn't wealthy enough to bribe or hire people with cash, his credit—since he's going to inherit the Johnston estate—ought to be excellent. If he happened to be friendly with a High Acres maid, or if one of his confederates was . . ."

"A maid wouldn't have known about Joe Murphy. Miss Laurette didn't even tell Kolina Kirkland about him."

"A maid who's addicted to eavesdropping could have known. You'll also have to make routine checks on Duff Schaffer's traveling men and the monks."

"The monks will be a problem. Not even Brother Mulberry knows their real names. I have no idea how easy or difficult it would be to slip a Johnston heir into that bunch, but I doubt very much that one of them could get away with any skullduggery once he arrived here. No one pulls wool over Brother Mulberry's eyes—goat's or any other kind. Day or night."

"Take a careful look just in case."

"Maybe the villain isn't even related to the Johnstons. I still think it would be worthwhile to check the local spite index. Hatred might be motive enough, and it's much more difficult to deal with than greed."

"There's more than hatred involved in this. Why go to Chattanooga and kill someone the Johnstons had never met?"

"Very well. First, cherchez la money. Has the demon reporter been around lately?"

"Not since the ball."

"If he shows up again, have the security men go through his

pockets before they eject him and try to find out who he really is. If I'd known about the will, I'd have asked Cecil to check out his license number. I'm curious about how he manages to drive such an expensive car."

"Isn't he a reporter?"

"He's not on the *Constitution*'s payroll. Cecil thought he might be some kind of stringer, but stringers don't drive cars costing twenty-five or thirty grand. Neither do reporters. That stupid clause in the will makes him worth another look. If he'd succeeded in interviewing the General, he could claim to be personally known to him. How many others have there been down through the years—reporters, salesmen, solicitors for charities . . ."

"It's a mess," she agreed. There was a moment of silence. Then I heard her footsteps. She had got to her feet and was pacing back and forth. "This will be a far-flung investigation," she went on. "We'll have to check Kirkland in Boston. It may take a nationwide search to track down Joe Murphy. We won't have any idea how complicated the Atlanta situation is until you take a look at it—and that's only the beginning. We'll simply have to start digging and eliminate names as fast as we can."

The crack of a bullet came just perceptibly before the distant report of a rifle. I scrambled around the side of the gazebo and looked in. There were two more shots. The third missed me by no more than a couple of feet although the rifleman couldn't have seen me. Raina had dived into the safe corner where she'd put the table. "Are you all right?" I asked anxiously.

"I'm damned mad. He missed me by about an inch and a half."

"Keep under cover. I know where the bastard is. If he hangs around hoping for another shot, I'll get him."

I took off through the woods, zigzagging toward a path I remembered. When I found it, I was able to move at a dead run.

I had my automatic ready. A gunman who has just attempted murder won't hesitate to shoot again. The survivor was going to be the one who fired quickest and straightest.

I pushed myself up a long, tortuous climb. I was starting to pant, and my heart was pounding. I reached the crest, veered to the right, and leveled my gun as I edged into the little clearing. It was empty.

I stood where the sniper had stood and saw where he steadied his rifle against a tree trunk. Even with that support, putting a first round within a couple of inches of a moving target was either expert shooting or fantastic luck. The range was at least seven hundred yards. There were no footprints on the hard ground, but the brittle weeds of autumn had been trampled.

Raina Lambert was not visible. She would have done her own calculation of lines of sight and made her way safely back to the house. I looked about for ejected shells, but there were none. This was an unusually tidy sniper.

A woman's voice called, "Who is it?"

I holstered my automatic before I turned around. It was Nell Troppit, the witch. She was livid with anger.

"I heard shots," she said. Her voice sounded accusing.

"I heard them, too. I came to investigate."

"Who was shooting?"

"I don't know. That's what I wanted to find out."

"I don't like guns," she said. "I don't like shooting. Not this close to my house. Sometimes I have trouble with hunters. Once one of them put a bullet through my roof."

Her roof—or the top of her chimney—was just visible to the north.

"I don't like guns, either," I said. "They've been known to kill people."

She turned quickly and looked at me. "You found the body of that young man. Miss Laurette told me about it."

"That's what I meant. Guns can kill. If I find out who was doing the shooting, I'll speak harshly to him."

Suddenly fury transformed her face. She was no longer the poised suburban housewife I remembered. "Don't come near my house with a gun!" she shrilled. "I won't have guns here!"

She turned toward home, and I stood looking after her for a moment. I no longer had any difficulty thinking of her as a witch.

I retraced my steps until I reached a path that took me back to the gravel road where I had left my car. Just as I reached it, I heard a horse approaching. It carried the statuesque Kolina Kirkland in full equestrian costume. She pulled up beside me.

"I have to apologize to you," she said brusquely.

My mind was still on the rifleman. "Apologize?"

"For the directions I gave you. I couldn't understand why Miss Laurette was hiring a big-city detective. I thought you'd need a guide just to keep from getting lost in the woods. So—for a joke—I see now it was a silly thing to do, but at the time it seemed funny—I gave the people in New York roundabout directions for you."

"Who else knew about it?"

"Miss Laurette asked me that. She said someone tried to shoot you, and she wanted to know who knew you were coming that way. But no one did! I didn't tell anyone! I just gave the directions to the woman who called from New York, and I waited to see what you would say when you arrived. When you didn't say anything, I thought maybe you came the other way."

"Who could have overheard you?"

"No one," she said emphatically. "I telephoned from Miss Laurette's office, and there was no one around."

"But the telephone has extensions," I suggested.

She stared. "Do you really think—"

"I do." I thanked her for the information, and she rode away. It was not until she was gone that I remembered the apology I owed to her for doubting what she told me earlier. I wondered whether I would owe her another for not believing her this time.

I sat in my car for a few minutes, thinking. Had Tad told anyone else about Raina's message? I doubted it. Boiling in oil or tarring and feathering wouldn't make him divulge the secrets of his fervently admired Miss Raina. No one else could have known Raina was going to the gazebo until she actually started in that direction. Within minutes, news had reached the rifleman, he had trotted through the woods from wherever he was to the little clearing—which he already knew about—and he was ready to take aim at her the moment she showed herself.

Put like that, it sounded impossible, but it could have been done another way. If Kolina Kirkland had seen Raina leaving for the gazebo just as she was starting her ride, she could have ridden straight to the observation point, got off her shots, and then circled back to apolo-

gize and make me her alibi. It would be no surprise—to me—if Superwoman handled a rifle as well as she did a horse.

I drove back to the Corners and summoned Tad. He swore he hadn't breathed a word of Miss Raina's message to anyone except me.

"Make certain that you don't," I told him sternly. "Someone found out about it, and just now he tried to shoot her. When there's a murderer loose, everyone has to be careful."

We had been assuming all along that any grandchild of the General's was in danger, and it was nice to know we were right, but we were lucky Raina hadn't gotten herself killed finding that out.

I gave Tad a note to take to her. I told her about my encounter with the witch. I also mentioned Kolina Kirkland's confession and suggested a search for horse droppings in the vicinity of the clearing. And I asked her if there were any photographs of the Johnston children.

Tad returned bringing a note from Raina, several items with Al Johnston's signature, and a fat photograph album. The note read, "Nell Troppit had an alarming experience. She heard shots, went to see what was happening, and found you with a gun in your hand. You put the gun away and pretended you'd heard the shots, too, and come to investigate. She wanted to know what Miss Laurette really knew about you and how sure we were you didn't shoot that young man yourself and then pretend to discover the body. Your reputation is ruined. Miss Laurette and I asked her to take us to the place where she saw you. I wanted to see how much of a sitting duck I would have been if I hadn't moved the table. I found out—a dead one. There weren't any horse droppings nearby, but as you must have noticed, there are acres of forest there where a horse could have been tied."

Unfortunately, no one connected with the Johnston family had been a photography enthusiast, and half the album's pages were blank. I took it to May, and we sat at her kitchen table and leafed through it while she told me all about the young Johnstons. Tisha sat nearby scouring May's heavy iron pans and kettles. I wished the girl's introduction to work could have come with something other than bleak drudgery. I could only hope that May and Miss Laurette knew best.

On the album's first page was a group photo—a snapshot of the seven children standing on the imposing High Acres veranda. Letty was a chubby blonde infant of about three, pouting for attention; Laurette was a homely girl of eleven or twelve, already the boss; Leonora was a vapid nonentity even then. The four boys were as handsome as the girls were plain. The scowling Millard was the rebel, held in the photograph by invisible constraint, ready to dash off with the camera's click. Merrick, wearing glasses, turned a scholar's face to the world. Michael was watching the photographer as though convinced he could do it better himself. Only Malcolm offered the good-natured grin common to family photographs.

"Malcolm looks like a pleasant child," I observed.

"He was," May said instantly. "He was the most likable member of the family. The least stuck up, too. He was friendly, and he liked everyone. He did favors for people. He enjoyed being with them. The girlfriends that boy had! Every girl in the county was in love with him at one age or another."

"Strange he turned out the way he did. Why would the son of a wealthy man have to steal?"

"I've wondered about that myself. I'm sure his father gave him money, and he had an inheritance from his mother. People said he got in with the wrong crowd, and got bad habits, and started gambling, but I never believed that. His problem was being generous. He liked to do things for people. And then—he'd never had to worry about money and probably never learned how to take care of it. He wouldn't think anything at all of borrowing from his boss for a day or two, which is what he claimed he'd done. But he'd been doing it for a long time, and it amounted to a lot of money."

"So he went to prison. What then?"

"The General was furious. He wouldn't let anyone mention him again."

"Doesn't anyone know what happened to him?"

She shook her head.

"Did he have a special girlfriend people thought he might marry?"

"I don't think so. He liked them all because he liked everyone, but I don't think he got really serious about any of them."

"What are the chances he might have had an illegitimate child with one of those girlfriends?"

May blushed, but she answered instantly. "None. Not with any of the girlfriends I knew. I would have known. In those days, that didn't happen very often, and everyone knew it when it did."

"Does the same go for the other boys?"

"Merrick didn't pay much attention to girls. He always had his nose in a book. The only time Millard was interested in a local girl was when he bet someone he could get June Fellings elected homecoming queen. And he did—he ran the campaign like a presidential election and used all kinds of stunts. He kept the school in an uproar. She was the homeliest girl nominated, but she won by three votes. Michael—I never knew much about him. He kept to himself. Al reminds me of Michael."

"Did they all go to the public schools?"

She nodded. "The General thought that was good enough for them. He never put much stock in learning. He had to leave school when he was young and go to work. School was just something to keep children out of their parents' way until they got old enough to be useful."

I turned the pages slowly. The childrens' ages advanced, but their characters seemed unchanged. Millard remained the rebel; Michael, the loner; Merrick, the scholar; Malcolm, the grinning politician. Malcolm should have stayed home and run for office. He looked like a very personable young man. Joe Murphy had been described in similar terms—friendly and likable. Miss Laurette thought Murphy looked like Malcolm, and their personalities could have been similar.

The boys became even better looking as they grew older. Malcolm was really handsome as a teenager. The girls seemed plainer. The last photo in the book showed Letty as a fat, ungainly child of ten—entirely different from what I had imagined. It was difficult to envision her as the General's favorite.

"Is that all of them?" May asked.

I flipped the empty pages.

"There used to be more," she said. "Maybe the others are in another album. Letty got to be real pretty when she was a little older."

"Was Letty smart?" I asked.

"She had brains, but she was too lazy to use them."

"Did any of the girls look like their mother?"

"I don't remember their mother at all. There ought to be photographs of her somewhere, but I don't remember seeing any."

"I'll ask Miss Raina to look for the other album," I promised. "What are the chances that the General threw out Letty's pictures when he threw her out?"

"I know they were there after that," May said.

My investigation at the Corners, and at High Acres, and in the nameless Village had come to a blank end like the pages in the photograph album. I decided to leave for Atlanta that afternoon. I told Tisha to behave herself and do whatever May asked, and I would have important work for her when I returned. She smiled happily.

11

Before I left, I gave Duff's cabin records a quick check. None of his guests listed a home address in Atlanta, and Brother Mulberry didn't know whether anyone in his flock came from there. Both of those investigations would have to be done later. I took my leave of Duff and May, telling them I would be back in a couple of days, and I went to my cabin to pack.

The canted topography of northwest Georgia doesn't accommodate east-west roads. I followed a route that slanted southeast by easy stages until it reached the I-75, and from there I had a romp down to Atlanta. I kept checking my rearview mirror for a rusted red Plymouth or for anything else conforming to my movements a shade too conspicuously, but looking for a tail on an interstate highway on a sunny afternoon in October doesn't keep the mind fully occupied. I had plenty of time to sift the evidence we had turned up, which was scant, and apply it to every name on Raina Lambert's list. I couldn't

make much of a case against anyone. Even castles in the air need some kind of a foundation. I told myself philosophically that one can't expect to pick up the solution to a complicated mystery on the first pass.

I checked into the Harwell Court Motel, a quiet, dignified establishment near downtown Atlanta that caters to businessmen. An hour later I was at work in the Stickells Detective Agency's library, where items can be found that no public library would offer. Among other things, there were photocopies of a complete run of Atlanta telephone directories extending back to World War I.

A telephone directory is an immensely valuable investigative tool. The craze for unlisted numbers only began in recent years, and one often can construct a family's, or an individual's, or a business's history by tracing it through a series of telephone directories. For example, I quickly picked out the year of Leland Borling's marriage. He suddenly got an unlisted residential number, and I learned from a legal directory that he moved at the same time. I checked my entire list of names through various directories, which gave me a very good beginning—but only a beginning. An investigator must function in the same way that a reporter functions. If he wants to find out, he has to go there, and look, and ask questions.

When I had exhausted the available sources, I pushed my notebook aside and tilted back to meditate on my next move. I was scowling at the funny faces formed by psychedelic lines in the ceiling tiles when Sibyl Housey, Cecil Stickells's assistant, glanced into the room. She was a neat, graying woman who looked as though she should be squiring grandchildren around a playground, and on a previous visit she had taught me a very useful judo trick. "What is it?" she asked. "Did your most important witness elope with the suspect, or have you fallen in love with her yourself?"

I described the problem, and she sat down to consider it with me.

"For most of your names, I'm afraid you'll have to dig," she said. "A professional man like Borling is high-profile and shouldn't be a problem. We'll ask a few of his colleagues about him. If he's a reputable attorney, you'll quickly get all the information you want. If he isn't, they'll be reluctant to talk about him."

She made the calls, and I listened on an extension. The first drew

a blank. "Which proves he never worked the rarefied precincts of corporate law," she said cheerfully.

Her second resulted in a cautious appraisal of Borling as seen through the wrong end of a telescope. She thought again, made another call, and hit the bull's-eye. As soon as she asked for information, the attorney demanded, "What's he done?"

"Probably nothing," she said. "His name has come up in connection with a case he handled, and I'd like to know something about him."

"A juvenile case, I suppose," the attorney said. She remained silent. "All right," he said with a chuckle. "I know you won't make unethical use of it, and I owe you a few favors. For that matter, I don't know anything about Leland Borling that isn't common knowledge—in certain circles. Mind you, none of this is for quotation. At least—you're not to quote me on it. Borling was a specialist in family law, and he had a very good private practice. He was in fact an excellent lawyer, and he was on the Fulton County Juvenile Court list of court-appointed attorneys. Judges and court workers liked him. So did social workers. He got on excellently with the kids and did a conscientious job for them. Court-appointed attorneys are supposed to be taken in rotation, but you know how those things go. Those in charge of a case always want the best legal representation possible for the child, and if they have any influence, they'll use it. In my opinion, Borling got more than his share of appointments, though I never understood why he wanted them. That isn't the most profitable legal practice.

"Rumors began to circulate that he'd been seen about with very young girls—sometimes late at night. That naturally led to speculation that he might have an improper personal interest in the juveniles he was representing. Even if harmless, shenanigans like that would be professionally suicidal. They were only rumors, though, and a lot of people pooh-poohed them. His reputation had always been good. Then he suddenly married a very young girl, and that seemed to give substance to the rumors. I don't know whether his practice fell off as a result, but when he left Atlanta for a rural practice a year or two later, I had the impression he was getting out before more damage could be done. I may have been wrong about that, because he's still

considered a very good attorney in his area of specialization. He handles an occasional case here, and he's frequently called in as a consultant. There are people who enjoy getting away from the big-city rat race, and maybe he's one of them. The Georgia mountains are a lovely place to escape to. Now you know everything I know."

Sibyl thanked him and hung up. I was sitting with my lips frozen in a pucker, waiting to whistle.

She raised her eyebrows. "You look like Gabriel about to blow."

"Borling was in an ideal position to find out the backgrounds of kids in trouble," I said. "If one of these people on our list had a spell of naughtiness as a child and was frightened or coerced by an attorney into telling him something that was never supposed to be mentioned to anyone—that his or her grandfather was one Bramwell Johnston, for example—"

"One small question before you go winging off into the blue. Is there any evidence at all that any of these people weren't brought up by their real parents?"

"As far as I know, none of the known orphans on our list grew up in Atlanta, but I'm thinking about those who might be unknown orphans. Adoptions are sometimes deliberately concealed and infernally difficult to track down. It might be a lot simpler just to find out whether anyone on my list got into Borling's clutches as a child."

She pursed her own lips thoughtfully. "You want to run your list of names through juvenile records?"

"How else could I get that information?"

"How many years were you planning to devote to this? The people who founded the City of Atlanta inconsiderably located it so it would spill into several counties. Each has its own juvenile court system. Those cases have closed hearings and the records are sealed—which is just a way of describing them; they aren't really sealed, but they certainly wouldn't be easy to get at. Probably you'd have to go through the district attorneys of the various counties if those on your list were involved in serious offenses. Kids who grow up to be responsible citizens have to be protected against having their youthful mistakes exposed to casual snoopers."

"A murder investigation doesn't come under the heading of casual snooping."

"But you aren't investigating a murder. You're just making casts at random in the hope of snagging something. For less serious cases, you'd have to see the Department of Family and Children's Services. It's a state agency, but it's also organized by county, and a search of its records would mean another chase through various county offices."

"How about a computer search?"

She shook her head. "You're after records that go back—how many years? Twenty to twenty-five? That was B.C.—before computers—and I don't even know whether the current juvenile court records are computerized."

"Sometimes 'before computers' is an advantage," I said. "When a clerk misfiles something, there's always a chance it might be found again, but when a computer swallows the wrong way, one gets an entirely new conception of the word *limbo.* Can you recommend someone who knows the way through that maze of juvenile records?"

"Yes. Carla Joblan. She specializes in records—legal, business, or whatever. She free-lances and charges plenty. And earns it. With a problem like yours, there'll be a lot of holes to dig in."

"See if you can sign up Carla for however many days she thinks it'll take. I want her to run all of these names through the various juvenile departments. Would a phone call or two from the governor's office smooth the way for her?"

"And how!"

"I'm sure our client has unlimited political clout when she wants to use it, so we might as well take advantage of that."

Sibyl got Carla Joblan on the telephone for me. I engaged her for the next day, described the problem, and dictated the names to her, even including Kolina Kirkland's on the long shot chance that the secretary had enjoyed a southern escapade of some kind during her youth. I also asked Carla for suggestions as to where political pressure would be the most useful to her. We arranged to meet for dinner the next night. Then I thanked Sibyl and went back to my motel to plan my own day's work.

I had a late evening telephone conversation with Raina Lambert. She had found an elderly friend of Miss Laurette's in the Village, a widow named Ellen Ingram, who possessed a private telephone and

didn't mind retiring to the kitchen while a friend of a friend used it for confidential business. I dictated the list of organizations Carla Joblan would be contacting, with several additions of my own, and Raina promised that Miss Laurette would pull any strings she could in our behalf.

"How was the tea with Lana Fithie?" I asked.

"Very pleasant. She's the most interesting person I've met here. She has a house full of plants, plus a small greenhouse, and she seems like a very capable botanist."

"What are the chances that one of her parents was named Johnston?"

"I'm looking into that."

"Have you found any more photographs?"

"Miss Laurette is certain there never was another album. The one you saw contained all the pictures there were. She agrees with May that some are missing. Since there's no evidence that any pictures were removed, someone must have carefully excised some pages, which would have been easy to do. They're looseleaf and tied together with a string, as I'm sure you noticed."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"So much so that I checked the album for fingerprints. There should be an appalling accumulation on something like that. There isn't. It's been wiped, but that could have been done years ago. Miss Laurette can't remember the last time anyone looked at it. The few prints that remain there are yours, which I recognize, and May's—I collected hers for comparison, to her enormous amusement—and some juvenile contributions from Tad."

"Then one of the missing pictures showed a dangerous resemblance to someone. At a guess, one of Letty's. She's the only one who changed much as she grew older. She blossomed out at puberty, May said."

"I know. I've talked with May. I also discussed this with Miss Laurette. Neither of them can think of anyone local who looks like the Letty they remember, but it's been years since they saw the photographs."

"It's another dratted barn door that got locked too late," I complained.

"Have you turned up anything?"

"Leland Borling isn't a nice man. He's fond of young girls—as might be deduced from his marrying a fifteen-year-old."

"That doesn't make him a murderer," she said. "Call me tomorrow."

The bureau that processes automobile titles for the state of Georgia is located in a large office building south of the state capital. When its doors opened the next morning, I was there with my samples of Al Johnston's signature. My problem was a simple one: A man had disappeared, and it was important to know whether he sold his car himself or someone forged his signature on the title. Probably no obstacles would have been erected in any case, but a telephone call from the governor's office arrived about the time I was walking through the door and did no harm.

An employee and I compared the signatures, and they matched perfectly. We agreed that the chances of forgery were remote. An expert opinion could be obtained if this became a legal issue at some later date, but for the present, I could assume that Al Johnston had been alive but in financial difficulties shortly after he left home. I could think of no other reason for him to sell his car.

Before I left, I checked the ownership of the plush sports car driven by Jerry Collendon, the alleged reporter. It was registered to one Flavia Sandover, which left the Collendon question even more confused than before.

I thanked the employee for her cooperation and turned my attention to family trees.

My first stop was a deteriorating middle-class neighborhood in the Inman Park district. This was a venerable part of the city, and several memorial plaques commemorating incidents in Sherman's siege of Atlanta, which was heavily fought in this area, were positioned along busy Dekalb Avenue. The neighborhood consisted of small and moderately sized homes on dead-end streets with dwellings in good repair standing side by side with those destined for early demolition. The few large Victorian houses scattered among them looked like jetsam on the wrong beach. The sidewalks were badly worn hexagonal flagstones that in places had deteriorated to footpaths. There were patches everywhere of new construction and renovation.

The Narlanders had lived in a small, one-story bungalow for more than twenty years. It was freshly painted, and the yard was meticulously maintained. Conrad Narlander's employer probably called him a custodian, but he was a department store janitor to his neighbors. His wife, Denise, was a homemaker. A neighbor who lived three houses down the street told me they had a good marriage; they got along well with their daughter and son-in-law; the daughter had grown up in the neighborhood; and she was a lovely girl and had two lovely children of her own. As a teenager, Madge had baby-sat their daughter, Betty; and now Betty baby-sat Madge's children when she visited her parents. The Narlanders were very proud of her, and of their distinguished son-in-law, and of their grandchildren. It was an American success story.

Like a suspicious dentist, I kept probing deeper.

I found nothing at all until I got to the end of the block, where a Miss Amy Dobbs had lived all of her seventy-plus years in the same splendid old Victorian house. She remembered the Narlanders when they proudly moved into their new home.

"They'd just had the baby," she said. "Been living in an apartment somewhere, but it wasn't big enough for a couple with a baby. Or maybe it wasn't good enough. So they bought that house, which they couldn't afford at the time. They were strapped for years, but they never could do enough for that child. Spoiled her rotten. She turned out pretty well for all that. Married an older man, which always seemed odd to me. He settled her down, though."

"Settled her down" struck a jarring note after the encomiums I'd heard from the other neighbors. Was Madge wild as a girl?

"Not exactly wild," Miss Dobbs said, choosing her words carefully. "She did have problems in school. I don't know if she was actually dumb or just lazy. She always seemed bright enough, but she was a dunce where books were concerned. Finally she dropped out of school to get married. She wasn't more than a sophomore in high school and her husband must have been forty at the time. Or older." She shook her head disapprovingly. "Strange doings. It wasn't a shotgun wedding, either. Her first baby wasn't born until three years later."

Miss Dobbs would keep careful track of something like that.

"It seemed to work, though," she said, sounding regretful.

And that was all the scandal I could discover about Madge Borling: Her parents had spoiled her, she hadn't done well in school, and she had dropped out to marry an older man.

The various directories in the Stickells library had added nothing of significance to what I already knew about Leland Borling. He was born in New Jersey. His father was a highly regarded country doctor. Borling graduated from Emory University Law School and practiced law in Atlanta for more than fifteen years. Then he moved his practice to Letty, in northwest Georgia. The fact that one of the directories actually said "Letty" meant there were geographic limits to the General's influence. No one I questioned on my own would be likely to speak more frankly about Borling than the attorney Sibyl Housey had talked with, so I moved on to the next name.

Before Doria Vinick left Atlanta, she'd had her own telephone listing with an address in a neat, well-maintained but severely economical apartment building. I talked with a former neighbor who still lived in the apartment next door. It was encomium season all over again. Doria's mother, Jeanette, had been an invalid, and the neighbor had never seen a more devoted daughter. She had a good job as a secretary in a big business downtown, and she spent all of her free time with her mother. Finally the mother died. Doria lived alone for a short time and then moved north to live with an aunt and uncle.

"What about Doria's father?" I asked.

"I never heard him mentioned," the neighbor said. "I always thought there was something funny about him."

I now knew her mother's name and could track her through the records. That led me to a series of apartment buildings, each shabbier than the previous one—though in justice it should be said that those buildings were years younger and certainly less shabby when Doria Vinick and her mother were living in them. Now the high tenant turnover made it difficult to find anyone who had been there more than a year. The trail ended at a vacant lot—the site of a demolished apartment building Doria had lived in when she was three years old. Beyond that, the records failed me.

With the Wassler family, both mother and father were present and accounted for all the way back to Belinda Wassler's infancy. They

moved to an address in southwest Atlanta at that time, buying their own home. As with the Narlanders, the addition to the family probably made them think they needed more room. They bought an inexpensive house in an area that was already run-down and rapidly becoming worse, and there they stayed while the neighborhood decayed around them.

It was a mixed neighborhood, now, and there were no nearby residents who even remembered the Wasslers. Not until I reached the end of the block did I find two former neighbors who had known them. These were elderly white people trapped in an inner-city slum because they were too poor to move. Both described the Wasslers with rare affection.

"They were a real family," one of them said. "The children got along so well with their parents. They were gems, both of them. Workers—how those children worked! The father was often sick and never able to earn much money, but the wife did any work she could find, and so did the children. Mark was mowing lawns and digging and cleaning and running errands even before he started to school. When he got older, he throwed two paper routes—the *Constitution* in the morning, and the *Journal* in the afternoon."

"*Throwed* them?" I asked. "Do you mean 'delivered'?"

"Sure," she said. "He throwed them. Belinda worked right along with him as soon as she was big enough. She throwed the papers herself whenever he needed a substitute so he could take another job. The odd thing was they seemed to enjoy it, and every penny they earned was proudly taken home to their mother. It was the family they were working for."

The other neighbor was just as enthusiastic. He had never seen anything like that family. "Mark was smart," he said. "I was the one that started him on electronics. It was just a hobby I fussed around with, and in no time at all he knew more about it than I did. He got a part-time job in a radio and TV store and went on from there, learning everything he could and getting paid while he learned. Later he took a correspondence course. He couldn't have done it any other way—even that was money taken away from his family, and he had a guilty conscience about it."

I asked about the family. Were there any relatives?

"The kids' aunt visited them now and then. I think she was the mother's sister. She looked prosperous—not rich, understand, but like she maybe could spare a dollar now and then to help them out. As the years went by, and the father's health got worse, they needed every bit of help they could get. I'll never forget that family. It was them against the world. They worked all the time, and they were happy doing it—happy they could be together. And they won, too. The kids turned out fine. A few years ago, Mark and Belinda moved north, up near Tennessee, and Mark started his own business. The parents were going to follow them as soon as they got settled, but just about that time, Joe Wassler died. Mary sold the house and went to live with the kids until she died. I haven't seen Belinda since she went away, but sometimes when Mark comes to Atlanta to pick up parts and stock, he stops to visit. Brings me a six-pack and some snacks, and we have a gab. He's doing real well up there, and he keeps saying how grateful he is to me for getting him started in electronics. But I'll tell you the truth—I really didn't do very much. He did most of it himself."

Neither they nor the detective agency's records had any idea where the family had come from or where Mark Wassler suddenly got the money for a store and a home in northwest Georgia.

I had never investigated such a harmless-sounding list of suspects. The only genuine twitch of suspicion I developed all day concerned Doria Vinick's nonexistent father. I went back to the motel to freshen up before I met Carla Joblan at the motel restaurant at seven-thirty. She was a short, stocky woman with thick glasses, and she looked as unflappable as Mount McKinley.

She was smiling. "You found something," I said resentfully.

She nodded happily. She couldn't have been more pleased if she had just won the Florida State Lottery. People had been unusually cooperative, she said, probably because of the phone calls, but she had spent most of the day looking in the wrong places. One never knew that they *were* the wrong places until one looked, of course. But she thought she had what I wanted or at least some of it. I told her to save it until we had ordered. I wanted to savor it without interruptions.

After the waitress took our orders and brought drinks, I settled back to enjoy whatever it was the records had revealed.

"First, about Madge Narlander. Her name doesn't appear in juvenile records. This means she wasn't involved in any serious trouble while she was growing up. The same goes for the Wasslers and for Doria Vinick. For lesser things, like truancy or minor misdemeanors, I'll have to tackle a whole new set of records. If you want me to dig deeper, that is. I've found nothing anywhere to indicate that those four children weren't the real children of their parents, but perhaps I wasn't looking in the right place for that, either. They could have been adopted in some other county."

She had the instincts of a great scholar. If she'd had a different kind of education, she would have been happily reading Egyptian hieroglyphics or quarreling over translations of Homer. Instead, she knew Atlanta and its records inside out and spent her days tracking down absconding debtors or husbands and detecting dishonest cashiers and clerks. Once in a great while she got to work on a murder case.

"That's in line with what I found," I said. She was still smiling, so she hadn't reached the end of it. "What else do you have?"

"I found no reference to a Kolina *Kirkland*," she went on. "More likely than not a woman that age has changed her surname at least once, so I concentrated on her given name. 'Kolina' is unusual. Unfortunately, there's no possible way to check a first name through the files, so I began asking secretaries if they remembered a Kolina. Eventually one of them did. Some of the brightest, most capable people I know are secretaries. The system would collapse without them. Would a Kolina Olsen interest you?"

I wondered why I hadn't thought of that. "I'll take a very careful look at anyone named Kolina," I said.

Carla passed a copy of a photograph across the table. It showed a lanky, underweight, immature fifteen-year-old Kolina Kirkland. I recognized her at once.

"Astonishing," I said. "I only included her name because I'm stubbornly thorough. I'll swear this girl has deep roots in New England. She speaks pure Boston."

"You're right. At age fifteen, she ran away from a foster home in

Boston and somehow ended up in Atlanta, where she was picked up for prostitution."

I whistled softly.

"A lot of interstate highways intersect in Atlanta," Carla said. "Runaways follow the highways, and a juvenile who arrives here hungry and flat broke may think it's no big deal to turn a trick or two for the money. Kolina was having problems with her foster parents. She agreed to return to Boston with the understanding that she'd be placed in a different foster home, and Boston sent someone for her. Case closed—as far as Atlanta was concerned."

"She turned out well," I said. "Poised and intelligent, in addition to which she's a beautiful woman."

"A different foster home can make a difference."

"Her family tree will have to be looked at carefully, but that search has to start in Boston. Does Borling's name appear in her file?"

"In capital letters. He represented her."

The waitress brought our salads, and we continued the conversation while we ate.

"I suddenly see a great deal of light, but let's not rush things," I said. "I think we'll want you to go on checking—on Madge Narlander, the Wasslers, Doria Vinick, and any other names we come up with. Dig as deeply as you can. I especially want to know where the families came from and their histories at the time the kids were born. I also would like to know who Doria's father was. Our problem is complicated by the fact that we can't just go to those people and ask. If they're conspiring to grab an inheritance, that means they've already committed one or two murders, and we'd rather they don't know we're interested until we produce something that'll pass for evidence. Plan on spending the rest of the week on this and maybe longer. I'll confirm that with my boss and call you at home later."

At ten o'clock, I again telephoned the home of Ellen Ingram, Miss Laurette's friend. Raina Lambert answered.

"Is Miss Laurette there?" I asked.

"She's in the kitchen talking with Ellen."

"Ask her how she happened to hire Kolina Kirkland. Whose idea was it that she go to Boston for a secretary?"

"Just a moment."

She was back twenty seconds later. "Leland Borling suggested it," she said.

"Right. If it weren't for the fact that we don't have any evidence and nothing about this makes sense to me, I'd tell you to mark the case 'closed.' "

"Explain yourself."

I gave her the history of Kolina Olsen Kirkland. "Borling knew her background. If there's a Johnston in it, he found out all about that when he was her attorney in Atlanta. When Miss Laurette needed a secretary, he arranged for our Kolina to get the job, thus making her personally known to the General."

"What does he get out of it?" Raina asked.

"That's what doesn't make sense. Right now he has her under his thumb because he can threaten to expose her. Would Miss Laurette—or any other high society employer—tolerate a former prostitute as a secretary?"

Raina was silent for almost thirty seconds. "It doesn't make sense to me, either," she said finally. "I especially would like to know how Borling expects to get his cut. And how the ghosts and the arson come into it, because I'm certain they do. Keep Joblan at work on the records. She can report directly to me. I need you here. Miss Laurette is getting restless sitting on a powder keg. We'll have to make something happen."

It was my turn to think for a moment. "All right," I said. "I can manage that. Did you know the murdered Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy had a brother named Albert Sidney Johnston Murphy?"

"It's a complete surprise to me."

"It'll be even more of a surprise to the murderer," I promised.

12

When a man has killed once and probably twice without leaving a clue, he isn't likely to be trapped by ordinary police routine. Wednesday afternoon I arrived at the Cumberland Motel in Chattanooga with something extraordinary—a slightly older edition of the dead Joe Murphy, who registered as Albert Sidney Johnston Murphy. Al Murphy was a figment of my imagination. The New York office already had photos of the dead Joe Murphy, and I told it to find an operative who looked just like that and send him to Chattanooga instantly.

They found Paul Dugas. He was no twin brother to Joe Murphy, but there was a slight resemblance, and when Rosemary Chambers read his name on the registration card, and then took a careful look at him, she suddenly forgot she was supposed to greet guests with a smile.

Paul explained that his brother had stayed there a short time before, and he had come to find out why Joe suddenly stopped writing. Rosemary clammed up; few people enjoy making death announcements.

The phony Al Murphy brought a friend with him. Greg Reid was a highly capable operative himself, but for the moment he was enrolled as a bodyguard. After what had happened to Joe, we thought it best not to take chances with Al. Reid looked like a college undergraduate, but he was forty-four years old, a former prizefighter, and an expert in several kinds of specialized mayhem.

We took a block of three rooms, placed Greg Reid on one side of Paul Dugas and me on the other, and held a long conference in the central room where we were least likely to be overheard. I described the case to them, and together we worked out a letter that Paul copied onto a piece of motel stationery:

"Dear Miss Laurette Johnston: I am worried about my brother, Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy. He was staying at this motel, and he wrote that he was going to meet you. That was the last we heard from him. I tried to telephone him, but the motel said he had checked out. I have come to Chattanooga to look for him. Can you tell me anything about him?" He signed if Albert Sidney Johnston Murphy.

I mailed the letter immediately and cautioned Paul to stay out of dark alleys and wear his bulletproof vest if he went out. Once that message reached High Acres, he would be living dangerously—but this time the murderer would be the target.

We knew exactly what was going to happen. Early in the morning, before there was anyone about, there would be a knock on Al Murphy's door by someone pretending to be a messenger from Miss Laurette. It wouldn't necessarily be the rival Johnston heir in person. The marching ghosts and the dead Yankee sharpshooter proved he had his own private army. The caller would warn Al that the General's heirs were in danger. His brother had been murdered and all of their lives were threatened. Miss Laurette wanted him to check out immediately and go to a safe place, making certain no one followed. Miss Laurette would meet him later—at Point Park or whatever secluded spot had been chosen for this next murder. A similar ploy must have been used on the unsuspecting Joe Murphy. Since it had worked perfectly, I expected a rerun for his supposed brother.

While we prepared for a murder attempt in Chattanooga, Raina Lambert was acting to turn off the murderer's sources of information. Telephone lines that would be genuinely private had been run up to High Acres. Raina now had a private phone in her bedroom, and Miss Laurette had one in her office. In addition, Raina took steps to prevent leaks by other means. The servants were cautioned not to talk with anyone—not even Nell Troppit. Miss Laurette was certain Nell wouldn't gossip, but she did have an odd miscellany of "patients," and all a shrewd murderer needed was an occasional hint.

There were other dangers. If Miss Laurette went around cautioning everyone not to talk, it would give Celisse Wadeson and her numerous compeers an exciting item to gossip about. Instead, Raina imposed a stern rule of silence on Laurette Johnston. She was not to tell

anyone anything except for carefully controlled items we wanted leaked so we could see who would react. "Anyone" included everyone, even old friends like Duff and May Schaffer. However loyal they might be, they did love to talk—as I well knew.

The exception was the phony Al Murphy's letter. Miss Laurette was to treat that exactly as she had treated Joe Murphy's letter. She would show it to Leland Borling and ask him what he thought she should do; and she would mention it to the same people she had mentioned Joe Murphy's letter to. Borling of course would caution her against doing anything at all, but she would make known to him and to the others her determination to call on this new Murphy at his motel the next morning. She would say she felt obligated to inform him about his brother's death and about the funeral on Saturday—the police had finally released Joe's body—and she could hardly do that over the telephone. She also intended to invite him to High Acres after the funeral to meet people. She would ask Borling to accompany her to Chattanooga.

While we waited, I kept Greg Reid and Paul Dugas confined to the Chattanooga motel. They wanted to spend Thursday morning touring the battlegrounds, but I was taking no chances at all on either the efficiency of the U.S. Postal Service or on how quickly a murderer might react. They did their sightseeing from their motel windows, which showed them the humped upper contour of Lookout Mountain.

Miss Laurette's call came late Thursday afternoon, informing the phony Al Murphy that she intended to call on him at ten the next morning, Friday. We treated it as a rehearsal for the next day's meeting, and he handled it well.

On Thursday evening, I used a pay phone to call Raina Lambert on her new private line. She refused to telephone me through the motel switchboard. She told me Carla Joblan was continuing her search but had turned up nothing more, an investigator in Boston was on the track of Kolina Olsen Kirkland's past, and private operatives across the southeastern United States were carefully checking the backgrounds of Duff's cabin patrons. She also had got in touch with Brother Mulberry's sponsors to see what could be learned about his monks.

"Do you still expect a visitor?" she asked.

"Certainly. All three of us will be up early and raring to go."

We were. We had two rental cars parked nearby, and we were ready for anything. Nothing happened.

At ten o'clock, Miss Laurette, accompanied by Raina Lambert and Leland Borling, called on Al Murphy as promised. The attorney was wearing a gray suit I hadn't seen yet, perhaps a new one. For once he looked neat and ready to address the jury. The phony Al had been meticulously briefed for the meeting, and he brought it off with a flair. He even told Miss Laurette the story his mother was supposed to have told him about the puddle kitten. It lacked epic significance, but it was the sort of childhood experience that gets remembered. All of the Johnston children had been fond of Beatrix Potter's tales of Peter Rabbit and other animals—including Jemima Puddleduck. About the time Letty became familiar with the tale of Jemima, the Johnston children had a new kitten that was not housebroken. Letty and Laurette began referring to it as the puddle kitten, which must have seemed like a deliciously naughty private joke to them.

I had bugged Paul's room so Greg and I could listen in. The phony Al was good, but Miss Laurette was magnificent when she tenderly broke the news that Joe Murphy was dead and that both Joe and Al probably were the General's grandsons.

Leland Borling contributed little except disapproving noises.

While I listened to their conversation, I thought about the murderer and wondered why he hadn't reacted. Since he had found out so easily about Joe Murphy, he must have known Miss Laurette was meeting Al.

I discovered what I thought was the answer by trying to put myself in his place. For years and years, the General's only known heirs had been Miss Laurette and a single grandchild, the unmarried Al Johnston. Only two murders, one of a person who was already elderly, stood in the way of an unknown grandchild becoming sole heir to an enormous estate. The murderer was able to plan with care and wait for a moment when he could act with impunity.

When an opportunity came, he disposed of Al so deftly we still had no idea what had happened. His first attempt on Miss Laurette had failed, but all he had to do was wait patiently for another chance.

Joe Murphy turned up before Al Johnston had been formally declared missing. The murderer reacted with such dispatch that the Johnstons never got to meet the newcomer. Then things started to go wrong. Within a week, a totally unsuspected granddaughter arrived. Again the murderer acted with dispatch, but the granddaughter proved to be a wary target. Before he could try again, Joe Murphy's brother announced himself.

It was enough to discourage the most ambitious villain. He had disposed of two heirs and made attempts on two more, and the situation was actually worse than when he started. He now had three heirs to eliminate, and his victims were certain to become more circumspect with each new attempt. No wonder he was reacting cautiously to the arrival of another new grandson.

I managed a private conversation with Raina when the meeting was breaking up. "I was wrong," I said. "Either he's shrewd enough to sense that the same technique used twice would raise questions and maybe even suggest answers, or he's suddenly become cautious. Next time he'll try something different. It's up to us to make certain it doesn't work."

I suggested that the phony Al Murphy and his friend be invited to High Acres immediately. The mansion was extremely vulnerable. Six security men were still on the job, but they represented brawn rather than brains. I could work more effectively on the outside if I knew Raina had two capable operatives with her. She agreed, and so did Miss Laurette.

We checked out of the motel, and I drove Paul Dugas to High Acres with Greg Reid following in the second rental car. Paul spent the trip looking through the tourist literature he had picked up in the motel office, several items of which were headed, "Picture Yourself in Chattanooga."

"I'm trying," he muttered. "I'm trying."

"I've often thought it would be fun to be a tourist instead of a detective," I said. "Just once I would like to check into a motel, find the disassembled parts of a human body in the bathtub, and have no responsibility beyond complaining to the desk that my room was untidy. Put that stuff away and start thinking about a murderer."

I delivered them to High Acres. Then I went to the Corners to

reclaim my cabin and see what momentous events had occurred during my absence. For one, all of the monks were now wearing new shoes and socks. Brother Mulberry came rushing to display his when he saw me drive up.

For another, Tisha had disappeared.

I was shocked. "Where could she go?" I demanded.

"I don't know," May said. "Maybe she's found a place in the forest. She doesn't have anyone she could turn to, and nights are too cold for staying outside. I hope someone finds her before she gets sick from exposure."

I hoped so, too.

"She did everything I asked her to," May said. "She didn't complain at all. But she went out each night after dark and wandered around. Several people saw her, going or coming. We didn't say anything to her about it. We thought maybe it was asking too much of her to keep her shut up when she was used to coming and going when she liked. Certainly her Granny didn't take much care of her. But last night she never came back. I sent Duff to see if she'd gone back to the old shack, but there wasn't any sign of her there."

May was sad but resigned. I wasn't resigned, but there didn't seem to be anything I could do about it.

"Every day she asked about you," May said. "I guess having to work regular hours was too much for her. She's always been wild. Not wild in a bad way, I never heard of her doing anything bad. Just a simple-minded, untamed kind of wild. Her grandmother was loony, and so was her mother, and she had a horrible upbringing, living in filth and scrounging just to get enough to eat, and she didn't think like other people. She even went off and left her money. She'd had so little in her life that it didn't mean anything to her."

That I couldn't believe. I remembered how delighted she had been when I paid her. But the girl had never been subject to any kind of discipline, which made me wonder whether she and May had clashed about something. Probably I would never know.

I unpacked, and then I drove to the Village to find out whether Dori Vinick had anything to report.

As I pulled up in front of the Snack and Dessert Bar, Mark Wassler came out with a bag of sandwiches. The shop was the one place

where Dori couldn't refuse to see him. He waved at me, climbed into a decrepit old van that had "Wassler Electronics" hand-lettered on it, and drove off. Considering how prosperous his business seemed, the van was an oddity. All his life he would be practicing the severe economies of his childhood, no matter how successful he became. Being poor builds character. It also can inflict a devastating assortment of hang-ups.

Dori was waiting on another customer, a man in overalls who looked vaguely familiar. He had arrived in an old dark blue Dodge pickup truck, and the driver, who remained in the truck, also looked familiar, but there was nothing unusual about that. I was gradually getting to know the Village regulars by sight, and most of the people I saw in the Fithie commercial complex looked familiar.

I also recognized the truck. Someone had repaired a rust hole in the left front fender and neglected to paint it, leaving a large, irregularly-shaped white spot. I had seen the truck in the Village several times without paying much attention to it.

It had an Alabama license plate. Since Alabama was only a few miles away, Alabama plates were common, but this one piqued my curiosity. I glanced again at the waiting driver, and then I went into the Snack and Dessert Bar.

Dori's customer had ordered four sandwiches and two large coffees to go. I took my usual seat in a booth and made a note of the truck's license number. Then I watched while Dori put lids on two take-out containers of coffee, packed them and the sandwiches into a paper bag, added napkins, condiments, and plastic spoons, and worked the cash register. The customer left, and she came over and sat down opposite me.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Traveling," I said. "I told you—I'm a traveling salesman. If I hung around here all the time, you wouldn't believe me."

"It doesn't matter what I believe," she said with a shrug. "Drew Fithie believes you. He's still talking about offering you a job. He thinks he'll open an appliance store and put Mark out of business. You're going to be the salesman. Would you like to settle down here with your wife and six children?"

"Not to work for Drew Fithie," I said. I nodded in the direction of

the truck, which had backed out and was turning south. "Do those characters come in here often?"

"The past week or so, they've stopped every day. Before that, I saw them now and then."

"They have an Alabama plate," I remarked.

"They don't talk like they're from Alabama. They talk like tourists."

"Do they always drive that truck?"

"A couple of times they had an old red car."

"A rusted red car?" I asked, jumping to my feet.

She nodded, wide-eyed.

"I'll be back," I promised.

I got into my own car, backed onto the road in a way that would have got me ticketed if one of Ed Schaffer's colleagues had been watching, and floored the accelerator. Even with the truck's head start, I should have overtaken it within a couple of miles. The only possible turnoffs were the gravel road to the Corners, the Wassler's Electronics parking lot, and the drive to High Acres. The parking lot had several cars in it when I flashed past but no truck. I turned around, finally, and drove back slowly.

Auto tracks leading into the trees weren't unusual along the highway. They marked places where courting couples or perhaps someone picking up fallen wood had driven a short distance into the forest. I scrutinized each set of tracks intently as I coasted along. Finally I was able to pick out a white spot that didn't belong to the landscape. The Dodge truck was effectively concealed in the thick undergrowth, but the two men in it were neither courting nor collecting wood. They were parked where they could watch the exit from High Acres. Any car coming down from the mansion would have to stop before pulling onto the highway. Any car bound for High Acres would have to slow almost to a stop in order to make the turn.

It was a perfect place for an ambush, and I strongly suspected I had stumbled on the method and setting for the next murder attempt. Since they had been hanging around for a week or more, it wouldn't necessarily happen today, but I wasn't of a mood to wait for it.

I stopped at the gas station and called Raina Lambert's private phone. "Is everyone at home?" I asked her.

"As far as I know. Why?"

I described the situation. "Don't let anyone leave until you hear from me. The other exit may be watched, too."

"Gotcha," she said.

I hung up and drove back to the Snack and Dessert Bar. A car I didn't recognize was just leaving. I glanced at it absently and then gave it a searching look. The driver was Jerry Collendon, the alleged reporter, but he no longer had the flashy foreign sports car. He was driving a venerable, very ordinary Honda. I recognized him too late to get the license number. Under other circumstances, I would have followed him, but I had to do something about the concealed truck.

Ed Schaffer pulled up in his unmarked car as I was getting out. He rolled down his window. "How are things?"

I showed him the Alabama license number. "Find out who that belongs to, will you?"

"Sure." He radioed the request and told his dispatcher he was taking a twenty-minute break. Then he got out and asked, "Coffee?"

In the Snack and Dessert Bar, Dori already had two cups waiting for us.

"How'd you know I didn't want lemonade?" I asked her.

"Anyone who comes in here with him drinks coffee," she said.

As she walked away, Ed said quietly, "Nice girl. Pity she's pinned down in this place. Her aunt and uncle will live for years, and she'll never have a life of her own."

"It's more of a pity than you realize. She grew up with an invalid mother to care for. When her mother died, her aunt and uncle needed help."

"I wasn't aware of that. I take it you looked into a few backgrounds in Atlanta. I'm betting you didn't find any blotches on Dori's past."

"I wasn't looking for blotches. It's blank spaces on family trees that interest me, and she has one of those."

"The New York police sent us a book about the Yankee soldier you found. He had a long record of petty crookedness. They think he'd recently graduated to the big leagues, and there were several items they wanted to discuss with him, but last spring he vanished—to turn up here. Strange. What's with the license number?"

"My stubborn curiosity," I said. I told him about the strange

careers of the rusted red Plymouth and the Dodge truck. "Ever since the sniper attack on Miss Raina, I'm sensitive about people setting ambushes."

Ed hadn't heard about the sniper attack. He listened to my description with raised eyebrows. "Then you figure the men in the truck could be waiting to knock off someone. I'll find out who they are and what excuse they can come up with for parking there. Want to come?"

We gulped our coffee, told Dori to keep the pot hot for us, and climbed into his car. Ed used his radio to ask about the Alabama plate.

"Registered to an R. N. Renkle, 4810 Woods Road, Norville, Alabama," the dispatcher told him. "No record."

"That's the party the red Plymouth was registered to," I said. "I have a suggestion. These characters are likely to be armed. If we go after them alone, with an unmarked car and neither of us in uniform, they can blaze away and later claim they thought we were trying to hold them up. Have one of your regular patrol cars investigate them. We can be the backup."

"If you think it's that serious—" He picked up the microphone. The trap was quickly arranged. The patrol car would be there in fifteen minutes, and we would try to arrive on the scene simultaneously.

"Will they be able to think of an excuse for ticketing these guys so we can find out something about them?" I asked.

"They don't need an excuse to do an identification check on a vehicle that's behaving suspiciously."

We passed the turns to Napoleon Corners and Mark Wassler's electronics store, and then we parked and waited. When the approaching patrol car announced, "Thirty seconds," Ed eased his car into motion. We rounded the curve just in time to see the patrol car swerve abruptly and head off the road. The officer driving it had intended to pull in front of the truck and block it; but the truck driver must have started his engine the moment he sighted the patrol car. The truck lunged forward, scraped the patrol car's front fender, and took a screaming left turn onto the highway. Ed had to stomp his brakes to avoid a collision. The truck roared away; Ed made a U-turn by way of the High Acres drive and started after it while tersely

describing the situation to his dispatcher. The patrol car had to back up in order to turn around, and it got left far behind.

We rounded the next curve, and the highway ahead of us was empty. "They took the turn to the Corners," Ed said. He hit his brakes and skidded onto the gravel road. "The idiots!" He reached for his microphone again. "All we have to do now is block the other end."

Because of the thick forest and the frequent curves, we saw no sign of them. Ed jammed his accelerator down. "Got to get them in sight. Otherwise, they might abandon the truck and try to escape on foot." When we reached the steep, winding road to High Acres, he didn't even slow down. "I know they wouldn't try that," he said.

The gravel road straightened out as it approached the Corners, and the truck was just ahead of us. It tore through the intersection, smashing the double gates to kindling, and roared on. A moment later it was skidding around hairpin turns on its way up the mountain. I took the mike and described our progress to the dispatcher while Ed deftly negotiated the tight turns and steadily gained on the truck. I looked down once and saw the patrol car far below us.

As we raced back and forth across the face of the mountain, the truck, one level higher, approached rapidly and then passed above us with a deep-throated roar, peppering us with flying gravel. When we made our skidding turn and started back, the truck, now on the next level, was approaching again.

Suddenly the center of our windshield showed a large pockmark, glass fragments stung my face—fortunately missing my eyes—and Ed's right arm was creased with red. Until that moment, the truck was being pursued by a plainclothes officer in an unmarked car, and the men probably hadn't done anything a traffic ticket wouldn't cover. Now they were in serious trouble. I drew my nine-millimeter automatic and rolled a window down.

"I wonder why they did that," Ed said. He sounded more puzzled than angry.

"They have long prison terms waiting for them somewhere," I said. "That type prefers death to arrest—or thinks it does."

We made another skidding turn. Now we were close enough behind the truck to race along on the same level with it for a few

seconds. Then it reached the next turn, taking a zag to match our zig. My passenger seat was now on the mountain side of the road, and I was able to look directly up at the approaching truck. I held my automatic ready, waiting for the distance to close. The truck's passenger also was waiting. He had used a handgun for his first shot, probably getting behind the seat so he could shoot out of the driver's window, but now he thrust the muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun through the window on the passenger side.

Ed saw it the instant I did. He muttered, "Uh, oh."

A shotgun loaded with a slug is a formidable weapon, and a blast through the windshield was likely to be lethal. I began shooting at once, aiming at the truck's windshield, pulling the trigger as fast as I could and hoping to make the passenger keep his head down. I can empty a magazine in three to four seconds, and I did. The shotgun wavered, steadied again, and finally fired as I got off my last shot. I instinctively ducked—but it was loaded with bird shot, which at that distance merely peppered the car and put a few pocks in the windshield.

I hadn't expected to cause much damage with my shots. I was shooting at an angle from below my target, and that, combined with the angle of the truck's windshield, virtually guaranteed a ricochet, whereas shots from the truck, taken from above, could hit our slanted windshield directly. One of my first rounds, fired when the angle was broadest, must have penetrated the windshield on the driver's side and sprayed glass in his eyes. Momentarily the truck continued straight ahead. Then it veered, became briefly airborne, and for a suspenseful second or two seemed about to crash on top of us.

It rolled across the road in our wake, cartwheeled end over end down the mountainside, hit a tree, skidded sideways, rolled further down the slope, wrapped itself around another tree, and burst into flames.

Ed was turning the car around, a touchy operation on the narrow road. "You sure get a lot of action out of a few shots," he said.

We started back down the mountain. I told the dispatcher the chase was over and asked for help and an ambulance. The patrol car got to the burning truck before we did, but it was already an inferno, and

the small fire extinguisher the patrol car carried was having no effect on it. Ed ran forward with his own extinguisher and squirted its thin stream futilely.

"They must have been carrying something inflammable," he said.

I mentioned the arson cases.

"That's what I was thinking about."

Ten minutes later, Duff drove up with Brother Mulberry, and both of them leaped out with fire extinguishers, but now it was impossible to get close enough to the truck to use them. I got a bandage from Ed's first-aid kit and wrapped it around his arm, which had only a flesh wound. My face was bleeding in about a dozen places from the sprayed glass, and so was his, but the cuts were mere pinpricks. We blotted up the blood and kept to ourselves any thoughts we had about how lucky we had been. In police work, fortune smiles on you or not, and there's no point in mulling about it afterward. On this day, we had been smiled on.

We worked to pull brush back and keep the forest from catching fire. It was the one useful thing we could do. Finally another patrol car arrived, followed by an ambulance. "If it's all right with you," I told Ed, "I'll ask Duff to drive me back to my car. I have a job to take care of."

"I need a statement from you. What sort of job?"

"I'm going to call on that address in Alabama. If Mr. R. N. Renkle was in the truck, his family should be told. If he wasn't, I'd like to know who drives it."

"Good thought," Ed said, "but you should take an officer with you."

He gave me a young deputy to ride along, and he made arrangements by radio for our reception. Once over the state line, we met an Alabama deputy from the Jackson County Sheriff's Department, who led the way to the Norville address.

It was a sprawling frame farmhouse, old but in excellent condition. A large sign in the yard read, BROTHERHOOD OF ST. GILES. HE THAT HATH PITY UPON THE POOR LENDETH UNTO THE LORD; AND THAT WHICH HE HATH GIVEN WILL HE PAY HIM AGAIN. PROVERBS XIX, 17.

A short, bespectacled monk in a brown cowl came to the door.

"Mr. Renkle isn't here," he said. "We're roofing today." He glanced at his watch. "We should have finished Sadie Tallaby's house by this time, which means we'll be starting Lem Chittock's."

He gave me the address. The Alabama deputy said he knew where it was, so we started off again.

As it turned out, the deputy didn't quite know where it was. A mountainous country has very special back roads. We sampled several of them, turned the wrong way, drove back, and finally found it—a teetering shack with a few pathetic outbuildings.

In the yard, a cardboard sign was nailed to a post: BLESSED IS HE THAT CONSIDERETH THE POOR. PSALMS XLI, 1. WITH GOD'S HELP, REPAIRS AND A NEW ROOF ARE FURNISHED BY THE BROTHERHOOD OF ST. GILES AND ITS MANY SUPPORTERS.

A truck and two cars—including the rusted red Plymouth—were parked in the yard. Seven or eight monks in cowls were swarming over the house or carrying building materials. They were reinforcing the walls and also installing a new roof deck and shingling as they went.

A monk came to see what we wanted.

"R. N. Renkle," I said.

The monk shouted, "Dick!"

A tall, slender monk on the roof turned, answered the shout with a wave, and descended the ladder, taking every other rung. He strode toward us. He was a pleasant-looking young man in his mid-twenties.

"We're looking for R. N. Renkle," I said.

"I'm Dick Renkle."

"A truck of yours was involved in an accident over in Georgia. We'd like to confirm the ownership and find out a few things about it."

"A truck of mine?" He shook his head. "No—no one went to Georgia today. We're all at work except for Marty Quint, who has KP duty."

"An old Dodge truck, dark blue, Alabama license number—"

He was nodding. "That's mine. We used it yesterday to haul a load of building supplies and shingles from Huntsville, but right now it's parked behind the barn."

"Would you mind showing it to us?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, but I can't take the time now. It may rain this evening. We have to get this roof on. Just ask Marty. He'll show it to you."

The Alabama deputy spoke up. "This is a serious matter, Mr. Renkle. Two men have been killed."

"I see. All right, I'll come with you."

He drove the rusted red car. We followed him back to the sprawling farmhouse and past it to a drive that led up to the barn. The KP monk, Marty Quint, saw us arriving. He stood on the house's rear stoop and watched curiously. There was nothing behind the barn except tracks that showed where a vehicle had been parked.

Renkle turned and dashed toward the house at a run. When we overtook him, he was questioning Quint, who stoutly maintained he hadn't heard a thing.

"No one could start that motor without your hearing it," Renkle fumed.

"Behind the barn, they could," Quint said. "If it's gone, they did."

Renkle turned to us. "I'm sorry. The truck should be here. It isn't. That's all I know. It was worth very little. I only carried liability insurance. You say two men were killed?"

"They ran off a mountain road," I said. "The truck caught fire."

"That's terrible. But there's nothing I can tell you. I have no idea who took it."

"Did anyone other than your monks use it?"

"Not to my knowledge. Sometimes we've left it parked at the woodlot, and our vehicles are often left overnight or over the weekend at jobs we're working on, but we've never had any trouble. The truck is old and didn't even run well. If someone wanted to steal something, there are far better vehicles around."

"Do you ever lend your vehicles?" I asked.

"Never." He turned to the Alabama deputy. "What do you want me to do?"

"Since the truck is gone and you didn't give anyone permission to use it, I'd suggest you report it stolen," the deputy said.

"All right. I will."

We thanked Renkle and the Alabama deputy and returned to my car. "What an odd setup!" the Georgia deputy exclaimed. "I've heard of these characters. They're in the charity business. They go around

helping people. They have a lot of supporters, and everyone thinks highly of them."

"Not everyone," I said. "I don't. Their charity business is just a cover for whatever else they're up to, and that isn't good."

13

On Saturday morning I attended two funerals. Joseph Egglestone Johnston Murphy's identity hadn't yet been verified, but the Johnstons had claimed him, and that was enough to fill the Village church. The two phony grandchildren, Miss Raina and Joe Murphy's pretended brother, Al Murphy, sat with Miss Laurette and the General. So did Nell Troppit, the witch. Drew Fithie observed the new Era of Good Feeling by bringing his wife, son, and daughter-in-law, but he refused to close any of his businesses for a Johnston funeral—even though there would be few customers until it was over—so Dori Vinick had to watch from across the highway. After the ceremony in the church, we gathered in the cemetery and saw the body of Joe Murphy committed to the Johnston family plot.

With violence striking ever closer to them, Miss Laurette had felt fearful about taking the General to a public gathering. Raina Lambert consulted me. I still thought the murderer would be highly solicitous of the General's health as long as there were other heirs with whom the estate would have to be shared, but as yet I had no explanation for the Yankee sharpshooters. We compromised. The General attended, but Ed Schaffer, Greg Reid, and I, along with four security guards, took up strategic positions inside and outside the church, and there were two patrol cars parked nearby.

After Joe Murphy's funeral, a number of us, including members of the Johnston household, traveled to Napoleon Corners, where another funeral took place at the tiny church used by the monks. Brother Pine, whose real name was John Dimmock, was burying his brother,

Jim, the man whose body I had found in the uniform of a Civil War soldier. Brother Mulberry made a short but moving address about the stranger, unknown to us in life, whom the people of the Corners were taking in for all of eternity. A tearful Brother Pine shared a few memories of Jim. Then the coffin was carried out for interment in the diminutive churchyard where fewer than twenty burials had preceded it.

Brother Pine had tidied up the little cemetery, and with the help of May and Duff Schaffer he had located two unmarked graves and placed wood crosses on them. When Miss Laurette heard what he was doing, she supplied flowers for all of the graves as well as a magnificent blanket of roses for his brother's coffin. The almost forgotten burial ground suddenly bloomed like a garden spot amidst its bleak Corners surroundings.

After the ceremony, Brother Mulberry spoke to Ed Schaffer. "Have the two men who died in the truck been identified?"

Ed nodded. "Yeah. It was like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. Teeth, prints from one hand that didn't get burned badly, ID from a wallet that survived, it all added up. Both of them were from New York. They were wanted on multiple counts of armed robbery and murder."

"How inexpressibly sad! Their lives of evil culminated in their own violent deaths. We can only pray that the Almighty granted them thoughts of repentance at the end. Could we bury them here?"

"I don't know," Ed said. "They probably have families in New York. Of course it would cost money to take them back there. If you really want them, I'll let the New York police know someone here is willing to assume responsibility for their burial."

"We'll build the coffins ourselves and dig the graves," Brother Mulberry promised. "And we'll pray for them. It sounds as though they have desperate need of our prayers."

The mourners had been invited to High Acres for lunch. I begged a sandwich from May Schaffer instead and ate it in my cabin while I meditated. The case seemed to have got away from me, just as Tisha had. I worried about the girl and tried to think myself back into the case at the same time.

Raina Lambert had asked me to telephone her at two o'clock. On

my way to the Village, I saw a frustrated-looking Professor Endford seated by the gravel road. I stopped to ask him how his search was going.

"The battlefield isn't where the General said it was, and it isn't where I thought it was. I wish I could ask the General a few questions, but he won't talk with me."

"Go back to the university and see if you can turn up something new about the court-martial of General Leonidas Polk after the Battle of Chickamauga," I suggested. "As I remember it, there's a controversy about which officers took part. If you can catch the General's interest with something, he'll talk with you."

Endford shook his head. "I'm sure Polk deserved it, and it's too late to reverse the verdict now. That kind of research doesn't interest me. I like to get away from libraries and see the ground where things happened."

I wished him luck and drove on to the Village. Mrs. Ingram greeted me with a smile, turned off the TV in the living room where the telephone was located, gathered up cards from a coffee table, and transferred her game of solitaire to the kitchen, where she had a second TV set.

I telephoned Raina on her private line. "New piece for the puzzle," I said. "Selwyn Endford is no more a history professor than I am."

"I'd say he's considerably less. They've never heard of him at the University of Georgia. How did you find it out?"

"Any Civil War buff from the South, let alone a professor in that subject, would know General Leonidas Polk was never court-martialed. Bragg preferred charges against him, but the War Department wouldn't consider them. Eventually Polk was killed in action and died a hero. Endford is a complete *dummkopf* in Civil War history. When I mentioned the court-martial, he said it was too late to reverse the verdict now."

"Fancy that. This puzzle has too many pieces. Now I suppose we'll have to find a way to keep an eye on Endford."

"The General knew he was a fake. After a brief conversation, he called him stupid and refused to have anything more to do with him. Probably he caught him in several misstatements like that, but people automatically assume it's the General who's cracked."

She had been attempting to learn something about the Brotherhood of Saint Giles. "It isn't anything like the Brotherhood of the Reborn," she said. "It doesn't hold religious services, and the monks use their own names. Saint Giles is the patron saint of cripples and beggars but also of poor people because the saint considered poverty and suffering to be a service acceptable to God. This Alabama brotherhood is a noble experiment. These young men have volunteered two years of their lives to help the unfortunate. Renkle is the boss. He raises money, buys supplies, and plans the work."

"Tell me what his rusted red Plymouth was doing in Chattanooga," I said.

"The monks scout around and find deserving poor people who need help, and they help them. No questions asked. They raise the money and do whatever is necessary. They clean and fix and repair. They provide nursing care for invalids. They build ramps and install special bathroom fixtures and doors wide enough for wheelchairs. They pay their own living expenses, and every penny donated to them is used for charity. Not only that, but they'll tell you exactly what your money bought—shingles for Widow Brown's roof, or repairs to the Wilsons' chimney, or a new floor for the Whites' porch—and a local auditor will certify it. A building supply company in Huntsville lets them have building materials at cost, since they're using them for charitable purposes. Because they donate all the labor, your charity dollars do more work through the Brotherhood of Saint Giles than they would in any other way."

"You sound like a testimonial," I complained.

"All of this has been verified. Local authorities scoff at the notion that the brotherhood isn't a genuine charity."

"It hasn't been verified by me. I don't believe their truck was stolen. I know their Plymouth was tailing me in Chattanooga. The charity they perform in Alabama provides excellent cover for the mayhem they commit in Georgia. Which came first—the Brotherhood of the Reborn or the Brotherhood of Saint Giles?"

"The Brotherhood of the Reborn. The Brotherhood of Saint Giles just started operating early this year."

"There you have it. Brother Mulberry's success gave someone the notion that a religious group would be a useful cover. Because it's

located across the state line, it has a certain immunity from Georgian investigations, but its members are close enough to buzz over here on very short notice to make like marching ghosts or do a little sniping."

"Perhaps so. I wanted you to know what a solid reputation the group has."

"Not with me. What else do you have?"

"I tapped the house telephone line," she said. "The one with all the extensions."

"We both should have thought of it sooner. Have you learned anything?"

"Yes. Did I tell you Kolina has been after me to go riding with her?"

"No. It might be useful to win her confidence, but surely you can find some other way to do it. Is she trying to be a pal?"

"She is not. It's the 'Anything you can do, I can do better' syndrome. I have no desire to be a sitting duck on a horse, so I turned her down. Last night she challenged me to a wrestling match."

"I'm sorry I missed it," I said with feeling. A contest between the diminutive redhead, who was all of five feet without her high heels, and the tall Nordic would have been a spectacle. "How long did it take you to pin her?"

"About twenty seconds. I had to do it three times because she didn't want to believe it. After that she invited me again to go riding, but I contrived an excuse. A little while ago, when the funeral crowd had left, Kolina answered the phone—as she usually does when she's in her own office. A man's voice said, 'Kolina?' She said, 'I won't talk.' He said, 'Four-thirty. Better be there.' And hung up. I'm tempted to tell her I've changed my mind about going riding."

"She'd cancel the appointment, and you might not overhear her when she makes another. Did the voice sound familiar?"

"It sounded tinny. There may be something wrong with my tap."

"Do you know where she goes when she rides?"

"All over the place, apparently. Miss Laurette said she knows the estate as well as the General does—from a horse."

"That's rather good for a person who's too frightened to go riding without a gun. The question is how to follow her. A horse would be

conspicuous, and so would I if I were trying to ride one. Keeping up with her on foot on a mountain trail would be strenuous. Any kind of a motor vehicle would be an instant giveaway even if something suitable were available."

"Do the best you can. She's going riding at four. The groom brings her horse over from the stable—not the old stable behind the house, but the new one, which is some distance away. She usually takes the bridle path heading south, but today may be different."

"Got it," I said.

I thanked Mrs. Ingram and drove back to the Corners. Along the way, I suddenly remembered Tad's bicycle. Tailing a horse on a bicycle would be a new experience for me and—considering how steep some of the slopes were—a strenuous one, but I couldn't think of anything better.

I changed my mind when I got a close look at the bicycle. Tad had bought it with his own money, and he hadn't economized. It looked as though it had a dozen speeds forward and four in reverse. I learned bicycling on the old-fashioned kind where one simply gets on and rides. Tad was even less enthused about my borrowing it than I was. He didn't want to lend this sparkling machine to anyone.

"What do you need a bicycle for?" he demanded.

"To ride," I said.

"You got a car and you want to borrow a bicycle?"

I didn't answer. It had suddenly occurred to me that Tad could bicycle after a horse much more ably than I could, and Kolina Kirkland would be far less likely to take alarm if she caught a glimpse of him.

I invited him to my cabin for a top-secret conversation. He scented a mystery, and his eyes gleamed. "Miss Kirkland is going horseback riding this afternoon," I said.

"She goes almost every day."

"I know. Today, she'll leave at four o'clock. She's going to meet someone at four-thirty. I don't know where. I want to know who she meets."

"I can tell you that," Tad said indifferently. "She meets that lawyer guy. Borling."

I wasn't surprised, but I was astonished that Tad knew about it. "Then you've seen them together. Where do they meet?"

He hesitated. "I could show you. It's in the forest."

"Were you able to hear what they were talking about?"

"They weren't talking. They were just—doing what people do there. Kissing, and he was feeling her boobs and stuff."

"How long would it take to walk there?"

"From here? It'd be a long walk from here. Couldn't we take the car? It isn't far from the highway."

"We'll take the car, then. But we'll have to get there early just in case one of them arrives early."

At a quarter to four we were driving along the High Acres estate on Highway 353 a couple of miles south of the Village. Tad pointed out the place where Borling usually left his car when he went to meet Kolina. I drove half a mile further. There was no point in making him suspicious by parking nearby.

"Does everyone know about this?" I asked Tad.

"Not from me," he said. "I don't blab unless there's a reason."

"That's an excellent philosophy," I told him.

I waited for him to ask what "philosophy" meant, but this was the boy who always had his nose in a book. "Naw—it's good business," he said.

The rendezvous was a small clearing that probably saw frequent use as a trysting place. It was a couple of hundred yards from the highway, and the bridle path passed near it. There were old droppings around a sapling where Kolina had tied her horse during previous meetings.

I didn't believe for a moment that she had resumed her juvenile career as a prostitute—her riding costume was inappropriate, and the setting was too public and too uncomfortable. I suspected she and Borling had other business to transact even though they were mixing it with pleasure. I would have preferred a closer place of concealment than the one Tad picked for us, but the forest thinned as it approached the road, and anything nearer would have been risky.

We had been there almost half an hour when Borling pushed into the clearing. He wore slacks, a sport shirt, and a sweater. I wondered what excuse he had given Madge for leaving the office in such attire at this time of day. He sat down on a log at one side of the clearing,

nonchalant and completely relaxed. The meetings had happened frequently enough for him to feel completely secure about them.

Ten minutes passed before we heard a horse approaching. Its hoofs sounded muffled on the soft path. Kolina Kirkland came riding along at a swinging trot, and instead of dismounting, she turned her horse into the clearing. Borling got to his feet when he heard her coming and started forward. He halted with a look of surprise as she rode up to him.

She leaned forward and spat words at him. She kept her voice low, and what she said reached us as a sustained hiss. Twice he tried to interrupt her; the hiss continued.

Abruptly she wheeled the horse about and left. Borling stood for a moment staring after her. Then he turned and started back toward the road. Tad and I were left looking with amazement at the empty clearing.

"I gather their other meetings went differently," I said.

Tad nodded. "She tied up the horse, and they kissed and stuff."

"Did he seem more enthused than she did about the kissing and stuff?"

Tad didn't answer. He hadn't yet reached that age when subtleties in adult behavior become meaningful.

We started back through the woods, following the bridle path for a short distance and then angling off toward the place we had left my car. Suddenly I heard someone talking quietly nearby. I raised my hand to halt Tad, and with him on my heels, I gingerly worked my way through the undergrowth and the fallen twigs and branches toward the voices, placing each foot with care.

I was discovering surprising undercurrents in this quiet rural setting. There were actions and interactions I hadn't even suspected.

Finally I worked myself close enough to see a man and woman seated on a log. Their backs were turned toward us, and they were talking so quietly that I couldn't make out words. The woman's voice sounded vaguely familiar. When she turned her head, I recognized Belinda Wassler. I had never seen her wearing slacks before. The man was wearing a neat business suit.

They talked for a few minutes longer, and then they got to their

feet and walked away side by side. He was shorter than she was, and slightly built, and he looked like a midget beside the much taller, stocky Belinda. Their manner, their attitude toward each other, puzzled me. The hardworking Belinda certainly was entitled to a little romance in her life, but these two were behaving unlike any courting couple I had ever seen. There was a suggestion of long-standing familiarity, but at the same time they were being ridiculously formal. They acted like a couple who had decided, after many years of marriage, to call the whole thing off and just be friends.

They parted without a kiss or even a handshake. They exchanged nods; she turned and walked away. He looked after her for a moment, and then he turned in the opposite direction.

Not until then did I see his face. It was a revelation though I had no idea of what. I had seen him in Alabama only the day before, performing KP duty for the Brotherhood of St. Giles. He was the bespectacled Marty Quint.

When they were out of hearing, I asked Tad, "Did you ever see them together before?"

He shook his head.

"Do you know the man?"

He shook his head again. "He isn't from around here."

We returned to my car. During the ride back to the Corners, I encouraged Tad to confide all the gossip he knew about courting couples who used the forest. He imparted a few choice items about high school students, but he knew very little about adults. Either the Village was an unusually moral place, or Tad was much too busy to be a Peeping Tom. Or perhaps the adults had access to more private meeting places.

I let Tad out at the Corners and paid him generously. Then I drove back to the Village. I had the frustrated feeling of having been operating on the wrong wavelength ever since my arrival. Perhaps local gossip would provide me with other material if I found a way to tap it. I stopped at the Snack and Dessert Bar and invited Dori Vinick to dinner at the Corners.

She shook her head. "The people who usually help out with Auntie and Nunks aren't available on Saturday night. I have to cook dinner for them and put them to bed. It takes all evening."

"Then you're stuck here until you close at six—"

"I have to clean this place after I close. I don't get away until almost seven. Don't worry about it. I'd be too tired to go out anyway."

"Why don't we do it this way," I said. "I'll be at your place promptly at seven with a take-out meal from the Corners. We'll have dinner with your aunt and uncle. No arguments, now. I can't promise you a carefree evening, but at least you won't have to cook, and you may get a laugh out of it. I'll see you at seven."

My next stop was Ellen Ingram's house, where I called Raina again. I described the two rendezvous Tad and I had witnessed, Kolina Kirkland and Borling, and Belinda Wassler and her friend.

Raina was astonished. "Belinda and one of the monks from Alabama? I do hope there's a simple explanation. She and her brother seem to be as uncomplicated as anyone I've met here. As for Kolina—my researcher in Boston hasn't turned up any kind of a connection with the Johnstons."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "The only thing we have on Borling is that he chases girls, which fits what I saw today. He was Kolina's attorney when she was arrested as a juvenile. Somehow he kept in touch with her, and when Miss Laurette needed a private secretary, he maneuvered her into the job. Probably his only motive was to provide some kind of local diversion for himself when he couldn't get to Atlanta. Knowing what he did about Kolina's background, he could blackmail her into granting favors. Eventually she had enough of it, and she told him so today. Her whole attitude said, 'Publish and be damned.' As I mentioned some time back, Borling isn't a nice man."

"No doubt, but we're not investigating his sex life. So far there isn't a scrap of evidence to make a murderer of him."

"After seeing the two of them together, I'm certain he hasn't been committing murder for Kolina. I'm also certain he didn't kill Joe Murphy. That was a stupid murder. It focused police attention on everything happening around the Johnston family. Now the family is warned and wary, the police are alerted, and there still is no proof that Murphy was a Johnston. During the funeral today, I asked myself whether a clever attorney would mess up something he'd been working on for years with a rash murder, and I answered that he wouldn't. He certainly knew Miss Laurette well enough to predict how she

would react. He knew she had influence and would use it, and a vigorous police investigation would be the last thing he wanted at this stage. So he didn't murder Murphy. Murphy's death doesn't make sense no matter how I look at it, but as you've already mentioned, there's an element of irrationality about this case."

"There is. I'll remind you, though, that the most insane crime may seem logical enough to the person who commits it."

I drove back to the Corners for a conference with May Schaffer.

"Tessie and Ned are dear people," she said. "They never had much money, but they came here once in a while before they got crippled. I know what they like. Ned could eat fried chicken all day, every day. Tessie hates it. A nice, tender, marinated steak is the thing for her. Dori? I worry about Dori. She doesn't look as though she eats enough to keep herself alive. I don't know what would tempt her. But don't worry, I'll do my best. What kind of pie do you want?"

"Every kind," I said.

Her best was very good indeed. When it was ready, Duff packed my car with boxes, and the blend of enticing aromas made me drool all the way to the Village. I arrived at the tiny cottage of Dori's aunt and uncle precisely at seven.

Dori greeted me with a smile. "They're excited," she said. "So am I. This has never happened to us. Come and meet Auntie and Nunks."

Ned Snell was partially paralyzed from a stroke. Tessie had looked after him until her arthritis became so bad she could neither walk nor use her hands. Both were confined to wheelchairs. They watched wide-eyed as Dori arranged the laden platters and serving dishes on the table. Dori wheeled their chairs into position, we took our places beside them, and Nuncle Ned intoned the grace. "We offer thanks, O Lord, for the food we're about to eat, for the friendship that brought us together, and for the love that sustains us. Amen."

The invalids were bright, alert, cheerful, grateful to be alive despite their infirmities. Tessie was exceptionally tall for a woman, but she looked paper-thin. Her hands were claws. Her thin face crinkled with pain when she tried to move, but her smile was bright. Ned was short and fat, and his weight made his body difficult to manage. His left arm and leg were paralyzed, which caused special problems because he was left-handed.

I fed Aunt Tessie, and while I cut her steak for her, I joked with Nuncle Ned about how large the pieces should be to fit her mouth comfortably. He maintained I was making them much too small. Dori fed him. We also fed ourselves, and with the slow eating and the considerable talking all of us did, dinner was a marathon affair. We spent almost three hours at the table, stuffing ourselves and them, and I enjoyed every bit of it.

Midway through the meal, I said casually, "I saw Leland Borling in the forest today with Miss Laurette's secretary, Kolina Kirkland."

I thought I was dropping a bomb, but Tessie and Ned both nodded gravely. Tessie said, "Poor Madge. I wonder why she puts up with it."

"Because she has a couple of kids, that's why," Dori said angrily, and Ned nodded wisely.

"Does she know?" I asked.

"She must know something is going on," Tessie said. "All those trips he takes to Atlanta. Business trips, he says. With the little law he practices, he can't have much business in Atlanta."

"Then he must be practicing something else there," I said. "Those games are usually expensive. Where does he get the money?"

"We've wondered about that," Ned said. "They say he inherited money from his father, who was a rich doctor, and maybe he made a lot of money in Atlanta before he came here. Of course the General pays him well for the little work he does, but the rest of his practice doesn't amount to a hill of beans. A deed to search or a will to draw now and then. People in these parts can't afford to be buying and selling much property, and most of us haven't got anything to will. Except for the Johnstons, the only local person who has any need for a lawyer is Drew Fithie, and Fithie won't have anything to do with him."

"He does well with divorces," Dori said dryly. "That part of his business isn't likely to play out, either. There are plenty of bad marriages here and more happening all the time."

"Even so, Kolina is a bit old for him," Ned said. "People claim he's been seen in Atlanta with girls that look like they're too young for high school. Chattanooga, too."

"He's headed for a pack of trouble," Tessie said.

"If variety is so important to him, how'd he happen to marry Madge?" I asked.

"No idea," Ned said. "Usually when a man is still a bachelor at forty, he's learned how to defend himself against such silliness, but Borling went and married an empty-headed chit without a thing to recommend her. She was just a stupid adolescent with a pretty face, which is a lousy qualification for marriage to a middle-aged professional man. She's got no education, no skills, no talent. I'd think she'd be the dullest wife imaginable for him. I don't know why he married her."

"How does he attract these young girls?" I asked. "He certainly doesn't project the rock star image that's supposed to appeal to them."

"That's another mystery," Ned said.

They talked on. Not only did they know everything about everyone, but they knew the entire history of everything about everyone. The soap operas that enriched their lives were not taken from television but from the inexhaustible kaleidoscope of Village gossip. I only had to offer a name, and they gleefully told me all about the person. The entire Village either reported or confessed to them regularly. They knew the connections, legitimate and illegitimate, of every servant at High Acres. They knew who was stepping out on wives or husbands, and who wasn't, and who should have been. I had to trust to my memory to record the items that sounded promising. If I had taken out my notebook, that would have silenced them.

"You make the Village sound like a hotbed of sin," I complained jokingly.

Ned guffawed. "It's a natural process. I've even heard that Nell Troppit meets a man in the forest."

I tried to imagine the superbly proper witch in a romantic tryst and failed. "No," I said. "I can't believe that. Why would she? If she's given to romancing, she can do it much more comfortably at the Witch's Circle. Any man she was interested in could call on her as a client and pretend he was getting treatment for a sore throat or an ingrown toenail. She must have been out collecting herbs and chanced to meet someone."

"I guess she must have been, at that," Ned agreed.

I asked about Drew Fithie's son and daughter-in-law.

"That Desmond Fithie might have been a nice boy if he'd had a decent father," Tessie said. "As for Lana, everyone likes her, but no one knows anything about her background, and the Fithies certainly aren't telling."

"Desmond met her at the university," I said.

"So they say. He wouldn't have married her if he hadn't known it would make his father furious. They seem to be getting along, though."

"No trysts in the woods for them?"

"They've only been married a year and a half. They're still trysting with each other."

"It's much more convenient that way," I said. "What about Al Johnston? Did he go trysting in the woods?"

"No one would tryst anywhere with Al," Dori said.

"This afternoon, I saw Belinda Wassler in the woods with a man."

Disbelief touched their faces. "What man?" Ned demanded.

I shook my head. "Tad Williams was with me, and he didn't know him, so it wasn't anyone from around here."

"I wonder how Belinda managed to get acquainted with him," Tessie said. "She never goes anywhere. She's such a good girl. Such a hardworking girl. I do hope she finds the right person."

"A real good-hearted girl," Ned agreed. "She looked after us a couple of times when our neighbors were busy. We stopped asking her because it was time taken from her own work, and she wouldn't charge anything. There aren't many like Belinda."

There weren't many like Ned and Tessie. When we finally finished eating, I helped Ned into the tub for a real bath, something he rarely was able to enjoy because the bathtub was awkwardly situated and few people could manage his compact bulk in that difficult, slippery maneuver. He soaked delightedly. While I looked after him, Dori was giving her aunt a sponge bath.

We put them to bed, finally, and Dori helped me repack the dirty dinner dishes and silver into the same boxes I'd brought them in. I almost had to do battle to keep her from washing them. We packaged the considerable amount of leftover food for the refrigerator and the freezer.

"You were wonderful with Nuncle Ned," Dori said. "It was a fabulous evening for both of them. They haven't had one like it for years. They'll talk about it forever."

"I'm sorry I couldn't create a wonderful evening for you," I said.

"But you did. I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone. I never knew my father. My mother raised me, but she was ill much of the time. Auntie Tessie is my mother's sister, and it was she and Nuncle Ned who supported us. This house will tell you they've never had much wealth. The reason is because they shared their small income with us. We couldn't have survived without them. When I finished high school, they took their savings—all of it—and put me through secretarial school. I never knew that until long afterward. Life has played a cruel trick on them, leaving them helpless, but while I'm alive, it's never going to leave them alone."

"I understand," I said.

It would have been silly to pretend this was a normal date. She was dreadfully tired, almost out on her feet. Even if she hadn't been, she was Mark Wassler's girl, and—as everyone in the Village knew—eventually he would convince her of that, by which time I would be working on another case in Spokane or Bangor.

I took the boxes to the car and then came back to wish Dori good night. I tilted her chin up and kissed her lightly on the nose.

"Did you get what you wanted?" she asked suddenly.

"I've had a wonderful evening, too," I said. "It would be rank selfishness to expect more than that."

"You're a police officer, aren't you?"

"Why do you think that?"

"I may be tied down, but I know what goes on. You're right in the middle of everything that happens."

"I'm not a police officer," I said. "I just happen to be unlucky that way. May and Duff have been worried about these nighttime happenings. They feel better with someone staying there. As long as I have to be in this part of the country, why shouldn't I help my cousin?"

"I don't believe it. No one has a cousin who helps that efficiently."

"Sometime when you're wide awake, with no worries about getting up in the night to help invalids or calling home to make certain

they're being looked after properly, I'll tell you all about me—and bore you to death."

I left her laughing, which was the best possible ending.

14

I was still pondering the gossip Ned and Tessie had told me when I rounded a curve and glanced up to admire the magnificent High Acres facade. On this particular stretch of the gravel road, it was a dazzling sight from dawn until the floodlights were turned off at midnight. I took one glance and brought the car to a sudden, skidding halt. The mountaintop was dark. There were no floodlights. No glimmer of light showed anywhere.

That was impossible. Even after the floodlights were turned off, light could be seen in one window or another until the last resident had retired. Now there was nothing at all, and it wasn't yet midnight.

My first impulse was to take the turn to High Acres and charge to the rescue, but I would have been an easy target driving up that narrow, winding, climbing road, and I remembered the roofing nails Kolina Kirkland mentioned. Two good operatives and Raina Lambert—who was a superb one—were already there, along with the six security guards. For the moment they didn't need me, and there was plenty I could do where I was.

I turned around and drove back to the Village. Ellen Ingram was ready for bed, and she donned a voluminous wrapper over her nightgown to come to the door. She peered out suspiciously.

"Sorry to bother you," I said. "An emergency has come up."

I dialed the High Acres telephones, one after the other: Raina Lambert's private phone, Miss Laurette's private phone, the old phone with extensions. They rang and rang and rang, and I knew that no phone would be allowed to ring unanswered in that house.

The telephone is a low-tech instrument in a high-tech world. The

"ring" you hear when you place a call is not made by the telephone you are calling. It is feedback provided by the phone company to let you know their equipment is sending the necessary electrical impulse to make a telephone ring. Even if the phone you are calling is disconnected, you will still hear that feedback. Finally I gave up and called Ed Schaffer at home. "The lines have been cut to High Acres," I said. "The electricity is off and the phones are dead."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Guarding that place will be quite an assignment—especially at night—but we'll have to make the effort. I'm on my way."

"They should be able to hold the fort temporarily with what they've got," I said. "I'm going to take a careful look at the situation before I join them. This could be someone's perverted idea of an early Halloween prank, but my instinct is to treat it seriously. Meet me at Drew Fithie's General Store as soon as you can."

I next called Drew Fithie. "J. Pletcher," I said. "An emergency has come up, and I need your help. Can you meet me at your General Store right away?"

He surprised me. He didn't even ask what the emergency was. "Sure thing," he said and hung up.

Probably I had surprised him. His reputation was such that it could have been years since anyone asked a favor of him.

I thanked Mrs. Ingram and rushed away.

There were exterior security lights around the Fithie commercial buildings and dim night-lights inside. The headlights of Drew Fithie's car were approaching from the opposite direction when I reached the store. He jumped out and asked, "What's up?" He had pulled trousers and a jacket on over his pajamas.

"There may be trouble at High Acres," I said. "Can you open the store? I need to buy a few things."

He nodded and got out his bunch of keys.

Amidst the clutter of this, that, and everything else the store offered for sale, I had seen a pair of walkie-talkie hand radios displayed among the toys. "Got any more?" I asked Fithie.

"Yeah. Unfortunately. I ordered them last Christmas and only sold one pair. I been thinking I ought to mark them down and try to get

rid of them. Nine ninety-five a pair, you can have them for six. But they haven't got much range. What do you want them for?"

"The telephone and power lines to High Acres have been cut. There may be other funny stuff going on. They need a way to communicate."

"You want regular walkie-talkies," he said. "They cost more, but the range is much better." He led me to the sports department at the other end of the store and handed me one. "These are thirty-five bucks each. I sell a few every fall to hunters."

It was a larger, much sturdier instrument and of far better quality than the toy. "How many have you got?" I asked.

"I'll look." He went behind the counter and opened a sliding door. "I count seven here. That makes eight in all."

"I'll take them," I said. "I hope they're all on the same frequency."

"They all have Channel 14 crystals. You can add two more channels if you want to buy crystals for them."

"One will do for tonight. Let's put some batteries in and see if they work."

They did work, and Fithie thought the range ought to be good from the High Acres mountaintop. We were trying them out when Ed Schaffer arrived. He took in the situation with a glance and nodded his approval.

I had seen some small police-type whistles at the toy counter. There were twenty-one left in the box, and I bought them all. I also took two dozen flashlights, with batteries, and plenty of extra batteries—all that Fithie had—for them and for the walkie-talkies.

I handed him my credit card, and he wrote out the bill. "First time anyone ever got me out of bed to do five hundred dollars worth of business," he said with a grin. "I'm giving you a ten percent discount."

"I would have been willing to pay extra for the service," I told him. I signed the credit slip and took my copy. Fithie packed everything into two large boxes, and Ed and I picked them up and started for the door.

Fithie hurried after us. "Look," he said. "If they got real trouble up

there—I mean, if you need manpower—I can round up some employees to help. I can get my neighbors out of bed, too."

I turned to Ed. "I think maybe he's got something. A private army could be exactly what this problem needs."

"I'll get as many men as I can," Fithie promised. "All of 'em have guns." He locked the door after us and hurried toward his car.

"Bring them back here," I called. "Someone will be here to tell you what to do."

"Are you trying to get half the Village killed off?" Ed demanded. "I've seen some of those clowns hunt, and I wouldn't send them out at night with anything more lethal than grease guns."

"That's easily regulated. Make them keep their guns unloaded until they're needed. A show of force is the important thing. Someone thought there'd be nobody at High Acres tonight but old people, frightened servants, and a few bewildered guests. Raina Lambert will have a surprise or two ready, and Fithie's army—complete with guns—will provide a bigger one. Whoever planned this thing isn't going to wait around to see whether the guns are loaded."

"Maybe so. Okay, I'll take charge of whatever Fithie comes up with. I'll have to wait here anyway. We only have two cars on the road at night, and I told both of them to meet me here."

I gave him one of the radios. "If you're thinking of taking a car up to High Acres, remember they've had trouble with roofing nails on the drives. A car wouldn't be of any use up there anyway except for the radio, and a car halfway up the mountain with flat tires would be of no use at all. If these walkie-talkies work, I suggest you keep your cars down here on the road. Whoever is causing the trouble will have to make a getaway sooner or later."

"Are you going up there now?"

"I have a quick errand at the Corners. Along the way, I'll look in on your parents and make certain they're okay. Then I'll go up."

"Someone ought to check on Nell Troppit. If the lines to High Acres have been cut, her phone and electricity will be out, too, and she's some distance from the house and all alone."

"I'll take care of it."

I drove south and took the turn to the Corners. As I passed the High Acres drive, I heard gunshots reverberating down the

mountainside. I drove faster. There was no point in my galloping into battle until I had enough resources to make a difference.

When I turned in at the General Store and Café, Duff came charging out. "Ollie Kidgell rode down here on a horse with a message for you. All the lights are off at High Acres and the phones don't work. Miss Laurette thinks the wires were cut. They were afraid to use a car because the roads down the mountain probably have nails sprinkled on them. Also, Miss Raina thought a car might be ambushed. Ollie used bridle paths instead of the roads, and from here he went to the Village to call the power company and the telephone company."

"They don't make service calls at this hour, not even for the Johnstons," I said. "Did Miss Laurette send any instructions for me?"

"Nope. I guess she figured you'd know what to do and do it."

"I'm doing it. I stopped by to make certain no one is cutting up around here." I gave him one of the walkie-talkies with an extra set of batteries and showed him how to use it. "Ed has one at the Village, but I don't think you can reach him from here. A little later he'll be moving this way." I looked at my watch. "In half an hour, turn it on and leave it on. As soon as I get to High Acres, I'll give you a call."

To save time, I drove to the monks' community. One of Brother Mulberry's sentries saw my car bouncing along the rutted road, and the entire brotherhood was drawn up and waiting when I pulled up. The moment had come to make up my mind about Brother Mulberry, and I decided to trust him completely. I had no choice.

I told him about the cut wires.

"What do you suggest?" he asked.

"High Acres is vulnerable," I said. "It's a difficult place to guard."

"We'll all go up there," Brother Mulberry announced.

"That would leave the Corners unguarded. I suggest you keep five men here, send three to Duff, and let me take eight. Duff has a walkie-talkie. High Acres can ask for more help if it needs it or send help if you need it. Ed Schaffer has some deputies coming, and Drew Fithie is collecting volunteers in the Village. We'll soon have things under control."

Brother Mulberry shouted names. "Go with him and do whatever he tells you." Four crowded into my car. The others were to start walking, and I would return for them after I dropped off the first four.

Brother Mulberry was already on his way to the General Store and Café with the three monks who would reinforce Duff. For the moment, at least, things were nicely under control at Napoleon Corners.

I took the four monks as far as the High Acres drive and went back to pick up the others. Then I parked my car off the road, locked it, and distributed my purchases among the eight monks and myself. We blindly plodded and perspired our way up the dark, steep, winding drive to the mansion. The monks had mastered the discipline of silence; they said nothing at all, which is an excellent thing when you would like to keep your arrival a secret until you get there. I thought it best not to show a light until we reached the top. I had heard no more gunshots.

Eventually the drive intersected the one that came up from the highway. We panted around the final loop and emerged in the formal garden, which looked ghostly in the darkness. I began flashing my penlight.

Greg Reid's voice called, "Who is it?"

"Pletcher," I called back. "With reinforcements."

"Good show. We were beginning to feel lonely."

He stepped out to meet us. "I take it you got the message."

"Yes, but I'd already noticed the lights were out and tried to telephone. Did anyone think to ask why High Acres doesn't have its own generator?"

"It does have one, but we couldn't start it. It may have been sabotaged. With a little work I might get it running, but lights make good targets, so Raina decided to keep the house dark. The jerks responsible for this can't do anything without moving around, and we can sit still and wait. They're bound to be a lot more conspicuous than we are."

"I heard shots a short time ago."

"Someone came strolling up the drive. When he was challenged, he fired. I gave him a volley to make certain there was no misunderstanding, and we've had no trouble since."

"Then he's still out there with a gun, and there's no telling how much company he has."

"I said we were beginning to feel lonely."

I turned on the radio I was carrying and asked, "Are you there, Ed?"

"I'm still parked at the general store. I have a patrol car at the Corners Road intersection. When the other one arrives, I'll cover both the High Acres drives. What do you want me to do with Fithie's recruits? I already count twenty-five, and they're panting for action."

"I'm at High Acres, and I brought eight of Brother Mulberry's monks with me. He stayed at the Corners with the other seven. Three of them are with your parents."

I described the gunfire. Ed said, "I was going to bring you a portable generator and some floodlights, but maybe you're better off without them."

"I'm sure we are. When I've looked the situation over, I'll call again."

Duff's voice cut in. "I heard that. Everything is quiet here."

May wanted to talk with her son on the radio, but the range of about four miles with a mountain between them made that impossible. I handed a walkie-talkie to Greg and went to the house to announce my arrival. The monks trailed after me. A woman's voice with an Irish twang challenged us as we approached the door. It was Becky Barrett, the Johnston's maid. I asked her to pass the word that Mr. Pletcher had arrived with eight men, walkie-talkie radios, and plenty of extra flashlights and batteries. High Acres was in touch with the outside world again.

"Goodness, aren't you the hero!" she exclaimed.

We unloaded those supplies that wouldn't be needed immediately, and then Greg and I walked the defense line Raina had set up. This included the old stable and the outbuildings at the rear of the mansion. Servants and security men had been positioned at strategic places. Paul Dugas, the phony Al Murphy, was in charge there; Greg supervised the line in front. Raina commanded everything. I gave a radio to Paul, and we filled in the most serious gaps with monks, distributing whistles along the way. One long blast would mean DANGER—HELP NEEDED NOW. Several short chirps would sound an alert. Other signals could be invented as needed.

We made the complete circuit. Then, with the defense line as secure as I could make it, I headed for the house.

Raina had forbidden the use of light except in the kitchen and in a sitting room on the second floor. She had carefully blacked out the windows in both places and hung blankets on either side of the doors so people could come and go without letting light escape. There was a fire in the sitting room fireplace and hot water in an iron kettle suspended over it. A commissary department was being run by old Martha, an elderly black maid who had been with the Johnstons ever since they moved south. She wore a long flannel robe and had her hair done up in rags, and she looked old enough to have been around since the Emancipation Proclamation. Her dignity was as impressive as her serenity, but her performance suffered somewhat because of her deafness, which was likely to translate an order for coffee into a bag of potato chips. Old Mac, the butler, was just as deaf, but he performed with his usual sedate efficiency despite the fact that he was in pajamas and a robe. He greeted me as a butler should, offered to take my topcoat, and assured me that the General and Miss Laurette, who were seated just behind him, would be pleased to see me. The General was calmly reading a Civil War tome by the light of four candles. Miss Laurette was knitting and taking everything in with a quixotic expression. She had never been under siege before.

"We ought to be terrified," she told me, "but you and Miss Raina handle things so very efficiently it all seems like fun."

She described the fun. Among other things, Kolina Kirkland had been handed the job of organizing the women servants and giving them observation posts at windows and doors. She relieved them periodically so they could go to the kitchen for tea or coffee.

I found Kolina and gave her the remaining whistles to pass out, keeping one for myself and one for Raina, who was out patrolling. Raina had been checking the defense line on the opposite side of the mansion from where I began my own inspection, and when she reached my starting point, she was agreeably surprised to discover the reinforcements I had brought. I finally caught up with her when I returned to the sitting room.

I gave her a whistle and a radio and asked about Nell Troppit.

"I sent one of the servants over there an hour ago to stay with

her," she said. "The stable is our worst problem. Ollie Kidgell is there with his wife. They have a small house nearby. We brought their two children back here, but his wife insisted on staying with him, and he won't leave the horses unguarded. Everyone is dreadfully worried about fire after all the arson cases. They need more people there, but I didn't feel I could spare anyone. Now maybe we can send them a monk or two.

"Even with the reinforcements, we're still spread thin. Why can't they bring the horses here? Surely they could tie them up somewhere until morning. I'll have Greg check on that, and I'll go after Nell and the servant."

Miss Laurette spoke up. "It's a long, roundabout way by road. The paths are much quicker, but you'd better take someone with you who knows them. They can be tricky at night."

"They're tricky enough by daylight," I said. While I waited for my guide, I had another radio conversation with Ed Schaffer. "Is your army ready?" I asked him.

"I count thirty-four. All armed and chomping at the bit."

"Good. Send half of them up each of the High Acres drives. They can meet at the top and take a long break before they march down again. Tell them there'll be coffee and sandwiches waiting for them."

"What's the idea?"

"Show of force. We don't want any trouble. If we have a crowd moving up and down the drives, with guns, the other party may decide he doesn't want any trouble, either."

"It's going to be a tired crowd," Ed said with a chuckle. "I'm not sure Drew Fithie can walk that far, and a couple of the others are just as lame."

"Why don't you set up a guard post at the foot of each drive and put the non-marchers there?"

"Good thought."

I warned Miss Laurette that company was on the way. She was astonished. "Where are all these men coming from?" she asked.

"They're volunteers," I said. "Feed them well, and the next time you have trouble, there'll be twice as many."

I met my guide outside in the dark. His voice sounded at least seventy years old, but when we started out, he went up and down

slopes like a mountain goat. We finally emerged in the clearing where the walk encircled the almost circular house.

There was a candle burning in every window.

Inside, Nell Troppit had already worked her witchcraft on Willard, the elderly servant sent to guard her. There were sandwiches, cookies, and three kinds of cake on a coffee table, and Willard was tilted back in a chair with his shoes off, drinking coffee and munching cake.

Nell greeted us with laughter. "You've come to rescue me! How droll! I was thinking of walking over to High Acres to see whether you people needed help."

I told her about the gunshots. "You're asking for trouble by keeping your windows lighted," I said.

"Nonsense! No one would dare mess with a witch. You think witchcraft is a joke, but it isn't. Anyone who brings an evil intention here is going to be afflicted with more than a guilty conscience."

I urged her to come back with us.

"I couldn't," she said. "This is such a lovely house. I wouldn't want anything to happen to it. It'll be safe as long as I'm here."

She refused to leave.

More than that—she insisted that Willard return with us. "I don't need him," she said. "It's High Acres that's in danger, not the Witch's Circle. What could he do against evil men with guns?"

"What could you do?" I demanded.

She smiled. "Witches have their own defenses."

I have never failed so completely with a mission. I argued and argued, but I couldn't budge her. She even refused to accept one of the radios. "My witchcraft is far more potent than that," she said with a laugh.

Instead of taking her to safety, I was removing her one inadequate guard, but I had no choice. My first obligation was to the General and Miss Laurette and to High Acres. I announced my return via the radio. Willard reluctantly put his shoes back on, and my guide with the decrepit voice and the youthful legs, who had looked older than seventy in the light of Nell Troppit's candles, led us back as quickly as we had come.

We were challenged as we approached the defense line, and I shouted a password: "Witch's Circle!" The sentry blew a series of

chirps on his whistle and waved us through the defense line. It was a one-time password. I hoped someone would overhear us and try to use it again.

Miss Laurette laughed heartily when I told her the witch not only refused to be rescued but insisted on sending her guard back with me. "That's Nell," she said. "And she's right where the local people are concerned. None of them would lift a finger against her. It's outsiders I worry about."

Drew Fithie's army—minus Drew Fithie—arrived in two separate squads of a dozen people each. He had recruited a miscellany of types, even including a few women. Mark and Belinda Wassler were among them, as were Desmond and Lana Fithie. He had got Leland Borling out of bed, and the attorney looked tired and footsore but also smug, as though he were pleased to find another way to earn his retainer. I recognized the barber, the woman who worked in the real estate office, and two men from the gas station.

There was one unexpected face: Jerry Collendon, the alleged reporter. I told him I was surprised to see him.

"I've rented a room in the Village," he said cheerfully. "Fithie called my landlord out, and I came along. I thought there might be a story in it. What's going on?"

"I'm in the dark myself," I said and referred him to Ed Schaffer. We fed the volunteers in the kitchen and sent them back down the mountain loaded with sandwiches and coffee for those at the guard posts below. After a long rest at the bottom, they were to make the climb again.

The next time I visited the blacked-out sitting room, I noticed the General had given up reading. He sat glaring at the ceiling. He was being treated like an elderly invalid—or a child—and he hated it. I asked him if he would like to inspect our defense line. He looked at me in surprise for a moment. Then he sprang to his feet and said, as though he had been waiting for that very invitation all evening, "Of course."

Miss Laurette was at his side immediately with a warning about the cold night air. At first he refused to put on a coat, but I helped him into it with remarks about George Washington and Valley Forge. Before we got started, I explained my radio and let him have a brief

conversation with Ed. "This would have revolutionized the Civil War," I said. "Reinforcements could have been brought to the right place much more quickly, which would have changed the course of several major battles. Jeb Stuart and his cavalry could have been called back in time to be useful when they rode off into the blue at Gettysburg."

The General said testily, "General Stuart was following orders and fighting the Yankee cavalry. But if Pickett could have called for reinforcements when his troops broke the Federal line on Cemetery Ridge, the Battle of Gettysburg certainly would have ended differently."

We talked for a time about Civil War might-have-beens. Then he followed me around the perimeter, keeping to cover like a good soldier and whispering his questions and remarks. The military organization that Paul Dugas and Greg Reid had effected delighted him. He even made a useful suggestion that resulted in shortening our defense line. He knew the ground intimately, and neither Raina nor I had given it sufficient attention.

He wanted to know where I got the whistles and radios so quickly at that time of night. When I described how Drew Fithie had come in his pajamas to open his General Store for me, he smiled but made no comment.

We completed the circuit, and I took him back to the blacked-out room.

The fear of fire persisted—High Acres was a huge wooden house—and Miss Laurette thought it unsafe for anyone to sleep on an upper floor. I was less concerned about people being trapped by fire than having a sniper pick them off as they ran to safety. We improvised dormitories in rooms on the ground floor from which the escape routes seemed the best protected.

"I can't believe this is Georgia at the end of the twentieth century," Miss Laurette said unhappily as we put her, the General, two other elderly people, and all of the children through a fire drill before sending them off to bed.

The next time I went outside it was almost two A.M., and I heard footsteps crunching up the steep drive. Drew Fithie's volunteers were making their second trip.

Miss Laurette had thanked them on their first visit; this time I did the honors in her absence. We entertained them in the kitchen again. They rested and took refreshments, and most of them seemed to be enjoying themselves, tired as they were.

"Belinda and I don't own guns," Mark Wassler told me. "We've never been hunting—we never had time to learn how. But Drew said numbers were the important thing."

"That's right," I told him. "Someone thought High Acres would be isolated and helpless if he cut a few wires. He seems to have faded away the moment he saw it wasn't."

I was tempted to ask Belinda if her boyfriend was still around, but obviously this wasn't the time for it. A detective has two problems. The first is to find out things. The second is to decide when and how to make use of what he has found out.

Mark and Belinda knew all about my dinner date with Dori. Aunt Tessie's life was so devoid of things to talk about that she had got on the phone the moment Dori told her I was coming, and probably the entire county knew about it. They wanted to know what happened, so I described the evening.

"I couldn't have done that," Mark said sadly. "She won't let me help her."

"That's because you want to marry her. She thinks if she shared her responsibilities with you even once, it would be a commitment to go on sharing them. She can be relaxed about accepting a favor from me because I'll only be here a short time."

Belinda placed a hand on my arm. "We can't make her understand. She doesn't have to carry that burden all by herself. Mark and I love her and her aunt and uncle, too. We could be a family. But she won't even let us help her. What would you do if you were Mark?"

I shook my head. "I can't answer that, but I'll tell you what I'd do if I were me with Mark's problem. I noticed you need a new van."

He nodded. "Yes. I've been looking at them for a long time, but I can't make up my mind what to buy."

Belinda gave her brother an affectionate grin. "He's been looking at them for years. We have the money, but the prices still seem like a lot."

"The kind you buy doesn't matter," I said, "but make certain it has

one of those lift mechanisms that are used to transport people in wheelchairs. Then you can start by inviting Dori and her aunt and uncle to try it out just to see whether it works. After that, take them to church, take them to see people, take them to Chattanooga to see things. Think what it would mean to Aunt Tessie to see a shopping mall again."

"But Dori wouldn't let us," Belinda protested.

"Yes, she would. She couldn't deny her aunt and uncle the pleasure of getting away from the four walls they spend their lives staring at. You could show her what it would be like to do things as a family, and in time she might even get the idea that helping her isn't all that much of a burden to you."

Mark was smiling at me. "It's a good thing I really need a van. Dori would be offended if she thought I bought one just for her aunt and uncle."

He put out his hand, and we shook.

When the troops had rested, I sent small groups of them wandering about the forest in all directions, creating as much confusion as possible. Then they marched back down the mountain. I went with them to talk with Drew Fithie, who was on guard where the drive intersected the highway.

"The radios have worked perfectly," I told him.

He beamed at me. "That's what Ed said. I'm going to order more and tell my customers this model is endorsed by the police."

"You're endorsed by the police, too. When we have time, I'd like to hear how you recruited all these people so quickly."

I told Ed Schaffer I thought we had things in hand, now, and he could send Fithie's army home to bed.

"Shucks, they're enjoying it," he said. "Let 'em go on thinking they're useful. All kinds of worthwhile things might come of this. It's the first time in my memory that people hereabouts have done anything together."

"Let them make one more round-trip, then." I glanced at my watch. "About four-thirty."

I made the long climb back to the mansion. When I got there, everything seemed so perfectly under control that I treated myself to

a catnap. I also persuaded Raina to take one. There hadn't been an alarum for hours.

Shortly after three-thirty, when I was starting my next rounds, I heard a car engine straining in the distance. The radio came to life. Ed said, "Someone tore past us and took the High Acres drive. Want us to follow?"

"We'll prepare a reception," I said. "Follow very carefully on foot—and be ready to jump out of the way in case he comes down faster than he went up."

Time passed. No car appeared.

Suddenly my ear caught the crunch of footsteps on the drive. The men posted there had been coached carefully. No one moved until the intruders had walked into our trap. When I took a step forward, everyone closed on them, and we had them surrounded before they were aware of us.

A woman screamed. A man lashed out furiously, striking blows in all directions. It took three of us to subdue him. The woman succumbed without a struggle and stood there sobbing.

"Who are you?" I demanded, rubbing a skinned knuckle.

The figure on the ground struggled to a sitting position. "I'm Al Johnston," he said angrily. "I live here. Who the hell are you, and what are you doing to my wife?"

Explanations and questions erupted on all sides. Someone had tried to stop them down by the highway, Al said, so they made a dash for it, and halfway up the mountain they were brought to a stop by three flat tires. We were still savoring our astonishment when flames leaped wildly above the trees. My first concern was the stable. It took me a moment to get myself oriented and make certain all the High Acres buildings were safe. When I finally got my line of sight adjusted, I experienced a deep and sudden chill.

I called to Greg and Paul and used the radio at the same time. "The Witch's Circle is burning. Bring all the fire extinguishers."

The guide with the elderly voice and the goat's legs started us out at a trot, but now we had leaping flames to guide us, and we soon pushed on ahead of him. When we finally made our last frantic uphill

dash and burst into the clearing, the pleasant, many-fronted house was an inferno.

We circled it, searching futilely for a break in the flames where we could force our way into the house. There was none. We fanned out into the surrounding forest, shouting frantically. There was no response and no sign anywhere of Nell Troppit.

15

Fithie's legion made a forced march and arrived in astonishingly quick time, but there was nothing for it to do but watch. Mark Wassler paced frantically; Belinda had to be restrained. "Nell has been so kind to us," she sobbed. "Can't anyone do anything?"

Even with proper equipment, we would have been too late to save the house.

Or, as it turned out, to save Nell Troppit.

There was one happy face in the crowd. Jerry Collendon was scribbling notes and muttering, "Boy, oh boy! Have I got a story!"

Miss Laurette came, looked at my face, and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Don't blame yourself. When Nell made up her mind, no one could change it. That was her way. You couldn't have brought her back to High Acres unless you tied her up and carried her, and of course you couldn't do that."

It was small consolation that I had done my best to persuade her. I had the bitter aftertaste of an unearned failure.

At High Acres, the atmosphere was funereal. Martha, the elderly servant, became hysterical. Becky sat in the corner sobbing. Even the General's erect back slumped when he heard the news. So much needed explaining that no one knew where to begin. Al Johnston—and his wife, Beth, who was formidably pregnant—weren't told much of anything, and they must have found High Acres under siege to be a bewildering place. They were bedded down in one of the dormito-

ries. It wasn't until hours later that they were able to account for themselves and hear what had been happening.

Their own story was the more astonishing for its simplicity. "We've been living with Beth's parents," Al said. "They're farmers in southern Alabama. We were awakened not long after midnight by a phone call that said, 'Your grandfather is dying. You'd better get home quickly.' "

"What sort of a voice?" Raina Lambert asked.

"A man's voice. I didn't recognize it. I didn't think anyone knew where I was. I tried to telephone and got no answer. I talked it over with Beth, and we decided to do what the man said—get home quickly."

So they made a reckless dash through the night, started up the drive to High Acres, had their three flat tires, and walked the rest of the way. Just as they thought they had arrived safely, we jumped them.

Al was a surprise. He wasn't remotely like the pampered brat I had expected, and he hadn't hesitated to do battle when his wife was threatened. Perhaps marriage had matured him. It certainly had been good for him in other ways. He was tanned and healthy looking, and he had lost weight since his most recent photograph.

The farmer's daughter, an attractive and intelligent young woman, was even more of a surprise. She was a schoolteacher, and they had been married for almost a year. Al described the utterly romantic circumstances under which they had met. He had driven down to Auburn for a football weekend. Then, having nothing much else to do, he drove about aimlessly, lost his way, lost control of his car in a driving rain, skidded off the road, and got stuck in a ditch. Beth happened by, went for a tractor, pulled him out—driving the tractor herself—and took him home to dry.

With her social ease and sharp intellect, the farmer's daughter from the lowlands would have no difficulty adapting to life on a mountaintop. A short time later, I saw her lecturing the General about the Civil War, and he was listening with respectful amusement.

She was attempting to graft a backbone onto her husband, and until she succeeded, she would have to make up his mind for him about anything and everything. She seemed to have the project in

hand. Selling his car had been her idea—part of the switch from "mine" to "ours" that must take place in a successful marriage. Her own car was newer, and she considered one car sufficient.

Either he had lacked the gumption to tell the Johnstons he was married, or he was stubbornly sealing off a bit of life for himself where no maiden aunt or grandfather could meddle. Beth settled that for him when the mysterious phone call came. "Let's go," she said, and they went.

She told me matter-of-factly that Al had been spoiled rotten, and her Mom and Dad were strenuously opposed to her marrying him—they didn't care what a son-in-law *had*, it was what he *was* and what he *did* that were important. In their eyes, Al wasn't anything and did nothing. But Beth and Al were in love, and she thought he had a wonderful potential. Working with his father-in-law had interested him in farming, and he felt that the farms on the Johnston estate could be made far more productive once he learned how to manage them. Now he was getting along well with her father, and he enjoyed being a farmer.

I had never experienced such a momentous anticlimax nor a stranger atmosphere—high tragedy blended with an old-fashioned, everything-comes-out-all-right romance. It was a house full of tears and smiles. Everyone tiptoed and spoke quietly; some of the servants were already wearing black; and even Beth, although she enjoyed the surprise she and Al had achieved as well as the attention showered on them, was feeling downright uneasy about the tense situation they had blundered into.

It was already light outside, and the next day's work was at hand. I found a seat in a corner, put my feet up, unsuccessfully tried to cover a large yawn, and began thinking about things to be done. The telephone and electric companies would repair the cut wires. Greg Reid could have another crack at the malfunctioning generator. If he failed, a different kind of repairman would have to be found. High Acres needed a good citizens band radio with backup batteries. There should be enough sets distributed among Duff and a few other local people to form a network. Mark Wassler could be consulted about that.

Information filtered back to me from time to time about the prog-

ress made by those who were sifting the ashes of the burned house. The fire had been set deliberately, which surprised no one. Nell Troppit's body had been found, a charred, twisted log lying where flames—"of a chemical origin," the investigators said—had burned most furiously. Fortunately none of her friends would have to read the autopsy, which would be full of indelicate descriptions of the distortions intense heat inflicts on a body, probably including an exploded skull. Her ankles had been bound and her wrists tied behind her. With leather thongs. Mercifully, she must have died of smoke inhalation during the fire's early stages.

Her face had been burned beyond recognition. That brought the investigators' worst instincts into play. They wanted to know why everyone was so certain the dead person really was Nell Troppit, and they began inquiries about Nell's dental records. No one knew whether she'd even had a dentist, which of course was another suspicious circumstance. They postponed a decision on the dead woman's identity until the body had been given a thorough forensic examination.

We managed without them. The dead woman's hair—that which hadn't burned because she was lying on it—was white. She was wearing a wedding ring with the engraved message, *ET from RS.* Nell of course was Eleanor Troppit before she married, and Mark Wassler supplied the information that her husband had been named Robert Smith. The experts pointed out that wedding rings are notoriously easy to come by, but the name of Nell Troppit's husband wouldn't have been—not even Miss Laurette had known what it was—and she challenged them to supply a scenario whereby the arsonists just happened to be equipped with a wedding ring engraved with the right initials.

Ed Schaffer settled the matter, at least for the moment. He remembered that Nell had a distinctive bunion on her right foot. Miss Laurette also knew that deformed foot well, as did several others, and the corpse had it. My own theory was that Nell knew the arsonists. They killed her to eliminate a witness and left her in the burning house to make it look as though she had been trapped in the fire, thus demonstrating a singular naïvety about forensic medicine and scientific investigation.

With the coming of daylight, every available officer had been brought in to search the area. One of them found a neat package of six sticks of dynamite, taped together, that had been carelessly dropped in the forest. Ed walked all the way to High Acres to tell me this.

"I don't want to hear about it," I said. "We've had several cases of arson, we've had murders, we've had vandalism, and we've had various flavors of conspiracy. Explosives simply don't fit. Someone got hold of the wrong prop. That's why he dropped it."

But the dynamite certainly had been intended for High Acres, part of a plan that was abandoned when the mansion proved to be too strongly defended.

As the search spread out through the forest, another officer, hearing a faint moan, happened onto a concealed camp with several rough shelters, and in one of them lay Tisha. She had been brutally beaten, and her hands and feet were bound so tightly that doctors feared they might have to be amputated. She was barely alive. The police rushed her to the Tri-County Hospital.

That added to the black bewilderment I was experiencing about Nell Troppit's death. If I hadn't left for Atlanta when I did, Tisha might have stayed with May and done her nighttime roaming under my supervision. I had no doubt about what had happened. She had been caught snooping, and "they" intended to dispose of her later. In the rush of events, they had forgotten about her. She was fortunate they hadn't killed her at once.

Miss Laurette was at my side. She had been a gracious, smiling hostess to Al and Beth, but I knew she was weeping bitterly inside. "Wouldn't you like to lie down?" she asked. "You must be awfully tired. I've sent Miss Raina off to bed. I'm sure the danger is over now."

I shook myself awake. "No, please don't bother about me. A lot of people have been up all night, and they'll have to be looked after. The monks should have breakfast, and then I'll take them home. I'm not ready to call off the watch yet, but now that it's light, we can do with fewer guards. They can take turns having breakfast. I'll get that organized."

When the monks had eaten, I marched the entire contingent down

to the graveled road where I had left my car. Along the way, all of us checked the drive carefully for roofing nails. We found a couple of handfuls. Both drives would have to be swept with a magnet before we could feel secure about them.

I drove the monks home in two installments. Then I went to the Village and told the men at Fithie's Garage to pick up the flat tires from Al's car—which was really his wife's—and repair them. After that, I risked driving up to High Acres on the drive we had collected the nails from. Al was excitedly showing Beth the High Acres gardens while Greg Reid and Paul Dugas discreetly hovered in the background as bodyguards. After I'd had my own breakfast, I reduced the number of guards again and organized a search for roofing nails on the drive down to the highway. As soon as I returned, Raina—who hadn't slept a wink—summoned me for a conference.

"For my first question, I'd like to know how many members of the Brotherhood of St. Giles were home last night," I said.

"Unfortunately, we don't even know how many there are," Raina said. "We don't know whether that place near Norville is the only one they operate. They resented my attempts to find out about them, and their being in Alabama complicates matters."

"Certain routine checks can be made regardless," I said. "For one, telephone bills. We need to know what calls they've been making to Georgia, and whether anyone in this area has been telephoning Norville, Alabama."

"Do you have any kind of a handle on what they were trying to do?" Raina asked.

"It was an elaborate plot that misfired," I said. "That's the only thing that makes sense to me. They were planning to rush the house, perhaps making use of the dynamite, kill Miss Laurette and the two supposed grandchildren, and make a nonfatal attack on the General, thus leaving the impression that someone was trying to wipe out all of the Johnstons."

She nodded. "That's one possibility."

"While that was going on, there was a separate plan for Al and his wife. The conspirators have known all along where he was and what he was doing. He and his wife—and the unborn great-grandchild, who is an additional heir-to-be—were expected to react to the anon-

ymous phone call by driving frantically all the way from southern Alabama, rushing up the mountain, and being brought to a sudden stop by flat tires. With them isolated in the forest and completely helpless, the number of known Johnston heirs could have been reduced to zero with a few gunshots. And that's exactly the way it happened, up to a point. The General was supposed to survive for a time, which meant that the unknown heir wouldn't have had to come forward until later. If he was asked why he'd remained anonymous, he could say he thought it wise after what happened to the other heirs."

"It was set up perfectly," Raina said. "Why didn't they finish it?"

"They hadn't expected to have police cars standing by, squads of local citizens making unpredictable sweeps through the forest, and our own sentries patrolling about. When the attack came, everyone at High Acres was supposed to be shivering in the basement and waiting for the dawn. Instead, a gunshot brought shots in reply, and an army appeared from nowhere and held night maneuvers. So they postponed their iniquity to a more favorable season."

"Then why did they burn the Witch's Circle and kill Nell Troppit? That didn't advance their plan an iota."

"Like everything else that's happened, there's a touch of irrationality about this. Maybe they only did it because they'd been stirring up so much fuss without any results, and they thought they had to do something. We're supposed to sit here puzzling over it until they try again."

Miss Laurette had joined us. "What's the likelihood that Tisha was a Johnston descendant?" Raina asked her.

For a moment I thought Miss Laurette would actually lose her poise and maybe even raise her voice. Then she decided it was funny and laughed. "You do come up with the most remarkable ideas. Her mother was a filthy creature with no morals at all. She also was loony—she escaped being locked up by dying young. I doubt that she or anyone else knew who Tisha's father was. I'd be shocked to learn that one of my brothers had anything to do with her—but even if it were true, how would Tisha go about proving it? There are blood tests, I know, but my brothers are either dead or missing. Tisha would

need an acknowledgement of some kind from her father, and if such a thing existed, the Gump family would have produced it long before now."

"I've been running down our list of suspects," Raina said. "Kolina Kirkland was here with us when the lights went out. So were the servants. You were with Dori. Obviously none of them was out cutting wires. Ollie Kidgell was either here or in touch with us all night. Leland Borling and the Wasslers marched with Fithie's legion. They were at home when Fithie called them and always in sight of someone afterward. Probably none of that matters because hired hands—who may or may not have been members of the Brotherhood of St. Giles—could have done it all."

"This can't go on," Miss Laurette said. "You two have accomplished wonders. I don't know what we would have done without you, but isn't there some way to put an end to it?"

I turned to Raina. "Do *you* know who it is?"

"I thought I did," she said. "I've been waiting for a missing document—Carla Joblan is on the track of it—but last night's performance unraveled several things. Now I'll have to put Humpty Dumpty together again."

"Did you expect an attack on the Witch's Circle?"

"I definitely didn't expect that. Neither did I expect the vicious murder of someone who seems to have no connection with the case." She added thoughtfully, "They did leave us one crack, though."

"Two," I said. "The anonymous phone call to Al, and the fact that someone must have tailed him to Alabama and found out where he went and what he was doing there."

"Both of them should be checked at once," she said. "Today?"

I shrugged. "I suppose."

"Beth can give you directions and let her parents know you're coming. Ed can pass the word to the local law officers."

Miss Laurette was gaping at her bewilderedly.

"If the anonymous telephone call to Al was made by long distance, someone left a fingerprint," Raina explained. "If it was a local call, that's a different kind of fingerprint because strangers are conspicuous in a rural area. Whoever did it must have kept close tabs on Al—

snooped around and checked on him regularly enough to know for certain he would still be there when the call was made. It's worth a look, I think."

It was worth a look only if these particular suspects had been stupid enough to scatter usable evidence all the way to southern Alabama, which I doubted. Questions about the telephone call to Al could have been asked by telephone. But she was the boss, so I kept my reservations to myself. "Do you want me to go now?"

"The trail won't get any fresher."

"Have you wondered why Al and his wife weren't attacked in Alabama? It should have been easier to ambush them down there when they were setting out. They would have been totally unsuspecting."

Raina shook her head. "The stage was set here with red herrings all in a row, so of course this is where the murders had to take place."

Miss Laurette was gaping at her again. "I don't understand any of it, but it's gone on long enough. I want it stopped."

I went to talk with Beth and Al. Beth, whose maiden name had been Firmin, gave me directions and even suggested which neighbors I should talk with. She promised to call her parents as soon as the High Acres phones were connected again and tell them I was coming. When I had everything I needed except a few hours' sleep, I returned to the Corners to pick up a suitcase and tell May and Duff I was off again. They were stricken by the death of Nell Troppit, whom they had known since they were children, and deeply saddened by what had happened to Tisha. They had lost a child of their own, and Tisha's childlike nature had touched them.

I stopped at the gas station to see if Drew Fithie was around, and I encountered Dori, who had come to buy ice cubes. Since it was Sunday, the Sandwich and Dessert Bar was closed. She had read about a treatment with ice bags and thought it might help her Aunt's arthritis.

"Nothing else has worked," she said, "so we might as well try this. I know all about the adventures you had last night."

"How'd you find out so early?" I asked.

"I told you—nothing happens here without Auntie and Nunks hearing about it immediately. Six different people telephoned before

eight o'clock this morning. The Witch's Circle burned and Nell Troppit died in the fire—that's the big news. Tisha Gump was taken to the hospital and may die. I never knew Tisha. Auntie says she's a strange little creature with a warped mind who never did anyone any harm. We're broken up about Nell. People liked her. *I* liked her. She came several times to try herb poultices on Auntie. They didn't help any, but she tried, and she wouldn't take any money. I know she helped a lot of people just by listening patiently to their troubles. She never once told them their messed-up lives were their own damn fault, though she must have been tempted."

"The fire at the Witch's Circle was only part of it," I said.

"I know. Drew Fithie recruited a Home Guard, and the members got to sit in the woods all night and take turns climbing the mountain to High Acres for coffee. I don't know what that accomplished, but it certainly gave people something to talk about. Rumor has it the General is going to make my boss a colonel or at least a major. Finally, Al Johnston arrived home from Alabama with a wife. Pregnant, they said. I suppose the girls over that way hadn't heard about him. What sort of a person is she?"

"For what my opinion is worth, a very good sort for Al Johnston. He's luckier than he deserves to be. Is your boss around anywhere?"

"He's probably home sleeping or soaking his feet."

I told Dori that duty called—I would see her in a day or two or three—and went looking for Drew Fithie. I found him in the garage bawling out one of his employees. I listened with polite disinterest until he finished. He expressed himself forcefully but with very little imagination.

"Miss Laurette asked me to thank you again for everything you did last night," I said. "Toward morning a lot of things happened, and we got too busy to check back with you. I suppose you know about the fire and about Al Johnston and his new wife."

"Sure do. I was sorry to hear about Nell Troppit. I don't put any stock in that witchcraft stuff, but she was a real lady. Nice to everyone. My daughter-in-law visited her only a couple of days ago. As for Al's wife, they say he met and married her over in Alabama. Now why would he want to do a thing like that? There are plenty of good-looking girls here in Georgia."

"Where a man marries depends on where he runs his car into a ditch."

"A Georgia man's got no call to be running into ditches in Alabama."

We shook hands, and for once we parted without telling each other lies.

To reach southern Alabama from northwest Georgia, one has a choice of going by way of Birmingham or by way of Atlanta. Both routes are considerably roundabout, but that's the way the interstate highways run. I chose the Birmingham route, which would give me a look at the Alabama mountains, and I found I liked them, too.

Autumn had arrived. On my trip to Atlanta, the mountainsides had been touched here and there with small splashes of color. Now they were transformed. The Old Master Painter had adorned them from peak to base with dazzling shades of red, orange, yellow, and one I had never seen before, a greenish yellow. Small rural communities were breaking out in color festivals, and I felt sorry I couldn't arrange a tour and attend all of them.

Tisha's small, pathetic face rode all the way south with me. Once I stopped to telephone the hospital, but they couldn't tell me any more than I already knew. She was still on the critical list.

When I stopped for lunch, I picked up a copy of the Atlanta *Constitution.* There was a front-page story about the burning of General Bramwell Johnston's historic Round House. Even the *Constitution* called him "General."

The story had a byline—"By Jerry Collendon."

I telephoned Cecil Stickells in Atlanta and told him about it.

"Really?" he said. "I hadn't noticed. I'll ask about him again."

"While you're at it, find out whether he's an orphan," I suggested. "I'd also like to know how he happened to be driving a classy, extremely expensive sports car registered to one Flavia Sandover when I first saw him. Later he was driving an old Honda."

"Do you really want me to look into this?"

"I want to know why he's been hanging around High Acres and how a non-reporter goes about getting a front-page byline in the *Constitution.*"

It was a long drive, and I had plenty of time to enjoy the colors

while tearing the case apart and cobbling it together again. Someone had been watching High Acres for months if not years, carefully nurturing his plans. If he followed Al just once on one of his mysterious absences, he knew all about the new wife and the in-laws. Thereafter, it would be a simple matter to check the Alabama address whenever Al absented himself from High Acres.

No one could keep a close watch on a rural household without arousing the inquisitiveness of everyone in the neighborhood, but I saw no reason why he would try. He could learn more than most people would want to know from very casual contacts—a check of local gossip, perhaps, and a chat with a neighbor.

Interstate highways have transformed detective work in rural America. Even in unpopulated areas, the motels that ornament many of the interchanges can be used as a base and returned to each night after ranging widely about the countryside. An investigator operating from a local motel or rooming house or lodging at a nearby farm would be the target of everyone's curiosity. At an interchange motel, he is ignored. It wouldn't matter whether he used the same pseudonym each time or a different one; or whether he stayed at a different motel each time or the same one. Scrutinizing the motels' registers would have been a waste of time. My best chance was to find someone who had seen a suspicious character hanging around the Firmins' farm—hopefully one driving an old dark blue Dodge truck or a rusted red Plymouth.

I talked first with the local authorities. Ed Schaffer had asked them to assist me, and they had already found out that Al's midnight caller used a local phone. They were checking to see whether anyone had been seen using a public telephone about that time.

I next went looking for Beth's parents. It was a region of large, prosperous farms, all of them neatly tucked in for the winter except for livestock, of which there was a lot. Beth assuredly was not an *impoverished* farmer's daughter.

Her parents greeted me warmly. Jeff Firmin, her father, looked like a small-town banker. He was the only farmer I had ever met who carried a pocket calculator and tried to translate everything into numbers. One glance at Melanie Firmin, her mother—like Beth, tall and attractive—and I knew how the family was organized. Mrs.

Firmin didn't bother with a calculator. She already had everyone's number. Beth was a chip off both blocks.

They were understandably curious about Al's family, and they transferred that curiosity to me because I was the first person they had met who had any connection with it. We had a long conversation about the Johnstons, the General's Civil War hobby, and High Acres before I was able to lead up to the point of my visit.

There was no need to alarm them with tales of murder and conspiracy, so I merely told them someone who was up to no good had been spying on Al and Beth. He may have hung around the neighborhood every time Al visited Beth.

"Always the same person?" Beth's father wanted to know.

That was the rub. It could have been a different person each time. A stranger seen only once wouldn't make much of an impression unless he skulked suspiciously or committed other flagrant acts like slipping in irrelevant questions about Al while pretending to ask for directions.

Beth's parents hadn't noticed such a person, but it was entirely possible that he would avoid them and attempt to pump their neighbors. Therefore I had to call on the neighbors, all of them, and I needed an introduction. If they wouldn't mind telephoning . . .

Beth's father got his hat and came with me.

We spent the afternoon and evening dredging the neighbors' memories. Last March, or maybe it was April, there had been this young man who called at the farm down the road and claimed to be looking for the Elmer Smith family. There was no Elmer Smith family in the vicinity. The neighbor finally established that the young man had taken the wrong exit on the interstate, driven south instead of north, and ended up in a different part of the state from what he intended. This didn't sound believable; on the other hand, the man hadn't mentioned either Firmins or Johnstons. He had been interested only in Elmer Smiths.

Occasionally someone had seen a car parked off the road in the neighborhood of the Firmins' farm, but that could have belonged to a traveler who stopped to eat a sandwich or answer a call of nature. None of those cars had hung around long enough to arouse suspicion.

We moved on—to more of the same. I had hoped the task would be a simple one. It was. I collected nothing at all except a long string of negatives. After our tenth call, Firmin gave me a searching look.

"You're a patient fellow. You're also a lot smarter than I am if you're finding out anything."

I smiled and tried to look wise. I knew positively that *someone* had kept an eye on the Firmin farm. The phone call proved that. Someone had known all about Al's Alabama connection; had known where to reach him; had written him into an elaborate scenario that began with cutting the power and telephone lines to High Acres; and then, when things started to go wrong, had had no way to call the whole thing off, either because he couldn't reach the colleague who was to make that local telephone call or because Al had already left.

I asked whether anyone had taken in a roomer or a boarder in the past year, and I questioned those who had. One misstep would have sent the case a giant stride toward its solution, but this snooper hadn't slipped anywhere.

That night I enjoyed a farm dinner that would have been just what I needed if I had been climbing mountains all day instead of being driven around the Alabama cotton belt. I had been forty hours without sleep, so the fact that I slept soundly was probably not due to my superbly comfortable bed and lovely Colonial bedroom. When I arose the next morning, a farm breakfast with dimensions similar to those of the dinner was waiting for me.

We started the previous day's routine all over again, but after an hour or so, I tired of thinking up new questions that inevitably produced the same old answers. A jarring thought struck me. Raina Lambert had been suspiciously insistent on my making this wild goose chase. She had her own special extrasensory intuition about these things, and normally she vetoed such expeditions. Only very rarely were they worth the effort. I wondered if she had sent me on this one because she wanted me out of the way.

I called her private phone at High Acres. Then I called Miss Laurette's phone. Then I called the phone with the extensions. All three rang unanswered.

That decided me. My own extrasensory intuition told me this case wasn't going to be decided in Alabama. I asked Mr. and Mrs. Firmin

to let us know immediately if any mysterious strangers materialized, took my leave of them, and drove north. I pushed the speed limit all the way.

16

I reached the Village shortly after one o'clock and went directly to High Acres. Old Mac, the deaf butler, seemed startled to see me. I raised my voice and asked for Miss Raina.

"She's not here," he said. "None of them are here. They left early this morning. The General is at the Corners. Mr. Duff came for him, and they're having a visit. Everyone was mighty upset about what happened to Nell, so Miss Laurette gave the whole staff the day off. They all went visiting or shopping—except for three of those guards, but they just sit around sunning themselves. Martha and I are the only ones left in the house."

"But where are Miss Raina and Miss Laurette?" I persisted.

"The family went on a picnic."

"They couldn't have!" I exclaimed.

"But they did."

It explained why no one was answering telephones. Martha was as deaf as Old Mac, and the guards stationed outside wouldn't be concerned about phones ringing in the house even if they heard them. "Where's this picnic supposed to happen?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'll ask Martha."

Martha came hurrying to the door when she heard I was there. "Miss Raina thought you wouldn't be back before evening," she said.

"There wasn't much for me to do down there. Who went picnicking?"

I had to ask her twice before she understood. She counted on her fingers. "Miss Laurette, Miss Raina, both of the Als—ours and Mr. Al Murphy. Our Al's new wife. Mr. Murphy's friend, Mr. Reid. We fixed a big lunch for six."

"Didn't they take any guards with them?" Again I had to ask twice.

"Guards? What would they want guards for? They left three to watch High Acres. The other three went to Chattanooga."

"But where are they picnicking?"

"At Half-Moon Valley," she said. "They're going to explore it and eat their picnic lunch there. They may not be back until late afternoon."

The name meant nothing to me, so I asked her how to find it. Ollie Kidgell, the diminutive, wiry groom—he was a former jockey—rode by while she was trying to direct me. Exercising a horse was Ollie's idea of a day off. I flagged him down and asked about Half-Moon Valley. He knew the location well. A bridle path went through there, he said, and it was very pretty down that way. In fact, it was Kolina Kirkland's favorite ride.

When I invited him to guide me, he suggested taking one of the General's spare pairs of binoculars. "Find 'em quicker that way. They'll probably be at the waterfall, but they could be several other places."

While he tethered the horse in one of the gardens, I went for the binoculars.

As we eased our way down the High Acres drive, my intuition suddenly started flashing warning signals. If Raina Lambert sent me on that Alabama goose chase just to get me out of the way, as I suspected, she probably had a reason for it—in which case her jubilation at my unexpected return would be restrained. She just might be furious. A picnic wasn't her idea of fun, and this one was a sure bet to be camouflage for a steel trap that was baited and waiting to snap on someone. I had to find out what she was up to before I wrote myself into her script.

I told Ollie I wanted to make certain everything was all right, but I didn't want to disturb the picnickers. A long-distance look with binoculars would suit me fine.

He nodded wisely. What with fires, and shootings, and ghosts, and cut wires, it was perfectly understandable that I would want to make certain everything was all right.

We drove several miles south on Highway 353, found the place where the picnickers had parked their two cars, and left mine there.

A bridle path that wound into what must have been the most untamed part of the Johnston estate passed near the road. We followed it. A creek had cut a deep gorge; the gorge widened into a curving valley, called "Half-Moon" after its shape, and a waterfall plunged into it at its far end. The wooded slopes were splashed lavishly with fall colors. It certainly was an agreeable spot for a picnic.

I scanned with the binoculars as soon as we entered the valley. I located the waterfall at once, and in a small grove nearby I saw the picnic. Everyone Martha had mentioned was there—Miss Laurette, Miss Raina, the two Als, Beth, Greg Reid.

One glance at them was all I needed. I took off at top speed with Ollie pounding after me.

They were dead. All six of them were dead. They looked pathetically like a group of discarded manikins that someone with a gruesome sense of humor had placed in the unlikely postures only death can achieve—torturously uncomfortable but at the same time totally relaxed, with legs twisted oddly, arms making awkward folds, heads askew.

I drew my automatic as I ran because the scene contained one incongruously erect male figure. He was facing away from us as he walked toward the dead picnickers, so I couldn't identify him at that distance even with the binoculars. He halted a mere twenty feet or so from the grove, slowly leveled a rifle, and took aim at one of the corpses.

I felt as though I were struggling in a surrealistic nightmare—I worked my legs frantically without seeming to get any closer. The rifleman was three hundred yards from me, an impossible distance for a running shot with a handgun, but I didn't have to hit him—just shoot accurately enough to distract him. I raised my automatic and fired.

I was too late. I heard his shot just as I pulled the trigger. To my astonishment—because I hadn't even aimed—he suddenly collapsed. An instant later, a magical transformation occurred. All of the dead stirred, sat up, and began exercising stiff necks and massaging cramped limbs.

I panted up to them with Ollie at my heels and bent over the prone figure with the rifle. It was the fake professor, Selwyn Endford. Raina

Lambert joined us with her pet .22 automatic in her hand; but the large hole in Endford's forehead, and the messy exit wound, had not been made by a .22. Greg Reid had lain with his .38 concealed beneath a fold of a blanket and covered Endford from the moment he appeared.

"Damn!" Raina said viciously. "I wanted him alive. Why'd you have to kill him? I shot him in the stomach." She turned to me. "Where's Ed?"

I told her I had just arrived from Alabama and hadn't seen Ed.

"At the critical moment, he was supposed to take over," she said. "I waited, and waited . . ."

"If Greg had fired his .38 two seconds later, eternity would have intervened for someone," I told her. "That .22 of yours has its uses, but this wasn't one of them. A tiny slug like that in the stomach wouldn't have made Endford pause to scratch himself until all of you were dead. Nice shooting, Greg."

Greg grinned at me.

Raina shouted, "Ed?" There was no answer.

"I suppose we'll have to leave this here," she said disdainfully. She took a blanket and covered the corpse. "We're already behind schedule, so let's get cracking. Greg and Paul are taking the Johnstons to the Corners. The General is already there. Brother Mulberry will see that they're well guarded. We'll have High Acres to ourselves until we get this thing settled."

"What did Endford have to do with it?" I demanded.

"He was a tool—pathetic and contemptible, as tools usually are. You should have caught that yourself. Let's go."

I had never seen her in such a rush. We left Ollie Kidgell to help Greg and Paul gather up the picnic stuff, get everyone back to the cars, and drive them to the Corners, where they were to stay—under guard—until this latest crisis was resolved.

As we jogged toward the highway, I panted, "That was as strange a performance as I've ever seen. All of you lying there dead—you certainly looked dead—and that character calmly walking up and pointing a rifle. What was going on?"

"We were poisoned," she said.

"With what?"

"*By whom* is the question. I'd hoped to find out from Endford. Dammit."

She was silent for a time as we pounded along the bridle path.

"There were three picnic lunches," she said finally. "I ordered all of them last night, so our friendly local poisoner would have plenty of time to make arrangements and figure out ways and means."

"You might have got someone killed. Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I didn't want you around. You've developed an unfortunate reputation here. You found a buried body at night in the forest—without even using a divining rod. You went snooping in Chattanooga, and suddenly what was supposed to be an innocent accident turned into a murder investigation. After the sniper attack, you ran at top speed to the exact spot where my intended assassin had been standing a couple of minutes earlier. You must have come very close to catching him. Then you ruined their ambush and got a couple of their men killed. And look how you messed up their plans Saturday night. On the spur of the moment—at midnight—you came up with radios, police, and a marching army. You're a terror. You—"

"Just a moment. That 'innocent accident' hadn't fooled anyone."

"True, but no one around here was aware of that. As far as the conspirators knew, you went to Chattanooga and suddenly there was a murder investigation. Sometimes I wish you weren't quite so flamboyant. In no time at all, people start seeing you as a blend of James Bond and Superman. We were due for a poisoning, but I knew they wouldn't try anything with you around, so I sent you out of the way for a couple of days and made an opportunity for them, and they grabbed it. Also, I thought you needed to get away from here. It wasn't your fault about Nell and Tisha, but I know how your mind works. Did it help any?"

"No. How is Tisha?"

"Still alive. They think she might pull through. What could have happened to Ed?"

We had reached the car. We piled in, slammed doors, and roared off.

"When I ordered the lunches, I asked for a special effort because they were for the Johnstons," she said. "Miss Laurette and all the

grandchildren were going picnicking. Sandwiches and trimmings, the works. I ordered one lunch from the Snack and Dessert Bar, one from May at the Corners, and one from the High Acres kitchen."

"Surely you can't believe that Dori—or May and Duff—"

"I'm an equal-opportunity investigator. I make certain every suspect has a chance to inculpate himself."

"You actually ordered lunch for a Johnston picnic from Fithie's Snack and Dessert Bar? Dori must have been shocked."

"I told her you suggested it. She confided frankly that the sandwiches are far better at the Corners Café. The Snack and Dessert Bar skimps on both quantity and quality—Fithie believes a penny shortchanged is a penny earned—but May Schaffer isn't sparing of anything when she makes a sandwich."

We suddenly were flagged down by a sheriff's patrol car. Since I was only doing twenty miles over the limit, that seemed unfair. The officer pulled up beside me. "I didn't know you were back," he said apologetically. "I have a message for Miss Raina. Ed Schaffer had an accident. Hit and run. A jeep deliberately smacked his car in the side. The jeep was stolen. The driver got into another car and drove off. Ed is in serious condition at the Tri-County Hospital. The investigator with him was injured, too, but not so seriously. Ed wanted to get word to you immediately, but no one knew where you were. He started to give directions, something about a picnic, but he passed out before he finished, and then the doctors took over."

"Ed and I are working on a case together," Raina said. "It's the Johnston problem. *Don't say anything about it on the radio.* The people involved must be using scanners. Probably they overheard something that put them onto Ed, and they set a trap for him. Follow us to the Village, and I'll telephone a report to the sheriff and get instructions for you. We have a corpse for you to take charge of."

Raina is at her absolute best giving orders to people she has no authority over. She does it so firmly, and so winningly, and so logically, that they fall over themselves to oblige her. At Fithie's service station, she talked directly with the sheriff, who then gave the deputy his instructions—which actually were her instructions. Drew Fithie came bustling past, and Raina grabbed him and asked for the loan of a couple employees for urgent police business. Of course she

got them instantly. The deputy took them with him to help carry Endford's body out.

When we returned to my car, Raina got in on the driver's side. "You dawdle," she said.

While we negotiated the winding gravel road to the Corners—in record time—I tried to sort the situation out. "You said you got a lunch from May. Surely at this stage you don't believe—"

"I told you—I'm an equal-opportunity investigator. Belinda Wassler has access to the Corners food. There are other people who could have arranged to be in May's kitchen at the critical moment if they knew she'd be fixing a picnic for High Acres. The same goes for the Snack and Dessert Bar. The same goes emphatically for the High Acres kitchen."

"So which lunch did you eat?"

"None of them. Greg drove over to Chickamauga, where no one knows him, and bought a picnic lunch for us at a sandwich shop there. We rehearsed last night so everyone would succumb to the poison properly. The Johnstons thought it great fun, but today they got rather cramped. The three lunches have already been sent to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation's Crime Lab in Atlanta. I gave them a list of poisons to check for, so we may have a quick report from them."

"So what did Endford have to do with it?"

"Look. I shouldn't have to tell you this. Killing half a dozen people is nothing like as easy as the movies make it. If you walk up to them and start shooting, they'll dive for cover. One or two may shoot back or try to attack you. If even one survives, there'll be a witness, and if several survive, you'll be uncommonly lucky if you don't get yourself killed. On the other hand, if you put poison in a picnic lunch and dispose of all six of them that way, an unbelievable fuss will be made—especially with a wealthy family involved. Forensic scientists will be brought in from all over the country. The poison will be identified, and so will your access to it.

"Our villains thought up a scheme to avoid both problems. They chose a poison that doesn't kill quickly. They wanted us rendered helpless or unconscious just long enough for a gunman to walk up and shoot every one of us fatally. Then an entirely different kind of

fuss would result. A mad mass murderer would be on the loose, the deaths could be tied in with the other queer happenings around High Acres, and the possibility of poison wouldn't even be thought of. I mean—if all of the victims are shot in the head, who'll bother to check the bodies for poison?"

"That's a stupidly naïve view of forensic medicine."

"That's what you said when we were talking about the fire. It's an ill-favored thing, sir, but their own—though maybe not so far off the mark if their poison is obscure enough. Cyanide, for example, would have been a bad choice, because it kills quickly. It didn't matter to them if we suffered extreme agony as long as we were rendered completely helpless and there'd be no obvious symptoms of poisoning after we were shot."

"This is a cheerful crowd of villains."

"Isn't it? The good news is that Georgia still has the death penalty for murder. These characters were within an eyelash of wiping out the entire Johnston family. We arrived here just in time."

At the Corners, we found a tearful May and a grim Duff—they had been told of Ed's accident. The General was upstairs taking a nap. Belinda was in charge, but she was deeply in mourning for Nell Troppit, and the news about Ed distressed her further.

"They say his condition is critical," Belinda said worriedly. "Police work is so dangerous. People never think so, but the police are out in all kinds of weather, driving all the time, and it would be dangerous even if there weren't any bad people."

Raina wanted to know if May had had any visitors that morning. Belinda shook her head. "None."

After a quick check with Brother Mulberry to make certain his monks were competently in charge, we were off again. As we pulled out, we passed the two cars carrying the other picnickers. Raina gave them a honk and a wave and zoomed away.

When we reached the drive to High Acres, she pulled the car off the road. "From this point, stealth is better than speed. We'll walk from here."

We walked as fast as we could up the winding road to the mansion. When we reached the top, we avoided both the looping drive to the front entrance and also the branch by which deliveries were made to

the kitchen and the rear of the house. We took cover like a pair of Indian scouts and moved from one place of concealment to another until we reached the former stable, now a garage with upstairs apartments. Only one of the security guards was in sight. He was relaxing in a chair by the mansion's rear door.

Raina studied the outbuildings. "There has to be a tunnel from one of them to the mansion," she said. "Which is it?"

"Not the old icehouse. The architecture is against it. Not the smokehouse. It's open underneath for ventilation. That garden shed, maybe, if you insist there is one."

"Not the shed. It's too recent. It'll be an old tunnel, maybe as old as the mansion. We'll try the underground storage room. I wonder what it was originally used for."

"Probably to store perishables like milk and butter in the days when High Acres had cows but no refrigeration," I said. "I doubt that it's been used since the Johnstons came here. What makes you think there's a tunnel?"

"If the High Acres lunch was tampered with by an outsider, as I suspect, then someone had to get into the kitchen to apply the poison. A tunnel is the most likely way. I think I know where the entrance might be on the mansion side. One of the basement storage rooms is filled with discards. No doubt there's a way through that junk, but I couldn't have found it without disturbing things. It should be a lot easier at this end."

We descended the crumbling stone steps to the warped and rotting door at the bottom. "I've already tried it," I said. "It's jammed."

"Try it now," she suggested.

The latch still didn't work, but the door opened easily at my touch. "Someone has fixed it," I said, speaking softly. "Someone's been here recently."

"Be ready to shoot. We don't know if we're chasing a wounded tiger or a crafty cobra." From her handbag, she took a flashlight and her automatic. "We've never met a murderer like this one. A final, grand immolation designed to kill everyone in sight wouldn't surprise me. The door may be booby-trapped. Push it open slowly and stand aside."

I leveled my own automatic and pushed the door open with my

foot. We stood at either side and looked in cautiously while her flashlight probed the darkness. The underground room was circular with stone walls. At first glance it seemed to be furnished handsomely, but that was only because it was used to store all manner of discarded furniture, which cast strange shadows as Raina's flashlight beam delineated one shape after another. I sniffed the air cautiously and detected nothing but the reek of dust and mold. There was no one in sight.

"There's the tunnel door," Raina said. Her flashlight traced its outline. "Is that the back of a couch over there behind the table?"

We took long steps inside, and the flashlight probed again. The table had a kerosene lamp on it as well as some remnants of food. We moved to the center of the room, walking in single file and touching nothing.

The flashlight continued to probe. We were almost across the room before we finally were able to see around the table. Someone was lying on the couch. We both hurried forward.

"Dead," Raina said disgustedly a moment later. "I wanted her alive, too, dammit. We're running late everywhere we go."

It was Nell Troppit.

One hand held a .38 revolver. A piece of paper protruded from the other. Raina aimed her light at it. A single, scribbled word was visible: *Sorry*.

"Suicide?" I exclaimed. "But why?"

"Her life was coming unglued. Even so, it seems very unlike her."

"But who died in the fire?" I asked.

"Velma Cutting, an elderly Alabama woman, is missing. She lived alone in a rural shack. The Brotherhood of St. Giles put a new roof on it last spring. Also, she was one of the witch's patients. She had white hair and a deformed foot like Nell's, and she was about Nell's age. The police are trying to locate medical and dental records for her."

"Then Velma Cutting was murdered to make it look as though Nell was murdered."

"Obviously, but let's leave that for later. The important question right now is how long ago Nell died."

I sniffed the gun, noting from habit that it was loaded with stan-

dard hollow point ammo. Then I took the flashlight for a closer look at the body. There was a hole in her forehead, powder burns on her forehead and face, and a messy exit wound at the back of her head. The eyelids showed no sign of rigor.

"Not within the last fifteen minutes," I said. "Not last night, either. Anywhere from half an hour up to an hour and a half."

"Or longer?"

I shrugged.

"Did she die before or after our picnic?" Raina persisted.

"Yes," I said, "and you're not likely to get anything more definite than that from the doctors unless they happen find out precisely when she ate last."

"Dammit. We've been running *way* behind."

"I'm having trouble believing this. Nell burned the Witch's Circle, murdering the Alabama woman. Then she moved in here, leaving Tisha to die in the woods. After a few days of remorse, she tried to poison everyone, and then she shot herself. I do wish there was one thing about this case that made sense. I'm going to resign and take up something easy like predicting the stock market. Does this finish it?"

Raina shook her head. "The picture is still fuzzy around the edges, and we're missing the most important pieces. Nell certainly didn't do all of it by herself. We've got to find out who was helping her and why."

"Or who she was helping and why?"

"Have it any way you like. The problem is to fill in the blanks."

I sat on the steps just outside the door to guard the place while Raina went to call the sheriff.

By evening there was good news about Ed Schaffer, and I drove May and Duff to Ft. Oglethorpe to the Tri-County Hospital to see him. Despite his weakened condition—he had a serious concussion, a broken arm, and two broken legs—he was smouldering with anger.

"That college professor, Endford, was driving the car that picked up the jeep driver," Ed said the moment I walked in. "I saw him pull up just before the jeep hit me. Tom saw the jeep driver dash over and get in with him."

Tom was the investigator who had been riding with Ed.

"You can forget Endford," I said. "The only person with any cause to worry about him is Brother Mulberry."

The nurse was scowling. We had been ordered not to talk police business with Ed, and there wasn't much I could have told him anyway. I was still waiting for someone to explain several things to me. I assured him the bad guys were on the run and about to be caught, and no doubt someone would explain everything to him later.

It was an unsatisfactory visit for all of us. Ed wanted a complete report right then. May wanted to tell him about Nell Troppit, but that was another forbidden subject. The only one who got to say anything was Duff, who was still excited about the General's visit, and we listened because we couldn't think of anything else to talk about.

Finally I left them and went upstairs to see Tisha. She was sleeping. There was a Christmas tree of IV bags beside her bed and tubes were draped everywhere. She had a bandaged head and bruises on her face, which looked pinched and very pale. Her hand felt cold, but thankfully they wouldn't have to amputate anything.

When she opened her eyes and saw me, she tried to sit up. "Later! Later! Just relax now!" I told her but not quickly enough. A nurse saw what was happening and evicted me.

After I took Duff and May home, I went to High Acres to see what was going on there. The Johnstons were none the worse for their afternoon outing, and all of them were feeling smug because they'd had an important part in a murder investigation. Cecil Stickells had just telephoned an item about my phantom reporter, Jerry Collendon. He had been pestering the *Constitution* for a job, and someone there tried to get rid of him by giving him an impossible assignment—an interview with General Bramwell Johnston, who hadn't permitted one for years. But the kid had done a decent job with the fire story, so now he was getting a formal tryout.

"Is he an orphan?" I asked.

"Cecil didn't say," Raina said. "Does it matter?"

"Everyone else connected with this case is an orphan," I said gloomily. "I just remembered I'm an orphan myself. What about the posh sports car?"

"It belongs to Collendon's rich girlfriend."

Raina showed me a report from the Georgia Bureau of Investigation Crime Lab. "They identified the poison," she said. "It was hyoscine."

"Now where have I seen that before?"

"Famous in the history of crime as the poison the English doctor, Crippen, used to kill his wife in 1910."

"I remember. Crippen fled to America and achieved the additional distinction of being the first criminal to be apprehended with the assistance of transatlantic radio communication. Where does hyoscine come from?"

"The leaves and seeds of henbane, which is a European relative of the deadly nightshade. It acts as a depressant on the central nervous system, producing convulsions, unconsciousness, and—eventually—death through respiratory failure. Like most poisons, it has a few medicinal uses."

"Sounds like a cheerful plant to cultivate. Of course it was in the lunch from the High Acres kitchen. Were you expecting hyoscine?"

"It was one of several possibilities," she said.

"What made you think Nell Troppit would snatch at a chance to poison everyone?"

"You saw the Witch's Circle."

"I didn't see any poison—" I began. Then I broke off and went on slowly, "Or maybe I did. She certainly had a huge variety of plants there, but the poisonous ones look pretty much like choice health foods to me when I meet them on the hoof."

"In addition to henbane, I recognized Canada moonseed, various kinds of nightshade, water-hemlock, poison sumac, Virginia creeper, false hellebore, wild lupine, goat's-rue, dwarf larkspur, monkshood, wild iris, dogbane, fly-poison, star-of-Bethlehem, the baneberries, poison hemlock, and atamasco-lily. Lana Fithie recognized a number of others. Nell was growing them as potted houseplants, and in her herb garden, and also in the forest nearby, she had one of the most comprehensive collections of poisonous plants ever assembled. I took Lana Fithie to see it just to make certain I was on the right track, and she was astonished. Some of the items were strange to her, so she made sketches from memory as soon as she got home and the next day she went to Chattanooga. Between the staff at the Reflection

Riding Nature Center and the public library, she got most of what she wanted. Henbane wouldn't be everyone's favorite houseplant. It stinks, and it isn't pleasant to touch, but if you wanted to have ready access to a strong poison, a dozen pots of henbane are as good a choice as any, and Nell had at least that many. She probably thought hyoscine would go very well with a highly spiced sauce the High Acres cook is so fond of. The cook uses that sauce on sandwiches and also in her potato and macaroni salads. But Nell didn't poison the sandwiches and salads directly. Instead, she put enough hyoscine in the sauce to give a fatal dose to anyone using it, which means she didn't care who else in the house she murdered. Fortunately Miss Laurette and I fixed a lunch for Old Mac, Martha, and the three security men who were staying behind, and we locked up everything that had been used for the picnic lunch."

"I just remembered something. One of the items of gossip Kolina Kirkland told me the day I arrived here was that the cattle on the south farm had been poisoned."

"You didn't tell me that," she said severely.

"At the moment, it didn't connect with anything. Suddenly I'm wondering if Nell used the cattle to practice on. Did you suspect her from the beginning?"

"Of course—along with several other people. Didn't you?"

"No. Tell me."

"Her background was the most mysterious on the list. The other suspects had known addresses and went about their businesses of growing up and attending school and getting married and raising families. Look how much information you were able to pick up in one day in Atlanta. Nell's life was a blank for all the years she was away. She never mentioned it except for a few generalities: She went to Atlanta, got educated, got a job, got married. Then her health failed, her job failed, and her marriage failed. That may be basically true, but none of it has ever been corroborated.

"Second, her husband, with that challenging name 'Smith,' is the most mysterious figure in our scenario—even more so than Dori's anonymous father. Apparently he's never been mentioned or thought of by anyone except her.

"Third, she was virtually a member of the Johnston family and

privy to all of its secrets. Those that weren't told to her, she could eavesdrop on. The High Acres telephone line originally had an extension to Round House. Nell had her own phone installed shortly after she moved there, and no one has telephoned Round House, the Witch's Circle, on the old line since then, but Nell never had it removed. Down through the years she's been able to listen in on any call High Acres made or received."

"Including the one with directions for finding Napoleon Corners," I suggested with feeling.

"Also including that. Miss Laurette had completely forgotten about the extension. Fourth, Nell's time was her own. She did whatever she wanted, whenever she chose. If anyone called to see her or invited her to do something when she didn't want company, she could say she was expecting a client. No one in these parts would dream of intruding on a working witch. A conspirator who's always at someone's beck and call has problems. Kolina Kirkland does a full day's work for Miss Laurette. She can have a weekend, or a day, or an afternoon, or time to go riding whenever she asks for it—Miss Laurette is extremely lenient—but she has to ask because her employer wants to know where she is. Otherwise, she's on call for about sixteen hours a day. Dori Vinick could easily meet with co-conspirators in the Sandwich and Dessert Bar, but beyond that she couldn't help them. She has far too many responsibilities and too little time for a criminal career.

"Fifth, I began to focus strongly on Nell when no attempt was made on our phony Al Murphy. Miss Laurette discussed his arrival with everyone she'd mentioned Joe Murphy's arrival to, but at my suggestion, she did it on her new private phone. The conspirators could have become cautious, but they also could have ignored Al because they didn't know about him. They weren't able to eavesdrop on the new telephone line."

"Nell didn't need all that poison just to give a medicinal kick to her herb teas," I said. "Has anyone checked the local death rate?"

"A person with a sick or elderly dog or cat always brought it to Nell. She mixed something with its food, and it died painlessly."

"Jolly. But why did she commit suicide?"

"If someone was watching our picnic from a distance with binoculars and hurried back to tell her what happened, she had ample motive. That's why the exact time of her death is important. I wanted to get to High Acres before she could find out, but we were delayed."

"Endford was doing the dirty work for her—or some of it. Did he plan it, or was she telling him what to do?"

"That was one of the things I'd hoped to find out from him. Or from her. We need to know who else was helping her."

"Why was Nell trying to wipe out the Johnstons?"

"I could guess some of it. So could you if you made the effort, but there are pieces missing. We still have a way to go."

"Is Carla Joblan still working on it?"

Raina nodded. "As she says, the successful researcher is the one who's lucky enough to look in the right places."

"Do you want me to go to Atlanta and help her?"

"No. Miss Laurette wants you here. She thinks you're entitled to a few days off after all the overtime you've put in. She has a strong maternal interest in you. Try to keep it maternal."

"I've already been warned about her. Has anyone mentioned what happens with the General's will if she suddenly marries a young husband?"

"I'd rather not know."

"Are you expecting new crimes to break out? Or are you only keeping me here for my ornamental value?"

"Another day or two should end this," Raina said. "The authorities were skeptical about the identity of the burned person, but there won't be any problem identifying Nell's body. When word of her death gets out, I expect someone to show up with the documents Carla hasn't been able to find."

"The mountain will come to Mahomet?"

"*Something* will come, but of course there's no guarantee it will be of any use to us."

Rather than sit and admire the four walls of my cabin that evening, I went through the motions of working. I looked over the café's customers, listened to a few minutes of Brother Mulberry's evening sermon, and then drove to the Village. At Tessie and Ned Snell's little

cottage, Dori Vinick met me at the top of the wheelchair ramp with hands on hips and told me sternly, "You lied to me. You said you weren't a policeman."

"Bring a Bible," I said. "I will swear on it. I am not a policeman."

"Don't try to double-talk your way out of it. Everyone in the Village knows you're a detective—maybe even a famous one. Miss Laurette says you're the best since Sherlock Holmes and you saved the Johnston family."

"Sherlock Holmes's reputation is safe," I said. "I haven't the faintest idea of what I'm supposed to have saved the family from."

Her aunt and uncle were delighted to see me and pathetically eager to hear one more version of the Nell Troppit tragedy. The next day's papers would have the entire story, so I gave them as much as I could.

While I talked, Dori suddenly grasped that she had been a suspect herself. She was indignant. "Do you mean to say you actually thought one of the Johnstons was my father?"

"Anyone in the neighborhood whose ancestry was even slightly muddled had to be investigated. We also had to look carefully at people close to the Johnston family whose parentage seemed to be in good order. Brother Mulberry's monks and Duff's traveling men had to be considered. It's been a complicated case."

"Then the only reason you've been paying attention to me was so you could arrest me!"

"Bring the Bible. I will swear I never had the slightest intention of arresting you. Surely you've heard mention of the difference between business and pleasure."

"For all I know, one of the Johnstons could have been my father," she said thoughtfully. "Mother never told anyone who he was."

"She never told anyone," Aunt Tessie said, "and I never mentioned him because it was such a painful subject to her. But I know who he was, and he was no Johnston. He was a bright boy, but he came from a family that had nothing. They were a couple of silly kids, and when she got pregnant, he panicked and ran off."

"But why should Nell have a vendetta against the Johnstons?" Dori asked bewilderedly. "They were very kind to her. Miss Laurette gave her the Witch's Circle to live in and paid her a salary. People

paid her every time they consulted her. She must have had a good income. Everyone considered her part of the Johnston family."

Nuncle Ned spoke up. "I do remember something from a long, long way back. When Nell first came home again and Miss Laurette gave her the Witch's Circle, it was rumored she'd done time at Milledgeville."

"Where—or what—is Milledgeville?" I asked.

"That's the state insane asylum."

I stared at him. "I wonder why no one has mentioned that. It may be important."

"Like I said, it was a long time ago. Not many people would remember. Probably not many knew about it."

"Could I use your phone?"

I called Raina Lambert. "For the Nell Troppit file. During part of her absence, she was a patient at Milledgeville."

Raina wanted to know where and what Milledgeville was. Then she demanded, "Is that guaranteed?"

I called across the room to Nuncle Ned. "How certain are you that Nell was at Milledgeville?"

He was silent for a moment. "I'm certain I heard someone say she'd been there, but maybe it was just talk. I never heard anyone claim to have seen her there."

"The rumor was genuine, but it was maybe just a rumor," I told Raina.

"We should be able to verify it easily enough. I don't like this. Do you see where it's pointing?"

"Toward something so rare there almost isn't any, a mad murderer. Nell seemed rational enough to me, and so did her supporting cast, but the crimes were wildly insane."

"Maybe I do like it. It would explain several things. I'll see what I can find out. By the way—the mountain has come to Mahomet. Miss Laurette received a telephone call from an Eldred Jaffke, an attorney who practices law in Rome. He has important papers that Eleanor Troppit Smith entrusted to him. She instructed him to turn them over to Miss Laurette in the event of her death. Miss Laurette asked whether her own attorney should be present. Jaffke had no

recommendation about that. He doesn't know the nature of the papers. They're in a sealed envelope, and according to his instructions, it must be opened in Miss Laurette's presence and the contents given to her. His own function will be limited to delivering the papers, and there will be no charge for it. He'll be fulfilling a commission he's already been paid to perform."

"I'll look forward to it. What time?"

"He promised to be here at ten. Miss Laurette has asked Leland Borling to come at nine-thirty. The family is meeting at nine, and she wants you there, too. Before we hear what Jaffke has to offer, we'll have our own conference, and then we'll confer with Borling."

"See you," I said.

Tessie, Ned, and Dori were listening with unabashed curiosity. I told them, "It's almost finished. Tomorrow's haul of gossip may be the last, but it ought to be sensational."

17

I entertained the three of them with accounts of my detective adventures, mostly true, and then I helped Dori put her aunt and uncle to bed. We talked for a time in the living room. I wanted to say a few good things about Mark Wassler, but I have no talent for matchmaking. The right word always seems to elude me, and the wrong one wasn't going to do either Mark or Dori any good. Finally I bade her a friendly good night and left.

When I arrived at High Acres the next morning, Kolina Kirkland and Beth Johnston had put up a badminton net, and the pregnant Beth was demonstrating an agility I never would have suspected, thoroughly trouncing the lanky Kolina, while Al Johnston looked on worriedly. The General sat nearby with a faraway look on his face, perhaps contemplating Civil War strategy. He snapped back to the present when he saw me and greeted me with a smile.

The day was sunny; the atmosphere was wonderfully relaxed. There were no guards in view, but I knew that several, probably including Greg Reid and Paul Dugas, were being discreetly watchful. Raina Lambert never believed a case was over until she could submit a final bill.

The office Kolina Kirkland occupied when she was working was a large, sunny, thickly carpeted ground floor room in the mansion's east wing. The desk was huge; the computer was new and looked large enough to handle the needs of a modest-sized corporation; and the row of four-drawer filing cabinets along the inside wall would have stocked an office supply company's warehouse. There also was a long table with magazines and newspapers stacked on it. The first time I saw this, I suspected Miss Laurette of using her secretary to pursue all manner of frivolous hobbies, but there was only one hobby in that house. The filing cabinets contained the General's Civil War collection—clippings, copies of articles, correspondence, whatever—and he still marked things to be cut out or copied from magazines and newspapers.

Next door was the much smaller, bare-looking room Miss Laurette used for her own office. The hardwood floor was polished to a warm glow, and a large rag rug protected the work area. Miss Laurette was already occupying the small desk when I arrived. A few straight-backed chairs had been brought in for the occasion. The only fancy-looking piece of furniture was the metal wastebasket, which had an unlikely ornament—at least, it seemed unlikely to me: Elvis Presley's picture. Raina Lambert was seated on one of the chairs at Miss Laurette's elbow. Across the room, a familiar stocky, bespectacled figure occupied a wicker sofa—Carla Joblan.

Carla flashed a smile at me.

"Got it?" I called to her.

"Got it!" she said. The satisfaction she radiated could only mean one thing: She had finally looked in the right place.

Raina went to the window and waved her hand. A short time later, Paul Dugas joined us. Al Johnston and Beth trailed after him. These preliminary conferences were really for the benefit of Al and his new wife, but Paul's presence as the phony Al Murphy, and the fact that

Raina was still calling herself a granddaughter, meant that the masquerade was continuing.

Miss Laurette described Eldred Jaffke's telephone call. "He'll be here at ten," she said. "Leland Borling is joining us at nine-thirty. You've already met Mr. Pletcher, the detective I hired. I thought he should be present. This is Miss Joblan, Carla Joblan. She's an associate of Mr. Pletcher's who's been assisting him." She paused to introduce Carla to everyone.

Then she said, "I invited you here early because there's one point that must be discussed before Leland Borling arrives." She nodded at Raina.

Raina began, "In the course of Mr. Pletcher's investigation, it became necessary to look into the backgrounds of a number of persons who have been in close contact with our family in recent years. Most of those persons are completely innocent and in fact are the good and loyal friends they've always appeared to be. This was only to be expected. One murderer among our close associates would be more than enough.

"The family's attorney, Leland Borling, also was routinely investigated even though he's the wrong age. No grounds for suspicion were found in his family connections—his father was a well-known doctor, and he received an excellent upbringing and education—but, as Mr. Pletcher so delicately put it, Leland Borling definitely is not a nice man. He likes young girls. While he was practicing law in Atlanta, his work with juveniles in trouble gave him frequent opportunities to pursue that interest. Many girls who attract the attention of the law are already sexually active, even those who are quite young, and having an affair with their attorney probably put them one up on their friends. Borling gave them presents and took them to restaurants, and they thoroughly enjoyed that. He got away with it for years before he became careless a few times and people began to talk about him. Then he accidentally met pretty young Madge, who was *not* sexually experienced and wasn't a bad girl at all. Her parents found out. Depending on Madge's age when the affair started, this could have meant big trouble for Borling—perhaps even the end of his legal career and a prison term as well. He avoided that by marrying the girl. He moved here because he thought it wise to

make a new start, but he's still fond of young girls, and he continues to pursue that interest in both Atlanta and Chattanooga.

"His position as the Johnstons' attorney will be reviewed in light of this. Firing him would be rough on Madge and their two young children, and his sexual proclivities are of course no reflection on his ability as a lawyer, but they are criminal, and they should be dealt with."

"They *will* be dealt with," Miss Laurette said firmly. "He'll be given one chance to straighten himself out—but no second chance."

Miss Laurette then talked quietly about Borling's predecessor, Steve Malkinson, and his long friendship with the family. She went on to discuss the problem of finding another attorney who would be capable of assuming a similar role. Al Johnston tossed in a few observations of his own—he had never liked Borling—and that continued until Kolina Kirkland tapped on the door and announced Borling's arrival. The attorney was again wearing the new gray suit, but he hadn't donned it in our honor. He said he had to leave for a court appearance as soon as our business was completed. Miss Laurette introduced Carla Joblan to him and then started the meeting over again.

"Miss Raina has had legal training," she said. "Perhaps it would help all of us to understand these problems if she would summarize them for us before we meet with Mr. Jaffke. Would you do that, Miss Raina?"

Raina has the audacity to pose as an expert in almost anything, and I have seen her fool doctors, engineers, art authorities, and far better attorneys than Leland Borling. She nodded modestly and began, "The first problem concerns the fact that several of our grandfather's children left home at an early age—Letitia was little more than a child—and were never heard of again until recently. The second problem results from the way our grandfather's will was drawn." She turned to Borling, "Would you discuss this, please?"

Borling did so, enlarging in scathing fashion on the stupidity of constructing any will in such an inept manner. He discussed the implications of its phraseology and then explained why the will could not be redrawn.

"So we're stuck with it," Raina resumed. "Miss Laurette has long

been aware of the danger that an unscrupulous person might find out about this and try to foist himself off as an unknown grandchild. Unfortunately, the problem facing us now is far more serious than that. Someone—genuine heir or impostor—has contrived a plan to murder the other heirs. He actually has begun. Miss Laurette hired Mr. Pletcher's organization to investigate this for us."

She discussed the things that had happened—vandalism, marching ghosts, arson, murder, attempted murder—and the search for the culprit.

"Mr. Pletcher had to inquire into the background of every person coming into contact with the General whose ancestry was in any way obscure. It was a large job, and it isn't finished yet. For example—Kolina Kirkland, Miss Laurette's secretary, was an orphan who complicated her life by being what is called 'a difficult child.' Actually, she was an extremely bright child with stupid foster parents, and she thrived when she was placed with a different family. Her real parents have now been identified.

"Dori Vinick's story is even simpler. She was illegitimate. Dori's aunt claims to know who the father was, and there's been no suggestion—from her or from anyone else—that he was one of the General's children. Dori's mother was ill much of the time, and the two of them survived because of the generosity of her aunt and uncle. Twenty-five years ago, an illegitimate child was considered far more of a disgrace than it is today, so they were understandably reticent about this niece of theirs when she was growing up, but they did everything in their power, and made enormous sacrifices, to give her a decent life. Dori is properly grateful to them.

"The investigators made a special search for orphans. For example, Lana Fithie was raised in an orphan's home. Anyone with enough poise and self-confidence to survive as Drew Fithie's daughter-in-law can overcome a little thing like an orphanage in her past. She told me all about her background when I asked her, and Mr. Pletcher's associates had no difficulty verifying it. Her parents died. They weren't impoverished—they left a trust fund for her education—but they had no friends or relatives who were in a position to care for her, so she went to an orphan's home for a few years.

"Mark and Belinda Wassler were checked routinely. They were of

the right age, but their parents, Joe and Mary Wassler, died recently enough to be known to many local residents. After a prolonged search, Carla Joblan finally located records relating to the children's infancy. Mark and Belinda also were adopted."

Miss Laurette and I both exclaimed, "What!"

"This kind of information often is concealed, so there may be other orphans who haven't yet been identified, and the search for them is continuing. In addition, Brother Mulberry's Brotherhood of the Reborn had to be investigated because the members' backgrounds were unknown to us. The organization is legitimate. It located here only because a friend told Miss Laurette about its need for a home, and she offered one. Mr. Pletcher has grave suspicions about a similar organization located nearby in Alabama, the Brotherhood of St. Giles. That investigation continues, also.

"Developments of the past few days have implicated Nell Troppit in the crimes. We don't yet know what her actual connection was, but there's no doubt that she had one. Ever since the Witch's Circle burned, Mr. Pletcher has been searching for some kind of explanation, and we're eagerly waiting to see whether the papers she left with Mr. Jaffke will shed light on this.

"Nell was a former mental patient. She had a breakdown that destroyed her career—she'd been a nurse—and also broke up her marriage. After she left the mental hospital, she returned home to her parents. Her life was ruined; she had no place else to go. At that point, Miss Laurette rescued her. Perhaps she should tell us about that."

It must have been a painful subject, but Miss Laurette responded in her usual brisk and businesslike manner. "I remembered Nell as a studious, black-haired child who never seemed to have any fun. When she came home again, her hair was completely white. Her eyes were haunted. She looked as though she'd been through hell. No one, not even her parents, knew what had happened to her, but obviously it was something terrible. Several of us tried to figure out some way to help her. She couldn't have held a regular job, and she would have resented charity.

"Goody Gump had died recently. Witchcraft was a family profession with the Gumps, but our local witches not only practice witchcraft but also provide a kind of family counseling. Goody's mentally

incompetent daughter was obviously unsuited for that. I can't remember who suggested making Nell the official new witch, but I liked the idea, and I did it with style. I gave her Round House and an allowance. She quickly made herself extremely popular. The fact that she'd been a nurse must have helped, though of course I didn't know about that at the time. I didn't know anything at all about her adult life. I didn't even know she'd been a mental patient. For years I prided myself in how clever I'd been to give her the job." She gestured resignedly.

"That was how matters stood last evening," Raina said. "Then Mr. Jaffke telephoned with the news that Nell had left papers with him to hand to Miss Laurette after her death, and a little later, Miss Joblan called to tell us she'd finally found some important missing documents. When all of this information is sorted out, perhaps Mr. Pletcher will be able to wind up the case."

Miss Laurette turned to me. "Would you see whether Mr. Jaffke has arrived? If he has, please invite him to join us."

The attorney was waiting politely. He was a bald, portly man of about fifty—lethargic and sleepy looking, though I wouldn't have tried to put anything over on him in court. He held a briefcase on his lap.

I introduced myself as a private investigator for the Johnston family and invited him in. I presented him to Miss Laurette, who responded graciously and introduced him to the family. He already knew Leland Borling. He politely declined Miss Laurette's offer of her desk, seated himself on the nearest chair, and opened his briefcase. Borling moved over beside him and sat eyeing the briefcase warily.

But of course Jaffke wasn't permitted to begin until Miss Laurette had exercised her prerogatives as hostess. Old Mac came in followed by Becky pushing a cart. The butler set up tray tables beside our chairs and Becky took orders, offering coffee, tea, milk, and an assortment of juices. There also were sweet rolls and cookies.

Becky poured a glass of milk for Borling without being asked, and he helped himself to it. Beth also took milk. Eldred Jaffke accepted a cup of coffee as the price of getting the amenities out of the way, but he didn't drink it. The rest of us announced our preferences, took a

few perfunctory sips, and sat back to await whatever dramatic revelations Jaffke had for us.

He drew a ten-by-thirteen manila envelope from his briefcase. It was packed full of something—it bulged. Red sealing wax had been liberally applied to the top and bottom flaps as well as the seam.

"Last summer, a woman came to my office with what she called a 'commission' for me," Jaffke said. "She gave her name as Eleanor Troppit Smith but said she was known as Nell Troppit. She wanted to place an envelope in my care. This envelope. In the event of her death, she wanted me to open it in the presence of Laurette Johnston, give the documents it contains to Miss Johnston, and obtain her receipt for them. She claimed the documents would be of vital interest to the Johnston family.

"I had two objections. For one, I asked what I was to do if Miss Laurette refused to accept the documents or even to see me. For another, I asked her what would happen if she died without my knowledge. She said if Miss Laurette refused to accept the documents, I should inform her that my alternative was to publish them in various newspapers. Miss Laurette certainly would want to see them before they were published. But she didn't think that would happen. As for her death, she promised I would be notified, and she wanted my assurance that the commission would be passed to my successor in the event that I predeceased her. She asked me what I considered a fair fee for this service, which would involve travel and might take up as much as a day of my time. I told her. She doubled it and counted out the money. She wanted to make certain I would perform the commission exactly as she described it, even though her death might not come for years. If for any reason she decided to cancel the commission, she would come in person and reclaim the envelope. In that case, she wouldn't ask to have the fee returned. It was obvious that she attached enormous importance to this commission.

"Now you know as much about the background of these documents as I do. When I read of the death in a fire of a woman presumed to be Nell Troppit, I immediately got in touch with the authorities. They informed me that visual identification was out of the question, so I took no action pending the identification of the body by other

means. Then I heard that Nell Troppit had committed suicide, which meant that the burned woman was someone else. Yesterday evening I drove to Ft. Oglethorpe, to the Tri-County Hospital, and viewed the suicide's body. I was able to identify it as that of the woman who visited me calling herself Nell Troppit. In accordance with the instructions she gave to me, I then telephoned Laurette Johnston to ask for an appointment. Shortly after I returned home, I received a telephone call from a woman who identified herself only as a friend of Nell Troppit's. She said Nell had asked her to notify me in the event of her death."

He smiled brightly. "And here we are. I have no idea what this envelope contains other than Nell Troppit's own statement that these are documents that will be of interest to the Johnston family. I now will open it. I suggest that Mr. Borling and I examine its contents, one item at a time, and agree on a description that I'll write down. I'll pass each document to Miss Laurette when we've finished with it. When all the documents have been recorded, I'll ask for her signature as a receipt, and the documents will be her property. Have you any objection to that?"

I knew Borling would be able to think of something, and he did. "I want to assure Miss Laurette that she's under no obligation to accept these documents. She doesn't even have to know what they are if she doesn't want to. Merely because Nell Troppit—"

"Never mind that," Miss Laurette said impatiently. "It was unkind of Nell to talk about publishing them if I refused to see them—why would I refuse to look at anything she left for me? Go ahead."

Jaffke took a letter opener from his briefcase and was about to slit the envelope. That was the moment I had been waiting for. I stepped forward and politely took the opener away from him. "Excuse me," I said. "Opening envelopes is my department."

Everyone except Raina stared at me. Jaffke was astonished. I tried to take the envelope, but he held onto it.

"We've had some unfortunate incidents here," I told him. "Before Nell Troppit shot herself yesterday, she attempted to poison the entire household. I'm taking no chances on her blowing everyone up posthumously. Modern technology being what it is, this package is

thick enough to contain a good-sized bomb. I'll open it myself—very carefully. If you're afraid I'll snitch something, come along and watch. You ought to be safe enough if you stand twenty or thirty feet away."

He was still gaping at me in astonishment. He said nothing, but he relaxed his grip, and I took the envelope. He made no move to follow me.

"Back in a jiffy," I told everyone cheerfully.

I found Martha in the kitchen and borrowed two brooms. I took them, and the envelope, down to the gazebo. Jaffke's letter opener was too dull for my purpose, so I very carefully slit flaps and seam with my penknife without disturbing the contents. Then I used the brooms to push the package apart.

It contained nothing but photocopies of legal documents, some of them consisting of a number of pages stapled together. I reassembled them without peeking, though I couldn't help noticing that the top document was a marriage license, issued in Clayton County, Georgia, to Eleanor Troppit and Robert H. Smith, which was something we already knew about. I hoped the remaining documents would be more interesting.

I returned to Miss Laurette's office and found everyone waiting expectantly for the sound of an explosion. "One package of legal documents, no bomb," I told Jaffke and handed him the opened envelope.

Miss Laurette turned to Raina. "He was actually smiling when he took that outside. And it really could have been a bomb. I wouldn't have thought of it, but it could have been. Isn't he afraid of anything?"

"As a matter of fact, he is," Raina said with a straight face. "He has a pathological fear of any woman older than thirty."

Jaffke frowned and focused his attention on the legal documents. "First item," he said, taking the one on top. "This is a photocopy of a license for the marriage of Eleanor Troppit and Robert H. Smith. I'll record its details in the receipt." Borling glanced at it and nodded. Jaffke opened a leather case and wrote briefly on a memo pad before he passed the copy of the license to Miss Laurette.

"Item two," Jaffke said. He took up a document several pages long.

"Here we have the copy of a petition to the Superior Court for the County of Dougherty, State of Georgia, to change the name of one Malcolm Johnston to Robert H. Smith."

"No!" Miss Laurette exclaimed. "The old silly," she went on tearfully. "Why didn't she tell us? All those years. The General ranted and raved, but it was like the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland.* He never executed anyone. If Letty and Malcolm and Millard hadn't had their stupid pride, they could have come back any time and all would have been forgiven. The General wouldn't have remembered what he was angry about."

"You couldn't have treated Nell much better if you'd known she was your sister-in-law," Al Johnston said sententiously. "Round House was a nicer home than most people enjoy. I always preferred it to High Acres. All of us considered her a member of the family. For a long time her allowance was larger than mine. What more could you have done for her?"

"Malcolm's wife should have been entitled to all of that and much more," Raina said, "but Nell had to receive those things as charity, which she hated. Also, her resentment festered over the years because her children, the General's grandchildren, were being denied their birthrights."

"If she'd told us, we'd have gladly given her anything she wanted," Miss Laurette said sadly. "But did they really have children?"

"They must have," Raina said. "If not, why was she trying to eliminate the other heirs?" She said to Jaffke, "Let's have the rest of it."

Jaffke had been looking through the name-change petition. "Everything is in order," he announced. "It was published four times, as the law requires. Here are copies of the notice, the affidavit of the publisher—the Albany *Herald*—and the court order decreeing the change of name." He looked again at Borling, who nodded. He wrote on his memo pad and passed the thick document to Miss Laurette.

The next items were birth certificates for Mark and Belinda Smith, whose parents were Robert H. Smith and Eleanor Smith, of the town of Inley, Clayton County, Georgia. Jaffke got Borling's nod, wrote the descriptions, and passed them to Miss Laurette. The final items were thicker than the change of name document. They concerned the

adoption of Mark and Belinda Smith, children of Elizabeth and Robert H. Smith, by their neighbors, Joe and Mary Wassler. Jaffke turned pages to make certain each document was complete, muttering, "Certificate of Adoption, Surrender of Parental Rights, Acknowledgement of Surrender, Consideration Paid and Received, Department of Human Resources Investigation, Decree of Adoption. Everything seems in order."

Borling nodded. Jaffke scribbled again and passed the final documents to Miss Laurette. The only sound in the room was that of a number of adults breathing suspensefully. Even Beth and the phony Al Murphy, who had no idea what the documents imported, sat as though afraid to make a noise.

Eldred Jaffke handed his list of descriptions to Borling to be checked and then passed it to Miss Laurette for her signature. She signed as though in a trance. Jaffke tucked the memo pad into his briefcase.

"I've fulfilled my commission," he said. "I hope the documents will be useful to you."

"I'm assuming you haven't authenticated any of this material," Raina Lambert said.

"Of course I haven't. As I told you, I had no idea what was in the envelope until just now when it was opened. But Mr. Borling will tell you that forgery is a futile activity with documents such as these. They can be checked so easily—for example, in Albany, for the name-change decree, and in Jonesboro, Clayton County, where Inley is located, for the birth and adoption records. It could even be done by mail. Or by telephone—Mr. Borling could ask a local attorney to do the checking for him."

He thanked Miss Laurette for her hospitality and shook hands all around. As the door closed behind him, Carla Joblan took a tray and began collecting cups and glasses. She placed them on a table in the most remote corner. Then she asked quietly, "May I see the documents?"

They were passed to her. She pulled her own briefcase from under the sofa, went to Miss Laurette's desk, and made two rows: Top row, the copies of documents that Jaffke had brought. Bottom row, copies she took from her briefcase.

"Marriage certificate—okay," Carla announced. "The birth certificates have the wrong biological parents. Belinda and Mark Wassler were originally named Atter, and their parents were *not* Eleanor and Robert H. Smith, but Lucy and Charles Atter.

"The same goes for the adoption papers," Carla went on. "The names of the children's real parents should be Lucy and Charles Atter." She added, "Lucy Atter was Robert H. Smith's sister."

"Then Nell was not the mother of Mark and Belinda but their aunt by marriage," Raina said.

"I never even knew she was related to them," Miss Laurette breathed.

Carla was still concerned with the documents. "As for the name change—I'm certain this is a forgery simply because I know the life history of Robert H. Smith, and I know he wasn't Malcolm Johnston. That can be easily checked in Albany. I can do it myself, but first I have to go to Blyning, New Jersey, to pick up a few more loose ends."

"Blyning, New Jersey?" I echoed. "What's in New Jersey?"

"Records," Carla said matter-of-factly. "I have several matters to research there."

Raina Lambert spoke to Borling. "Is there any possibility that Nell could have left something with your predecessor? Apparently Malkinson was a great friend of all of the Johnston children. If Nell really was Malcolm's wife, he would have been the most likely person to know about it."

Borling got to his feet. "He never mentioned it to me, but of course he did die suddenly. I'll make a search this evening." He glanced at his watch and spoke apologetically to Miss Laurette. "I have to rush—I'm due in court. I'll get back to you later today. Is there anything more you want from me now?"

"Not at this moment," Miss Laurette said. "On your next trip to Atlanta, I may want you to go on to Jonesboro and make the comparisons Mr. Jaffke suggested. We'll see. Telephone me later today."

Borling wished us good morning and left.

Carla had returned to her sofa. She seemed to be absently leafing through documents, but she was actually guarding the dirty cups and

glasses. A casual observer might not have noticed, but I had watched her collect them—inviting us to put them on the tray ourselves—and I knew she was ready to spring if anyone made any kind of a movement toward them.

Miss Laurette said, "I guess that's all. Now you know everything I do—which still isn't much."

Al Johnston, Beth, and the phony Al Murphy followed Borling out, perhaps to return to the badminton game. I continued to watch Carla. When the door closed behind them, I asked her what was going on. She grinned at me.

There was a tap on the door. Raina Lambert leaped to open it. A solemn-looking young man in a business suit looked in at us. "We've got it," Raina said.

"Good. Which is it?"

Carla pointed to one of the glasses. He thrust his hand inside, picked it up, and transferred it to a box. "I'll let you know," he said and hurried away.

My mind was still on New Jersey. I said, "Wait a moment. Didn't Leland Borling come from there? His father—what did his father do?"

"It's about time you thought about that," Raina said.

I turned to Carla. She was smirking. "What are you going to look for in New Jersey?"

"I've already been there," she said. "And I found it."

"Are you telling me I've been missing things on the kindergarten level?"

Carla looked questioningly at Raina. "We might as well let him in on it," Raina said. "But make him sit down first."

I didn't remember standing up. I seated myself, and Carla began complacently. "I finally found Madge Narlander in the records. She gave her parents quite a time when she was thirteen. She kept running away from home."

I whistled softly. "A pretty girl that age with a sub-par mentality can get into very serious trouble in a hurry."

"Apparently she didn't. She simply hated school. The only things she got good grades in were the homemaking courses. She got straight A's in cooking and flunked math and English. Her parents were intent on her getting a good education. They wanted her to go

to college and have a career. They thought she was doing poorly because she was too lazy to study. They filed a complaint with juvenile authorities about her running away, so the records contain a formal evaluation of her, and that includes a psychologist's report."

"They seem to get along well with her now," I said. "Also, they let her drop out of school and get married when she was fifteen. Eventually they must have faced up to the fact that they simply had a dumb daughter."

"The psychologist who interviewed Madge also talked with her parents, and he helped all three of them accept the fact that Madge simply wasn't college material. It was a blow, but as you say, the parents managed to accept it. One interesting thing came out—Madge Narlander was adopted."

"Aha!" I heard trumpet calls and saw lights flash. "*That* is the twist we were looking for. I suppose the Narlanders were better able to accept Madge's stupidity because they could blame it on her natural parents."

"Very likely."

"And what did the report say about those natural parents?"

"Nothing. To this day, the Narlanders have no idea who they were. They acquired Madge through a doctor running an adoption racket. They've been understandingly secretive about that. They agreed before Madge's birth to take the child of a mother who didn't want it. They never met the mother. They told everyone Madge was their own baby. They even have a birth certificate to prove that."

"Tsk," I said. "It sounds downright illegal. I suppose Borling handled her case as a runaway."

"He did not. Madge Narlander wasn't any kind of a 'case.' All she did was run away from home a few times because she didn't want to go to school. She stayed with a girlfriend who smuggled her into the house. The friend's parents didn't even know about it. No attorneys came into it at all."

"But Borling married her, so obviously he did meet her somewhere if only in the corridor," I protested. "If the two of you weren't sitting there smirking, I'd be ready to say, 'So what?' Where does the name Johnston come into this?"

"When you were making Leland Borling your number one suspect,

you were strangely incurious about *his* background," Raina said. "His father was a doctor. Doctor—babies—adoptions—get it?"

"New Jersey," I said. "Now I remember. Borling's father was a country doctor there. So was his grandfather."

"His father was a suspiciously prosperous country doctor," Raina said. "He ran a small, very private maternity hospital. Unwed mothers from New York City who were willing to give their babies up for adoption could have them there without cost. The adoptive parents paid the bill, paid the young mothers something to give them a fresh start, and also paid the doctor a hefty fee. There weren't supposed to be any records of this—the doctor registered the child as being born to the adoptive parents—but his head nurse kept all the details in a private ledger. She did it for humanitarian purposes, her daughter thinks. Mothers sometimes want to know what happened to a child. Children want to know who their real parents were. The daughter saved the ledger, but until Carla got there, no one had ever inquired about it except that a few years ago the doctor's son, Leland, had a certified copy made of the whole ledger, telling her it would be wise to have a spare in case something happened to the original. He also took a notarized statement from her. She saw nothing wrong with letting the doctor's son have access to the book. After all, he was an attorney—he understood those things.

"One of the unwed mothers was named Louise Murphy. She was the daughter of Letitia Johnston Murphy, and her baby was adopted by Con and Denise Narlander—who of course never knew who the baby's mother was. The Narlanders desperately wanted a child, and Denise had inherited some money. They invested it in the child and in the new home they bought. Leland Borling must have been home on vacation when Louise Murphy was there. He learned something about her background, and perhaps because the couple who adopted her baby had an unusual name, Narlander, he remembered it. Some thirteen years later he chanced to meet Madge. By that time he knew all about the Johnston family. He suddenly realized that pretty little Madge Narlander was a tremendous prize. With a clever husband to arrange things, she could be sole heiress to an enormous fortune, and her husband would become the squire of High Acres.

"He seduced Madge for the fun of it and then used that as an

excuse for marrying her. Otherwise, her parents would have said she was too young, and he wanted her safely married to him before the flighty creature eloped with some boy her own age. Borling knew Steve Malkinson, and probably he'd already discussed a partnership with him because the situation in Atlanta was becoming uncomfortable for him.

"Country lawyers are repositories of secrets, and Malkinson certainly would have known all about Nell Troppit's background. When Borling learned about the madness that churned beneath Nell's serene and charming manner, he devised a diabolical plot to make use of it. Only two murders stood between him and ownership of High Acres, and he needed someone to perform them. That was the role he intended for Nell Troppit. Nell's twisted mind already regarded the Wassler children as hers. He forged documents to give her what looked like legal proof of this. He also provided documents to show that her husband had been a Johnston and that her children were being deprived of their lawful inheritance. She was willing to do anything he suggested to help them regain their birthright. She thought she was working for Mark and Belinda, but it was Borling and Madge who would have benefited.

"Nell provided the financial assistance Mark and Belinda needed so they could move here and become personally known to the General." Raina turned to Miss Laurette. "Do you know where she got the money?"

"Her parents left her a house and their savings," Miss Laurette said. "I know she sold the house for a good price. Then an aunt and uncle of hers who were childless left her a farm in western Tennessee. I asked her later how she made out with it, and she said debts ate up most of it. But now that I think about it, Mark and Belinda moved here not long after that."

"Nell kept her supposed relationship to Mark and Belinda a secret—from them and from everyone else—to spare them the burden of a mother who was a former mental patient," Raina said, "but she helped them and their adoptive parents as much as she could while they were growing up, and she thought nothing of sacrificing herself to help them claim their inheritance."

"I'll believe it if you say so," I said, "but it'll be one of the most complicated legal cases in history."

"Not if we can nail Borling for murder."

"Nail him? You just let him go!"

"The sheriff and the GBI will make certain he doesn't go far. We still have very little evidence, but if he left a good set of prints on that glass, the case may be over."

"What do you need prints for?"

"Nell Troppit was murdered. Borling had to get rid of her to cut his losses. He used the same technique on her that she'd tried to use on the rest of us, maybe at his suggestion: a paralyzing poison followed by a gunshot—in her case with the appearance of suicide—but he slipped up on several points, including the angle of fire. He also was careless about what he touched. Perhaps the sudden collapse of his scheme rattled him. He left prints on the glass she drank from and also on the lamp, and Martha saw him coming out of the underground room. Martha's hearing isn't good, but there's nothing at all wrong with her eyesight. There'll be other evidence. The police have caught two of Endford's associates, and they'll talk once they hear Borling has been arrested, but we'd like to be certain about the fingerprints before we move."

"You knew all of this before you staged your charade," I said resentfully. "Things were confused enough already. Why muddle them further by telling both Borling and the Johnstons a pack of lies?"

"I didn't want anyone giving anything away before Borling left."

Miss Laurette had finally caught up with what we were talking about. She exclaimed, "Are you saying that Madge is Letty's grandchild, and her husband murdered both Nell and that young man Joe Murphy? Why, the poor child!" She got to her feet. "I must bring her and the children here."

"Not yet," Raina said. "This has got to run its course."

The solemn-looking young man stuck his head in the door, smiled, nodded. "Sixteen characteristics on one and fourteen on the other. No doubt about it. We have him."

As Raina picked up the telephone, she said to me, "There are two deputies watching Borling's home and office. One is in a car parked

by the General Store. The other is on foot. They'll move as soon as they hear. If you want to be in on it, you'd better get down there."

Finally I understood. She had converted the meeting with Jaffke into a trap for Borling. By showing him Carla Joblan's expertise with documents and having Carla mention Blyning, New Jersey, she let him know his time was running out. She wanted to stampede him into trying to escape, which would be the next best thing to a confession, and at this point there really was nothing for him to do but run for it. His only alternative was to wait passively to be arrested.

I was out of the office before Raina finished dialing.

18

Leland Borling had left his car parked out by the highway when he returned from High Acres. The deputy who was supposed to be watching from the parking lot of Fithie's General Store had positioned himself behind a clump of shrubbery that stood between the old stone building that served as Borling's home and law office and Fithie's commercial property. It concealed him from the law office windows, but he was attracting stares from Fithie's customers. The other deputy wasn't visible.

I joined the deputy behind the shrubbery.

"My partner's waiting across the road," he told me. "I don't think Borling suspects anything. We could go in after him, but I figure there's no point in alarming his family. We'll grab him when he goes out to his car."

"He said he was due in court, so he should be leaving soon," I said. "I'll cover the other side for you."

I circled widely and found my own clump of shrubbery twenty yards beyond the house. As it turned out, Borling used the side door, and I had the best view of him.

He was carrying an overnight bag, and he had changed into

something I hadn't seen him wear since the night of the coon hunt—jeans and a leather jacket. Madge and the kids were with him. I never knew whether he unexpectedly performed an honorable act or whether it was one more sly maneuver on his part. Either he wasted all of three minutes giving them as affectionate a farewell as I have ever witnessed, hugging and kissing each in turn and then doing it over again, or he was stalling for time while meditating on his next move.

He certainly had taken note of Carla Joblan's performance with the documents and her mention of Blyning, New Jersey, and he probably had seen the deputies arriving. When he moved, he moved with surprising quickness—not in the direction of his car but toward a tongue of the forest that extended behind the house. The two deputies rushed after him. I wasn't dressed for a woodsman act, so I shouted, "I'll watch the road." Having seen Borling floundering about during the coon hunt, I knew he was no woodsman, either. The dash into the forest could have been a trick.

It was. I don't know how he eluded the chase, but twenty minutes later he popped into view a mere fifty yards down the road and ran toward his car with a loping stride. He still carried his bag.

I got to the car before he did and stood waiting, automatic in hand. He turned and ran back into the forest. I could have dropped him easily. Most of us are entitled to a certain humane consideration by virtue of our humanity, but a murderer forfeits this when he murders. Borling bore the ultimate responsibility for at least six deaths, and I knew he would murder again if it seemed to his advantage.

But I couldn't do it with his wife and children watching from a window. Instead, I chased after him and shouted an alarm. When I heard an answering shout, I resumed my vigil by the car.

Reinforcements began to arrive. The first was Miss Laurette. She gathered up Madge and the children and took them off to High Acres with a vague reference to a party. Madge knew something was wrong. Her husband had dressed oddly, and then he had run off and left his car. She didn't want to leave. She had to have supper ready when her husband came home, she said, and anyway, she was supposed to be in charge of the office. Miss Laurette couldn't be derailed by minor details like that.

"If it's important, people always call back," she said. "Don't worry about your husband. He's just taking the day off. If he comes home hungry, he can eat with us."

They drove away.

More police arrived. Some fanned out into the forest. Others took charge of Borling's car and house and began to search them. Another half hour went by before I heard the gunshot. I waited, tensing momentarily when I saw someone approaching through the trees, but it was one of the deputies.

He paused to catch his breath before he spoke. "We'll need an ambulance for him."

"Is he hurt bad?" I asked.

"Naw. Barry plinked him in the leg. He wasn't even carrying a gun."

He went to radio for the ambulance. When I turned around, I saw Tad Williams watching from across the highway with a big grin on his face. His bicycle was leaning against a nearby tree. That boy would have made a fine detective—he had a knack for showing up where the action was.

I exchanged a few words with him, wished him luck with his medical career in case I didn't see him again, and then went for my car.

The case was over. Raina Lambert would spend several more days on it, putting everything into a tidy package for the client—clients always want cases handed to them neatly packaged—but I now knew or could guess the probable answers to the most important questions.

First there was Leland Borling, an obnoxious character and a blight on a profession that honorable men practice honorably. He ranked second to none on my list of conniving villains. He was a specialist in family law and a pervert with an interest in young girls. Even without the murders, it would have been difficult to contrive much sympathy for him.

He met pretty young Madge and caught the name "Narlander," which reminded him of a visit to his physician father years before. He seduced the girl—he'd had enough experience to be an expert—but before he took the drastic step of marrying her, it would have been in character for him to return to New Jersey and have a certified copy

made of those private records just to be certain that Madge's descent from Letitia Johnston could be proved in court; and also to consult with Steve Malkinson, the Johnston's attorney, to make certain the General's illegitimate great-granddaughter could inherit. Both answers being favorable, he married Madge and maneuvered himself into a partnership with the lawyer who handled the Johnston's legal affairs.

He was on the highroad to acquiring a huge estate with a fortune to match. Only the irresponsible Al and the elderly Miss Laurette stood in his way. The General's health was good, so he could take his time about disposing of them. He did nothing at all until Malkinson was dead and he was firmly established as the General's attorney. Then he directed his attention to what he considered his most critical problem.

It was urgent—more than that, it was imperative—to be certain that the General couldn't make a new will or modify the one he had. Any attorney Miss Laurette or the General consulted would have recommended changes. The mere addition of the word "legitimate" would disinherit Madge. Borling had to find a dramatic way to demonstrate the General's mental incompetence.

The marching Civil War ghosts and the Yankee sharpshooters must have been Borling's idea, and it was a masterstroke. The ghosts marched where the General would be certain to see them; the sharpshooters harassed him when he was playing war. His dash into the night to cane the Yankee foragers, and his complaints about Yankee sharpshooters—made with understandable pique because one of them accidentally came close to hitting him—were received with affectionate tolerance by everyone, but they also were taken as further evidence of his deteriorating mental condition. They guaranteed there would be no new will.

When Borling discovered how befuddled Nell Troppit's mind was about her marriage and her relationship to the Wassler children, he devised a role for her in his conspiracy. She was to do the dirty work—as much of it as possible while he was in Atlanta with an impeccable alibi—and take the rap. He easily forged legal papers proving Mark and Belinda were her children and legitimate Johnston heirs. He didn't skimp on the documents—they had looked genuine

to Eldred Jaffke—but of course they weren't intended to stand up under legal scrutiny. They were only designed to confuse a former mental patient whose mind still contained dark areas of madness.

Nell believed in them absolutely. Probably Borling persuaded her to return them to him for safekeeping and destroyed them as soon as he dared, but Nell was shrewd enough to make copies first. Then she set to work with fierce determination to restore the legacy she thought Mark and Belinda were entitled to. When murder became necessary, she didn't shrink from it. She was more than willing to sacrifice herself.

Endford probably was an old friend of hers from her Milledgeville days. He or one of his associates had a New York contact who could recruit the men she needed—all of them criminals with good reason for dropping out of sight for a time. They didn't mind a spell of rural skullduggery in return for a comfortable hiding place and the rich rewards promised when the Johnston fortune could be shared out. Nell lodged this riffraff across the state line under the auspices of the Brotherhood of St. Giles, whose status as a charity still looked blighted to me.

Eventually she must have suspected Borling of furthering a sinister plot of his own. Otherwise, why would she place copies of her precious documents with Eldred Jaffke?

But the army she recruited was her own, and Borling quickly lost control of it. The irrationality we kept encountering was Nell's, not his, and enough things happened when he was in Atlanta to convince me that Nell deliberately waited until he was away to exercise her madness. It was that blend of Nell's lunacy with Borling's calculating logic that made the case so perplexing.

Borling would have retired the ghosts and sharpshooters to limbo once the General's reaction to them became widely known. Nell kept them going. They established a reign of terror around High Acres that must have been useful to her. Frightened people are hesitant to snoop into things that don't concern them, which left Nell's riffraff free to prowl unmolested. I had no doubt that Kolina Kirkland took to carrying a gun because there were so many odd strangers about. Obviously it was Nell's pals who kept an eye on Al Johnston.

The grandiose plan to dispose of all of the heirs at once, including

the absent Al Johnston, showed Nell's madness raging completely out of control. Surely Borling would have opposed that vehemently, but he no longer had any voice in what was happening. When the plan failed, Nell resorted to poison.

It had to be Endford who murdered Joe Murphy. He also fired the shots at Raina Lambert. Probably Nell had been hanging around High Acres for any information she could pick up. When she saw Raina going to the gazebo, she used the High Acres phone to call Endford at the Witch's Circle. He hurried to the clearing, watched until Raina showed herself, fired quickly, and returned to the house. Nell dashed home in time to encounter me when I came looking for the sniper. Her anger was a measure of how narrowly I missed him. It also reflected fear that I had noticed the company she was keeping. Remembering the fury she directed at me, I felt severe sympathy for what Tisha must have suffered when the poor girl was caught snooping.

I now had a better idea of why Tisha had been kept alive. They wanted a body to stand proxy for Nell when the Round House was burned, and Tisha providentially appeared at just the right moment. Then they reluctantly decided her diminutive body wouldn't fool anyone, and Nell remembered the Alabama patient who conveniently had a matching foot deformity. Tisha, no longer needed, had been forgotten.

The burning of the Witch's Circle, and the supposed murder of Nell, were designed to quiet any suspicions her activities may have aroused. Nell took refuge in the underground room, amply equipped with poison just in case she found an opportunity to use it, and Raina Lambert provided one. Her usefulness to Borling had already ended, and at that point he got rid of a dangerous witness by faking a suicide.

In multiple ways Leland Borling wasn't a nice man, but in one respect I had to admire him. He attended that meeting at High Acres with no notion at all of what documents Nell Troppit might have left with Jaffke. It was her final piece of witchcraft, in which her dead voice would speak one more time, and he had no way of knowing what accusations she might deliver. Then Jaffke unveiled copies of the forgeries Borling had thought safely destroyed, after which Carla Joblan demonstrated a different kind of magic, that of a resourceful

and competent researcher, and Borling had to sit there and watch calmly while his carefully nurtured plans crumbled to dust and his life was left in severe jeopardy. He carried the thing off with amazing aplomb. He was not a man I would have cared to play poker with.

But now it was finished. We had brought the case to a triumphant solution, but one aspect of it looked like a messy failure to me. The revelation that the Alabama woman had been lying bound and gagged somewhere in the Witch's Circle the night of the fire, waiting to be hideously murdered, while Tisha had been lying helplessly out in the forest, would always haunt me. In my attempt to heroically rescue Nell, I forgot that an investigator always investigates.

I drove the gravel road to the Corners one last time, making a mental list of things I wanted to do: See Dori, see her Nuncle Ned and Aunt Tessie, see Drew Fithie, stop at the Tri-County Hospital and see Ed Schaffer and Tisha.

Crossing a bridle path, I caught a glimpse of a horsewoman. I came to a skidding stop, and Kolina Kirkland rode over to the car. "Miss Raina said you'll be leaving soon," she said.

"Yes. Probably today."

"I hardly had a chance to get acquainted with you." She hesitated. Then she said, with obvious embarrassment, "I had a long talk with Miss Laurette."

"About Leland Borling?"

She nodded.

"He was blackmailing you?"

She nodded again. "He threatened to get me fired without a recommendation."

That would have made it virtually impossible for her to find another job as a personal secretary.

"I didn't know he was doing all those things," she said. "I thought he just—liked girls, you know. Sometimes I talked with him about what the Johnstons were doing, but I didn't see anything wrong with that. He was their attorney, he knew a lot more about them than I did. Finally I realized something very sinister was going on, and it frightened me. I refused to have anything more to do with him."

"Are you going to stay on?"

She nodded happily. "Miss Laurette was very fair about it. She said

it wasn't my fault. I love this place. Come back and see us some time when you don't have to work. I'll take you horseback riding!"

"I'd like that," I told her. "Unfortunately, I'm allergic to horses." Actually, it's the idea of myself on a horse that I'm allergic to. I've tried it a few times, and I've never been able to convince myself that I don't look as ridiculous as I feel.

At the Corners, I packed quickly, delivered the cabin key to May and Duff, and thanked them for their hospitality. I made my escape before they could invite me back for horseback riding. I told the monks good-by and asked Brother Mulberry if he could spare the time to ride to High Acres with me. Someone there was certain to need him before the day was out.

I described what had happened as I drove. He sat huddled beside me, a massive form listening with a gravely troubled face. More than anyone I have ever met, he felt things—the murderer's burden of guilt, the loss and shame inflicted on innocent young Madge and her children, all of the pain the crimes had caused. Most ministers react verbally to a loss. They quote the Bible, they offer words. Brother Mulberry shared the suffering.

Madge Borling and her two children were already in seclusion in some remote part of the High Acres mansion, and Miss Laurette was looking after them. We joined Raina Lambert, who was talking in the library with Mark and Belinda Wassler. I had never seen two more thoroughly crushed people than the Wasslers. A person they loved had committed heinous crimes, supposedly in their behalf.

Belinda said tearfully, "I just can't understand it. Mark and I have always known who our real parents were. Their name was Atter. We have our adoption papers at home. We were told when we were children that we were adopted, and several times we were taken to meet our relatives. Mom and Dad Wassler were great, wonderful human beings. They thought it important for us to know all about our real parents' families."

She talked about their youth. No present-day agency would have approved the Wasslers as adoptive parents, but it was the best possible arrangement for Mark and Belinda. Belinda had been only a few weeks old; she couldn't remember the Atters, but Mark had haunting memories of a severe home life with a sickly mother and a

brutal, unstable father. Suddenly he had been surrounded by love. The Wasslers adored them as only a childless middle-aged couple could. "We didn't have wealth," Belinda said, "but we were much better off than most children—we had love and understanding." Mark and Belinda thrived, and both they and the Wasslers were richly rewarded.

"Our grandmother—our real father's mother—gave us a Bible with a complete family tree in it," Mark said. "All the aunts and uncles and cousins were listed. Belinda has kept it up-to-date as well as she could. Most of those relatives were poor people, but there was nothing about them to be ashamed of. We were poor, too. We still keep in touch with some of them."

"We've always known Nell was our aunt by marriage," Belinda said. "She's entered in the Bible as our uncle's wife. We loved and worshipped her. Her visits were better than Christmas. She brought us presents when we had so little. She helped with so many things—food, and taxes, and electric bills."

"It wasn't until we came here that she asked us not to call her Auntie," Mark said. "That seemed odd, but we thought it had something to do with her being a witch. We never paid any attention to that—it was a playacting kind of thing. People needed a witch, so she was a witch. She persuaded us to move here. She said we were her only relatives, and she wanted us close to her. And she lent us the money to build the store and house. Gave it to us, actually. She wouldn't even take a note for it or collect interest. 'It was going to be yours anyway when I die, so you might as well have the use of it now when you need it,' she said. We owe everything to her—when we were young, there were times we would have gone hungry without her help—but I didn't know she'd been at Milledgeville, and she certainly showed no signs of insanity that I ever noticed."

"She loved you and thought you were her children," Raina Lambert said. "No court would indict her for that. The conspiracy was Borling's doing. He worked on her madness for his own evil purposes."

Brother Mulberry came forward with a suggestion of his own: Somehow it seemed inappropriate to place Nell, Selwyn Endford, and the two men killed in the truck crash—all of them confederates in a

conspiracy against the Johnstons—in the Village cemetery. He offered to bury them with reverence in the tiny Corners cemetery where Jim Dimmock, the young man found dead in a Civil War uniform, already rested. He also wanted to place the murdered Alabama woman there, since no one had claimed her body. Raina and I left the discussion to them.

Outside the door, R. N. Renkle was waiting. He looked frightened. "Look," he said. "The Brotherhood of St. Giles is a charity and nothing but a charity. Several of us are devoting our lives to it. You can check on us any way you like."

"Nell Troppit helped with your financing, didn't she?" Raina asked.

"Well—yes. When we were trying to get started, she gave us five thousand dollars. And several other times, when we were hard-pressed, she made contributions."

"And you did her a few favors in return?"

He didn't answer.

"You provided marching Civil War ghosts for her?"

"Well—yes. It was just a harmless joke, she said."

"How many times?

"I don't know. Maybe seven or eight. But all they did was march!"

"We know what they did," Raina said. "I take it your men had nothing to do with the arson."

"Absolutely nothing. We didn't even know about it until the police talked with us. Mrs. Troppit supplied the uniforms. Endford drove the men over here in one of our trucks, showed them where to march, and drove them back. It certainly seemed harmless."

"You also provided quarters for Nell Troppit's men?"

"Not with us. They used an old farmhouse half a mile down the road."

"But you rented it for them?"

"Well—yes. As a favor to Mrs. Troppit. She provided the money."

"You rented it in the name of the Brotherhood of St. Giles?"

"Well—yes."

"And you let her men use your vehicles?"

"Nell said they were helping out with charities over here in Georgia," he said weakly.

"Her charities weren't noticeably charitable. The police will want

to know all about this. I suggest you answer them frankly and truthfully. Next time, exercise some care in the favors you perform and accept. There won't be any more contributions, but your men won't have to march again, either."

He left. Raina said, "Belinda knew one of his men, Marty Quint, from a place she worked in Atlanta before she came here. Quint didn't know what was going on, but he saw enough to feel disturbed about it. He had a fund-raising speech to make in Chattanooga, and because Belinda was closely connected with High Acres, he stopped off on his way there to talk with her. What he said sounded alarming. She discussed it with Mark, but the case blew wide open before they could decide what to do."

Miss Laurette arrived in time to hear the end of the conversation. She had met Renkle on his way out, and she said, "Charities have enormous problems raising money, so perhaps we should be charitable ourselves. Mr. Renkle has been disgustingly naïve, but friends in Alabama tell me the Brotherhood of St. Giles really is a worthwhile charity."

Old Mac escorted a visitor in—one of the deputy sheriffs. The officer presented Miss Laurette with a thick envelope. "Found in Borling's safe," he said. "Stolen property. I'm to take it right back—it may be useful evidence—but since Miss Raina asked the sheriff to look for it, he thought she'd want to see it, and he'd like to know if you can identify the contents. They've already been checked for fingerprints."

"Of course," Miss Laurette said. She sat down at a table with Raina and opened the envelope.

I said to the deputy, "You're moving pretty fast to be into Borling's private papers already."

"The sheriff had a search warrant with a 'no-knock' provision ready in advance," the deputy said. "He didn't want to give Borling a chance to shred any evidence. He also had an expert on hand to open the safe. But Mrs. Borling left in such a hurry she forgot to lock the house, and Borling was in such a hurry he left his safe open, so we just walked in and went to work."

Raina passed the envelope to me. "It was your discovery," she said.

It contained a bundle of old photographs. I looked at the one on top, looked again, and uttered an exclamation. "Who's that?"

"That's Letty," Miss Laurette said.

"I know May said she got pretty all of a sudden, but she was such an unattractive kid in the photos I saw."

The magic of adolescence had touched her, and now she was the ugly duckling transformed. She had slimmed down, put her straight locks in a glamorous hairstyle—probably emulating some movie queen—and become as beautiful as Malcolm was handsome.

The boys in these later photos were older but seemingly unchanged. Laurette and Leonora had evolved from plain children into plainer young women. Only Letty had undergone metamorphosis. Another snapshot showed her at fifteen. Her hair was fixed differently. Her figure was developing. The shy, homely, pouting child she had been was as unlike the blooming teenager as a caterpillar was unlike the butterfly. There was a new spirit in her face—as though she had suddenly discovered her beauty and was glorying in it.

I reached the last photograph. It was Letty at sixteen, perhaps already pregnant and shortly to be banished from High Acres forever. She had a new hairstyle.

Suddenly I saw the resemblance I had been looking for. Letty's face had far more character, perhaps because of her intelligence, but there was no doubt at all about the similarity. This photo of the blonde, sixteen-year-old Letty bore a startling likeness to the blonde Madge Borling.

I said as much and passed it to Miss Laurette. She scrutinized it with a frown. "I'd forgotten this picture. Madge really doesn't look much like Letty, or I would have noticed. But here she seems to. It must have something to do with the way Letty has her hair fixed."

"There was enough resemblance to alarm Borling, or he wouldn't have stolen the photos," I said. "He was afraid someone else would notice it and see through his plot."

"Also, he intended to use the photos to help prove Madge is Letitia's granddaughter," Raina said. "Now the state will make an entirely different use of them in his murder trial."

We returned the photos to the deputy and thanked him. After he left, Raina asked me, "When will you be ready to leave?"

"Whenever you like," I said. "I'm already packed."

"You can drive your rental car back to Atlanta and catch a plane there. Call me from the airport. I'll make the reservation for you."

"To where?"

"I'll tell you when you get to Atlanta."

Miss Laurette was looking at the two of us blankly. "Goodness!" she exclaimed. "Do you post him off to another job—just like that—before he even has time to say good-by to people?"

"If I don't watch her carefully, she does," I said with a grin. "But I always take the time anyway if I think there's someone who might be sorry I'm leaving. As for the people who'll be glad to see me go, I look them up, too, and tell them I intend to stay a while. I like almost every place I work, and I always meet people I'd like to know better. The only solution is to leave quickly."

"He's happiest when he keeps moving," Raina said.

"I don't believe that!" Miss Laurette said indignantly. "You must come back. Spend a vacation here. There are so many lovely things to do."

"Horseback riding?" I suggested.

"All you want."

"I'll think about it."

I shook hands with her. Then I went looking for the General and found him in his den. He had a slide projector with a screen that was showing a view of Cemetery Ridge as it would have appeared to Pickett's men during their famous charge at Gettysburg—minus the Federal army, of course. He was either scrutinizing it intently through narrowed eyes, or he was dozing. He straightened with a start when he became aware of me.

We discussed the Battle of Gettysburg for a few minutes. Volumes have been written about it, but the General thought insufficient attention had been given to Ewell's attack on Culp's Hill. Pickett's famous charge—and failure—was a desperate move made necessary because Ewell's attack failed. The General thought it should have succeeded.

I slyly tried to trip him up on the subject of the dead Yankee

sharpshooter. I had no doubt, now, that he ordered his boys to shoot back when one of the Yankee's shots grazed him, and then, when he suspected trouble might result, he made certain they would never mention it to anyone.

"What do you do with the Yankee dead in your war games?" I asked him.

"The Yankee dead are the Yankees' responsibility," he said with a wisp of a smile. "I look after my own casualties."

It was a good answer.

While we talked, I thought about the family tragedies he had presided over and wondered how much of the blame was his. Certainly he'd had a tough chore raising a large family by himself, and despite his wealth, or maybe because of it, he had muddled the job thoroughly—but the children seemed to have muddled their own lives just as badly. Probably the blame belonged equally to everyone concerned, which is usually the case.

At Fithie's General Store, I did some shopping. I bought an enormous stuffed dog for Tisha. It was almost as large as she was. She had missed her entire childhood and come within an eyelash of missing her adulthood as well. This would provide a small measure of compensation. Probably she had never owned anything of value before, and she would make it the most pampered stuffed dog in the state of Georgia if not the entire South. It cost a small fortune, but it was worth it.

I also bought a five-pound box of candy and talked a clerk into trying to assemble an attractive basket of fruit for Dori's aunt and uncle. Drew Fithie happened along, and he took charge of the project himself when he heard what I was doing. He constructed a Taj Mahal of a fruit basket and laughingly charged me only for the fruit.

Very early in the case, he had figured out for himself that I wasn't a salesman, but he politely refrained from mentioning it. Now he said, "I'm sorry you're going. Those crimes were bad, of course, but it was a lot of fun having you here. You made things happen. Look at this." He pointed at the fruit basket. "Now who else would have thought of a present like that for those two old people? And look at that." He pointed at the stuffed dog. "It's a great idea, and I understand why

you're doing it, but who else would have thought of giving an expensive stuffed toy to that nutty kid?"

I made modest noises and gave him a parting handshake.

A neighbor woman was looking after Aunt Tessie and Nuncle Ned. The eyes of all three of them opened wide when they saw the fruit basket. I explained that the candy was a present for Dori—a surprise for her when she arrived home. Her aunt and uncle were delighted that Dori was receiving a gift of her own. A new wave of gossip was about to break over the Village, but I didn't bother to recite it for them. They would hear it soon enough, and they would be talking about it for months.

I chatted for a time and then took my leave of them. I wanted to tell Dori good-by before I went on to the Tri-County Hospital to see Ed Schaffer and Tisha, but that was one farewell I never got to make. There was a new van parked in front of the Snack and Dessert Bar—a large van, with "Wassler's Electronics" painted on the sides in neat, professional lettering. Mark Wassler had invited Dori out to see how its mechanism loaded and unloaded persons in wheelchairs, but once the two of them got into the van, a different kind of demonstration followed.

Most murders are depressing, but this case did have its bright moments. I gave Mark and Dori a farewell wave. I doubted that either of them saw it, but I certainly wasn't going to interrupt them just to tell them I was leaving. There are times when even a detective shouldn't eavesdrop.

ENVOI

In my dedicatory preface to the previous J. Pletcher and Raina Lambert novel, *A Hazard of Losers*, I wrote, "This book was made possible by the friendly interest and generous assistance of a large number of people who, in official or unofficial capacities, were unfailingly considerate and hospitable to an inquiring stranger." The same applies to this book. Without the friendly interest, assistance, and splendid hospitality of people in Chattanooga and northwest Georgia down to Atlanta, this book would have been impossible to write. Unfortunately, I am able to mention only a few of them. Some prefer to remain anonymous, and I failed to obtain the names of others.

A search for the origin of the story would be like the search for the origin of a Congo or an Amazon: One would think one had found it, but continued exploration would keep pushing the source further and further back.

The beginning may lie in my childhood. My great-grandfather, Peter Woodring, was a Civil War veteran. He lived almost to age ninety-five, and I can remember sitting on the floor beside his rocking chair as a child and listening to him spin tales of the Battle of Vicksburg and other engagements he took part in. The Civil War has never seemed remote to me; I heard it described by someone who was there.

(When Peter Woodring was a farm boy growing up in Illinois, his parents one day took him to the nearest large town, Freeport, to a political meeting. That meeting consisted of a debate between two politicians named Lincoln and Douglas. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates have never seemed remote to me, either, for the same reason.)

To this background was added the fortunate coincidence of my discovering at an early age a fascinating series of books about the Civil War. I pursued that interest into adulthood. Eventually it began

to fade, but the writing of Bruce Catton, which aroused the interest of so many Americans in the Civil War, revived it.

Up to ten years ago, I had been a Civil War "fan" virtually all of my life, but—like Calvin Rick in the novel—I had never seen a Civil War battlefield. In 1983, my wife and I decided to vacation in the Great Smoky Mountains. When planning the trip, I put a jog into our route so we could visit the Chattanooga area.

We spent several days tracing Civil War history and enjoying the various tourist attractions. Evenings, from the patio of our motel room high on Lookout Mountain, I looked down at the lights in the valley below and thought about the drama that had been enacted there. As yet I had no notion of setting a novel in the area, but I knew then that I wanted to see it again. A number of years later, when I began considering the potential of a pair of traveling detectives who would visit interesting places and solve crimes there, Chattanooga and northwest Georgia were high on my list of possible story locations.

How does an author go about setting a novel in a place he glimpsed only once, briefly? He begins by reading extensively. This may not provide many answers, but at least it gives him a notion of what he needs to know. A local contact is invaluable, and I inquired to see whether my friends knew anyone in Chattanooga. This brought me the names of Dick Lynch and his wife, Nicki, who were flatteringly willing to assist an author. They began furnishing me with the materials and information I needed. Unfortunately, before I was able to carry my research to Chattanooga, they moved to Maryland, and I have never had the pleasure of meeting them.

They recommended a successor, artist Julie Scott, and she and her mother, Elizabeth Morgan, provided continuing support and a wealth of material about the area before, during, and after my second visit to Chattanooga. I remember how appalled Mrs. Morgan was when she discovered I had never seen, or even heard of, beggar's-lice. She dashed out of the house and down the road to a place where she had noticed some growing and brought me back a clump. Of such minute details are books fashioned, and the research for a book of this type requires an attention to details that might astonish a reader who has never given the problem a thought.

Julie Scott acted as my guide not only for Chattanooga but for the entire area, and we spent a lovely autumn day driving through the mountains south of Chattanooga and visiting small towns in the area. She even lent me her home and its lovely setting on the slope of Missionary Ridge to use as the home of Rosemary Chambers and her parents.

My plot concerned a crime committed at Point Park on Lookout Mountain. Since this is federal territory, it posed problems for a criminal investigation. The only way to find out how it would be handled was to ask, and I spent a morning there. First Ranger Ken Dubke and his staff answered all of my questions and allowed me to use the headquarters library. First Ranger Dubke retired a short time later, and I lost touch with him. When I needed a few points clarified after I had returned home, Ranger Cliff Kevill (who has since been transferred to the Blue Ridge Parkway) corresponded with me and sent additional material.

When I learned that Hamilton County Sheriff's Department detectives would be called in on a crime committed at Point Park, I visited the Sheriff's Department and discussed the matter with Detective Sergeant (now Captain) Roy C. Parham and Detective (now Detective Sergeant) Larry Sneed, of the Major Crimes Division. They not only provided all the information I needed, but Detective Sergeant Sneed handled further questions by letter.

As a setting for most of the story's action, I gently pried apart the map of Georgia and inserted a fictitious (unnamed) county. Having done so, I had to populate it—not only with towns and people, but also with flora, fauna, and geological formations. The simple problem of describing the mountains of that region, as I do on the first page of the novel with a few words, turned out to be extremely complicated. When I became thoroughly confused by contradictory statements in reference works, I consulted the Georgia Department of Natural Resources where geologist Michael K. Laney settled the problem deftly.

To achieve a better understanding of the flora one encounters in that mountainous region, I visited Chattanooga's Reflection Riding Nature Center. The center itself, with its nature trails, offers a fascinating education. At the center's headquarters, naturalist Beth Ann

Fisher helped me to populate my fictitious county with a proper mix of trees and shrubs.

After I had talked with as many people as possible in Chattanooga, and exhausted my questions about that area, I spent a day looping through northwest Georgia in search of information about rural law enforcement for my fictitious county and observing how people lived and worked there. I visited the county seats of several small counties, talking with anyone in an official or unofficial capacity who could spare me a moment—courthouse workers, motel or store clerks, waitresses, service station attendants, casual passersby. At a restaurant in one mountain town, I ate a lunch embellished with turnip greens and felt I had become indigenous myself. I remember with special pleasure and gratitude the Dade County Sheriff and his staff, who cheerfully interrupted their work to make certain I got the information I needed.

Leaving the courthouse in Lafayette, Georgia, I noticed an attorney's office, so I called there—without an appointment, naturally—to obtain information on the laws of Georgia as they would affect the story I had in mind. What I had to know—about wills, adoptions, legal name changes, and other aspects of Georgian Law—was fairly complex. Attorney Kenneth D. Bruce not only made me welcome and gave me everything I needed, but he later furnished additional information and supplied copies of legal forms I had to describe.

When I drove down to Atlanta to research the novel's action there, I turned to a fellow author and longtime friend, Gerald Page, and his sister, Debbie Page. Both are lifelong residents of Atlanta. I needed to identify the neighborhood settings where my characters lived and locate state and local offices where I could turn up information I needed. The most complicated Atlanta problem concerned the question of juvenile court procedures and how an investigator would obtain information about cases. I had expected several days of tedious chasing from place to place, but Jerry and Debbie unerringly directed me to the right places and the required information, and my work in Atlanta proved to be the simplest phase of my research.

My fictitious county required a highway with a number that wouldn't be confused with one in another part of the state. An employee of the Georgia State Highway Department kindly checked

his records and suggested that I use number 353, which had been taken out of service some years before and probably wouldn't be used again. In this way, I acquired my very own Georgia state highway.

Not all of the information came from Tennessee and Georgia. Michigan residents also contributed. Tom Rice, a Civil War hobbyist with expertise in its weapons, gave me a wealth of material on cannon, rifles, and the handling and firing of them. Deputy Sheriff Ken Biggle and Security Officer Harry Maleski provided detailed information concerning the problems of shooting at moving vehicles.

The use made of this material is of course the author's responsibility, and if, in spite of the expert assistance provided, errors have crept into the book, these are of my own making.

Lloyd Biggle, Jr.
Ypsilanti, Michigan, March, 1994

LLOYD BIGGLE, JR., is the author of four mysteries, including *A Hazard of Losers* and *Interface for Murder*, both in this series, and twelve science fiction novels. He lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

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