

THE KINGDOMS
OF SAVANNAH

Also by George Dawes Green

The Caveman's Valentine

The Juror

Ravens

THE KINGDOMS
OF SAVANNAH



GEORGE DAWES GREEN


CELADON
BOOKS

NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and recent events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

THE KINGDOMS OF SAVANNAH. Copyright © 2022 by George Dawes Green. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. For information, address Celadon Books, a division of Macmillan Publishers, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271.

www.celadonbooks.com

Map design by Daniel Dirkin and Jessica Anne Schwartz

Map illustration by Daniel Dirkin

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Green, George Dawes, author.

Title: The kingdoms of Savannah / George Dawes Green.

Description: First edition. | New York : Celadon Books, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022004925 | ISBN 9781250767448 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9781250767431 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3557.R3717 K56 2022 | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20220207

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022004925>

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 800-221-7945, extension 5442, or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

First Edition: 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Esther, this is the one passage in the book where I can't ask your help, can't get your insights and razor editing, and it's starting to sound a bit long-winded and unshaped, and I'm sure you'd cut this whole first sentence, wouldn't you?
Anyway, I will love you always and this book is for you.*

A NOTE ON HISTORY

This book is fiction, but at its heart is a history so strange and troubling that no novelist could have invented it. I didn't try. The historical secrets that the Musgrove family uncover in the course of this investigation are all true, and at the book's end I'll provide notes to lead you to further reading—a kind of “ghost tour” to the real horrors of Savannah.

PROLOGUE

WHY DIDN'T THE SKELETON CROSS THE ROAD?





A soft spring night in Savannah. In an hour Luke will be murdered, stabbed to death, and Stony will be snatched off the streets and hurled into darkness, but for now it's just the two of them walking to their favorite bar for a nightcap. Luke's a white kid, early twenties; he has big-ass bones and hulks when he walks. Stony's Black, forty-three. A bit lame from a bum knee, which various websites have been telling her is a torn this or an inflamed that, or gout maybe or rheumatism. Her mother says rheumatism would be just deserts for sleeping in the woods all the time, out in the damp. "You're lucky you don't get no *fungus*. You're lucky you ain't been ate by no *wild pigs*." Her mother loves to mutter the names of dangerous things. Fungus, snakes, the police, that Nigerian prince tryin to catch her money. Stony misses her. She thinks maybe tomorrow she'll take the city bus down to the Tatemville neighborhood for a visit. But for now she and Luke make their way peacefully around Lafayette Square, past the fancy houses with their gas lamps and dark gardens. Stony can pick out the fragrances. The wisteria, the early tea roses, jessamine. She takes after her mother, and there's always any number of things eating at her, but tonight she's not

brooding about anything. Tonight she loves Savannah, she loves Luke, her Kingdom is more or less safe. Tonight she's floating.

Then just as they're about to turn onto Drayton Street, Luke says, "Shh! Shh!" and stops. Stony hears it too. Whistling. The guy they call the Musician, who wanders around the city at night and whistles. First his tune comes low and caressing like a clarinet, then it swoops up an octave and it's a flute, as clear as ice. They can't see him. You never see the Musician when he's whistling, but the melody seems to come from all around, from the trees and the porches. When a mockingbird to their left starts singing, the Musician holds up a moment and then *replies* to that bird. Stony's in bliss.

But along comes a ghost tour to fuck up the moment.

Open hearse. Full of tourists. Rattling up Drayton Street, with the ghoul-guide on a loudspeaker booming out: "OK, GUYS! WHY *DIDN'T* THE SKELETON CROSS THE ROAD?"

Wait for it.

"HE HAD *NO GUTS!* HA HA HA HA HA!"

As the hearse passes, one of the drunken tourists looks down and shouts: "YO, FRANKENSTEIN! YO, UGLY WITCH!"

Then it's gone. The Musician's gone too. Stony and Luke strain their ears, but nothing.

Ghost tours are a plague, she thinks. I live in a city whose principal industries are death and the production of bad puns about death, and no wonder we all get so gloomy. But when she looks over to Luke, she finds he's grinning. Actually quite pleased to have been cast as a mythical Savannah monster. He's bipolar and he's been on the upswing for some days, with money in his pocket from life-modeling for SCAD—the Savannah College of Art and Design—and now he brings forth his sweet childish laugh, which is surprising for a man so big, and Stony can't help but laugh with him. Ahead is the sign for their bar: Miss Bo Peep with her neon shepherd's crook and naughty pantaloons, watching over her neon sheep and also over the flock of inebriates lighting up smokes on the sidewalk beneath her. Coming to Peep's always feels like

coming home. Stony and Luke get a dozen fist bumps and high fives before they're even at the door. Rednecks, shrimp packers, teachers from SCAD, soldiers from the 3rd Infantry, old Billy Sugar with his long, grizzled whiskers. He's here most nights but never goes inside because he's always got his dog, Gracie, with him, and anyway has no money, and anyway prefers the night air. He drinks from a flask, which he shares with old, wizened Jane, who was a hooker back in the days when sailors in the big ships were allowed port leave (she must be eighty but insists she's only "semiretired"). Everyone likes to close their night at Peep's. Stony and Luke greet everyone and work their way inside. Some patrons are just leaving so they manage to grab stools at the horseshoe bar. Sinéad is playing on the jukebox. On the walls are a thousand photos of the original owner, a bootlegger known as Bo Peep, wearing a porkpie hat and posing with all his chums and cronies.

Right away the bartender brings them a margarita and a PBR.

This bartender's name is Jaq. She asks for no money, never does. Just sets out their drinks and goes back to work.

But Stony calls after her: "No, Jaq, tonight we're payin, we're flush! I found a Bolen Bevel arrowhead. Sweet one. Got good money." Not *great* money: eighty-five bucks. But Stony sets a twenty on the bar and insists, "Do *not* give me no change, bitch."

Jaq smiles and rings the tip bell and moves to the far side of the horseshoe bar, and Stony watches her.

Luke murmurs, "Hey, Stony."

"What?"

"Your crush is showing."

"Ha ha. Is it?"

Laughing it off, but he's right. It's a thorny one. Three nights a week, ever since Stony got back into town from the Kingdom, she's been coming in here to gaze at this girl. Jaq's twenty-three. She's Black with a fountain of box braids, and cuts such a sweet compact figure in her jeans and her little crop tee that when she stretches for a pour from the taps, all her admirers must suck in their breaths. And there are many of those,

particularly now so close to closing: boys who linger at the horseshoe bar and give her hopeful looks because sometimes on a whim she *will* pick one out and go off with him. In the late-night rush she works fast and her braids fly and she's snappish with the clientele ("Stop waving your money at me, asshole! You think I'm a *frog*? That I only see *movement*?") but she's often laughing and even when she's not her eyes have little darts of light, and she's always curious and questions everything. When she gets a break, she'll pick up her camera and furry microphone and make videos for her MFA application project, which she calls *Some Town Out of a Fable*.

"I will admit, though," says Luke, "you did just get a smile from her."

"Oh, yeah?" says Stony. "I'm sure she's really into crones."

"You're not a crone."

"Thank you, Luke."

"You're just so very fucking old."

They sip their drinks and listen to the jukebox and keep watching Jaq.

Till Stony feels a tap on her shoulder. She swings round on her stool and it's some guy, pale and clean-shaven and small, with a jacket that doesn't fit and a black polyester tie, like he's a Jehovah's Witness or something. He says, "Hey, you're Matilda Stone, right?"

She shrugs. Matilda is her name but her friends never use it.

He says, "You're like an archaeologist?"

A curt nod so as not to encourage him.

"Like, a professor?"

Actually, no, she's not a professor of anything. She's a *contract* archaeologist, though she hasn't been fully employed in a long time. She lives off the occasional arrowhead, or when the county's paving a new parking lot they bring her in to make sure it's not on a burial ground. Plus now she's got a "patron" who helps her out a bit. Though if this dude here wants to think she's a professor, let him.

She asks, "Do we know each other?"

"You don't remember me? Lloyd? From Statesboro?"

"Nope."

“We met at Wild Wings.”

“I doubt that.”

The guy has a friend who comes up now. Also clean-shaven and buzz cut, also with a tie and ill-fitting jacket. Stony wonders, is this some kind of JW *convention*?

But as soon as they get Jaq’s attention they order shots of Jack Daniel’s (so no, they’re not JWs). And Lloyd buys Stony another margarita. Which is nice of him, but the price is, now he’s bought the right to bore her. Which he does, in a cracker whine pitched right up there with the insects. Starting with a discussion of his work. He sells wholesale plumbing supplies out of Statesboro. Stony knows Statesboro, has driven through it many times and always felt sorry for it, partly for its ugliness but mostly for the banality of that name, in a part of Georgia where towns have names like Enigma and Sunsweet and El Dorado.

Lloyd seems to notice that she’s drifting, for he suddenly shifts to, “Hey, ain’t them screamin eagles awesome?” For a moment her ears perk up. But turns out he’s not talking about wild raptors. The Screaming Eagles, it seems, are a sports team. Back in Statesboro. Winner of last year’s inter-subdivisional something or other. When all she wants to do is gaze at Jaq.

Then comes a little surprise. He brings his face close to hers and says, “Hey, you know you got yellow eyes—you know that?”

“Yeah?” she says. “Well my daddy was a jackal.”

Little joke but he doesn’t laugh. He keeps looking into her eyes.

Oh Jesus. It finally dawns on her. He’s hitting on her.

What’s this about?

Nobody’s hit on her in quite a while. And I *could* use some cock, she thinks, and maybe he’s got a perfectly nice one.

Though on second thought, no. Since it would come attached to the rest of him, to the wholesale plumbing supplies and the Screaming Eagles. She says, “Hey, listen, I gotta talk to my friend about something so excuse me, OK, Floyd?” And swings her stool back to face the bar.

To find a camera staring at her.

Jaq, on her break, is recording her.

Shit. Stony's heart jumps in its cage.

"Stony," Jaq asks, "would you tell us about where you live?"

Cameras terrify Stony. She knows she's mentioned to Jaq, more than once, that lately she's been living in a Kingdom. But those were slips. She sometimes drinks too much. The whole Kingdom thing has to be kept quiet. "Jaq, not everyone wants to hear about that."

But Jaq's breath is so fresh and sweet and she pleads so tenderly. "Just a little bit for my doc? Before I have to start working again? Do you *really* live in a Kingdom?"

And Stony finds herself crumbling. "Well. I do."

"What's it like?"

"But I mean I just shouldn't—"

"Is it in Savannah?"

"Near."

"Who else lives there?"

"The King's soldiers."

"Who are they?"

Stony feels a pinch—Luke squeezing her thigh. *Shut up.*

Right. She knows. But maybe the margarita has gone to her head a bit because she's feeling kind of loose-tongued. She wants to say just one thing, and she does. "They're free people. OK? The King's soldiers are the only free people to ever live in the State of Georgia. They *live*, that's all. They're not on the Savannah Death Trip, they're not ghosts, they're not anybody's slaves. You can't fuck with 'em."

This all comes out scrapper than she intends. Jumps out, at a moment when there's nothing playing on the jukebox. The patrons of Bo Peep's are listening because they see Jaq recording her, and now Luke is squeezing her *hard*. She feels faint. She lowers her eyes and mumbles, "Hey, sorry. Talk to Luke, OK?"

Jaq obligingly pivots the camera away from her and says, "Luke! What's up?"

“Not too much,” he says. Then he grins. “But you know who we just heard? Out there? The Musician.”

“He’s out tonight?” says Jaq.

“And whistling so gorgeous, and I swear to God he did a duet with a mockingbird.” Giving that Luke laugh. The bar loves him, and Jaq loves him, while Stony’s still sunk in her sense of shame. A feeling of humiliation that verges on nausea. Luke is saying, “And them tourists on the ghost tour, you know what they shouted at us? *Yo, Frankenstein! Yo, Witch!* That’s *us*. I mean we’re the stars of Savannah, Jaq! Ha ha ha!”

Someone at the far side of the horseshoe insists: “Need a beer!”

Jaq calls back, “What you need is to chill the fuck out.” And holds her camera on Luke.

Stony takes this moment to steal away. She goes outside and stands in the night air. Bums a smoke from Billy Sugar and says hello to his dog: “Hey there, Gracie.” Giving her a scratch behind the ears. Then she leans against the big front window, under the light of Peep’s peachy pantaloons, and asks herself, why did I say all that? Why did I feel I had to share my crazy shit with all of Peep’s? Jesus. Poor homeless woman thinks she lives in a fairy Kingdom and commands an army of elves? How fucking pathetic. She feels sick now, swoony. Drank too much, clearly, but can’t remember doing it. She shuts her eyes and feels like she’s bouncing around in her own rib cage, bouncing and dropping but there’s no bottom, no splash, just an ever-spreading feeling of unwellness and trouble.

Somebody speaks to her. Not Billy Sugar, some other guy. She hopes that whoever it is, whoever’s standing here, will go away. But he keeps talking. “Hey, Matilda. I got a message for you. Hey, look at me, Matilda.”

Oh God. It’s Lloyd from Statesboro.

Matilda is officially her name, but no one ever uses it except employers and the police. And now this guy. She opens her eyes. “Do me a favor and get the fuck outta my face?”

“Matilda, listen. The boss sent me to get you.”

“Huh?”

“You gotta save the Kingdom.”

“Wait,” she says. Trying to collect herself. Take this all in. Who is this guy? What does he know about the Kingdom? Does he really work for the boss?

“He needs you right now,” says Lloyd. He hands her a note. She focuses.

Meet me now. Bad shit. Lloyd knows where.

She raises her eyes. “Where?”

“I can’t say but I’ll drive you there.”

She shakes her head. “Uh-uh. I just met you.”

“Awright. You got a car?”

She shakes her head.

He shrugs. “You wanna take an Uber? OK. Get an Uber and follow me.”

“I can’t get an Uber. I don’t have a cell phone. Lemme get Luke.”

“No, the boss just wants *you*, Matilda. Says it’s top secret, says it’s the King’s treasure and all. Hey, what about a taxi? Why don’t you call a taxi?”

She tries to laugh. “A *taxi*? Like, are there still taxis?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know, Matilda. I just gotta get you to the boss.”

And she’s thinking, maybe she should trust him? He seems like a creep but likely he’s just boring. He’s kind of cracker-formal, a little awkward and gruff, but that doesn’t make him dangerous. You shouldn’t pigeonhole people, Stony. He’s just trying to help out here. And abruptly she says, “OK. I’ll go with you.”

“Yeah?” he says. Very politely. “You sure you comfortable with that?”

“Uh-huh.” She puts her hand on his arm. “Kinda drunk but yeah. Wait.” She turns to old Billy Sugar and tries not to slur her words. “Hey, Billy? Tell Luke I had to run?”

Billy with his beard looks like someone from the Old Testament. The way he’s scowling at Lloyd from Statesboro. “Stony? You sure?”

"I'm good, yeah," she says, and off she goes with Lloyd from Statesboro.

Actually she's not good at all, but for the Kingdom she'd go anywhere, with anyone. She lets him prop her up, and they cross Drayton and head toward the gloom of Madison Square. She asks, "But what *about* the Kingdom? What's the matter? What's this . . . crisis, tell me."

"I don't know," says Lloyd. "Boss says. That's all I know."

He keeps pulling her with him, hustling her along, and she's thinking, oh maybe I shouldn't. Be doing this. But she's really confused. Her thoughts are like moths and she can't corral them. She tries to take her arm back.

"Walk," he tells her.

He's not asking. Oh shit. And he's strong. So much stronger than she is. Mistake. Shouldn't be here.

But then a voice: "Hey, darlin, hold up."

She turns. It's Luke. Her gentle giant, come to rescue her.

"Stony, what's up?"

Lloyd from Statesboro replies for her. "My girlfriend, she's a little drunk."

Luke shakes his head. "Not your girlfriend."

"Tonight she is."

"Get your hands off her." Sounding resolute, which isn't Luke's usual manner. Stony gathers herself and steps toward him, struggling to keep her legs straight. When she falls, she manages to fall in his direction. He catches her and puts his arm around her, and turns her back toward the warm light of Bo Peep and her neon sheep.

"You OK, Stony?"

"Just. I might. That guy. That . . . something. In my drink."

"Try to walk," says Luke. "Let's get out of here."

Walk, she thinks. Walk is easy. Keep my eyes on Miss Peep, and lean on Luke, and head toward that light. And she does manage a few steps. Till that other guy—Lloyd's buddy—steps in front of them.

"Give her back," he says.

“Oh get fucked,” says Luke, pushing past him. But some event takes place. It’s too quick for Stony to follow but involves a gleam of metal. Luke groans. Blood wells on his T-shirt. He has such a look of helplessness. He’s suffering because he can’t rescue her. As he reaches for her, he sags, falls to his knees, and that breaks her heart. A man’s hand covers her mouth. She bites at it but with no effect. A pickup truck stops beside them, and the men take Luke and heave him into the pickup bed, and shove Stony into the cab. Lloyd from Statesboro slides in next to her and turns the key.

She keeps trying to cry out. No sound comes.

She sees the door handle. It’s in the shadows and out of focus, but it’s her last chance. Gotta do this, she thinks. Pull the handle, open the door, jump out. Shout. Run. Go now.

Nothing happens.

Get that handle, she thinks. Open the door, roll out.

Watching her hand from afar as it slowly gropes for the handle. Please, girl. Can’t you go quicker?

But her hand moves as though through syrup. Lloyd, while driving, reaches over calmly and places her hand back in her lap. Then her mother shows up at the window. “You can’t trust strangers, Matilda. Some of them are bad people.”

“I see that, Mom.”

“They’ll drug you, darlin. They’ll *hurt* you.”

“I know, Mom. But you’re not helping.”

CHAPTER ONE

SOME HIDEOUS COMPROMISE





Ransom Musgrove has been summoned to the house of his youth, the Romanesque revival mansion from the 1880s that everyone calls the “Old Fort”—on account of the parapet and the grand turret and the gargoyles and all the ivied brickwork. As he comes up the walk he gets flashes from his boyhood. Under that pecan, first kiss with Debbie Gannon. Under the crepe myrtle, third base with Lu Ann Farris. Up in the brown turkey fig tree, wasn’t there some death match with his big brother, David? He has a vague memory of David taunting him, of getting so mad he went for David’s throat and forgot to hold on to the limb. He doesn’t recall what happened next.

Then at the front steps he has one more memory.

Thirteen years old. Standing out here awaiting the carpool to school and daydreaming, when his mother appeared on the balcony. Although it was a bright, sunny morning, she was drunk. Clearly she’d been out partying the night before and hadn’t been to bed yet. She began to disparage him in the third person, one of her favorite pastimes. She said, “While the kid dawdles there like an idiot, gathering wool, concocting his little fantasies about how the world *should* be, the *real* world keeps marching on, doesn’t it? Clomp clomp clomp, crushing his little dreams.

Does he even notice? No, he's too stupid. Is he going to be a hobo? Well yes, that's certain, unless he gets some ambition and starts kiting checks. Ha ha ha."

He hoped that the arrival of the carpool would shut her up. And it did, for a moment. Mrs. Tarkanian's big Suburban pulled up, and he squeezed into the second row with two other kids while Mother, up on that balcony, produced a silk handkerchief and waved it. Mrs. Tarkanian waved back. "Hey, Morgana." His mother said, in a loud tragic voice, "Hey, Laurel. Goodbye, Laurel. Goodbye, my son who is destined to be a vagabond." Her position when drunk was always: I'll speak the truth and the public be damned. As the carpool pulled away he felt his mortification in his jawbone and his spine, and silently begged for death. However, the other kids made no comment. Maybe they'd thought she was joking? Or they hadn't understood the word? However, years later a girl who'd been in that car told him she'd thought it was "romantic, scary but kind of romantic the way your mom stood up on that balcony that day telling the whole neighborhood how you were *destined to be a vagabond*."

It's not lost on him that Morgana's prophecy has come true.

Up four steps to the porch, to the front door with the spiderweb fanlight and sidelight, and he hasn't even seen her yet but already he feels the bad juice in his veins, and has to remind himself that *she* summoned *him* (sending her accountant to find his tent under the Harry S Truman exit ramp), that he's still a free man, he's thirty-three years old and should she try to start anything, to flip any of his switches, he can just turn and walk away. Anytime he's so inclined. So he tells himself.

He turns the door crank. Here comes Betty the maid.

"*Raaan-sum!*"

Betty's a white woman in her late thirties. She grew up on a farm in Odom, Georgia, and wears a perpetually awestruck look, and dresses in baggy browns and grays, and always has a slow and languorous drawl even on the rare occasions when she isn't riding her magic carpet of downers. When she says, "Oh, your mama will be so glad!" the last words seem to roll on forever: *sooo glayyyy-uddd*.

She hugs his neck and then holds the door open for him.

He steps inside.

His eyes have to adjust. The foyer is always kept in the gloaming, with only a thin light slanting down from the oriel window. There's the pomp of the staircase, and the bronze sconces and the walnut secretary desk, and the still lifes and fantastical landscapes that Morgana loves. His forebears scowl down from their frames. He appreciates that none of them pretend to be happy.

However, Betty does pretend. When he asks how she's doing, she smiles and says, "So well, Ransom." *Raaan*-sum. He knows this to be false. A few weeks ago she went to the home of her ex-boyfriend's new flame and borrowed a cup of sugar from her. Then found her ex's Durango on the street, and emptied the sugar into the tank. Not coy about it. Bystanders took out their phones and recorded her. She posed with that cup the way Annie Oakley would pose with her pistol. Then she returned the cup to the new girlfriend and thanked her. The videos became popular of course. Now she's in a great deal of trouble but keeps a brave face and says to Ransom, "It's such a lovely *dayyyy*, isn't it?" and leads him straight to his mother.

Morgana stands at the dining room table. She's plumping up an immense arrangement of flowers. "My beloved," she coos, raising her cheek for the requisite buss. "You look terribly thin. Are you eating dandelions and wild asparagus?"

"I'm eating fine, Mother."

And somewhat to his surprise, she drops it. Doesn't needle him at all. Doesn't accuse him of "assuming some pose of dereliction to which you are frankly *unentitled*," or charge him with "plunging a dagger into the heart of your family." She simply gestures for him to take a seat. With a quick smile, as she resumes her arranging.

She must truly need something.

She is wearing a mauve silk shirt and her honeycomb brooch, and looks quite formal. Not "imperial": her enemies call her that, but really she's too small and birdlike to fit that description—and, just now, too

busy. She's laying in a base for her spray. Building a pedestal of ruscus and aspidistra and stock and freesia (Ransom grew up amid her flowers and knows them all). She asks, "Would you care for iced tea?"

"Thanks, yes."

She nods; Betty goes off.

He watches his mother work. The snip-snip of the shears. After a moment though, she frowns and says, "Oh it's impossible."

"What is?"

"It's for my event tonight, the Spring Soiree for the Disabled. Every year the big spray is all anyone talks about, and every year it gets harder to assemble. Would you just look at *these*?" Holding up a few stems loaded with garish blooms. "They're called Papaya Popsicles. They're ludicrous yet must be given prominence, because they were grown by Rebecca Cressling, who donated sixty thousand dollars last year. What do you think?"

"Sort of blaring."

"Yet it gets worse."

She shows him a clutch of black blossoms with long white whiskers. "We must also give pride of place to *these*. Bat flowers. Have you ever seen the like? Grown by Jane Rundle with great care in her greenhouse. And why did she do this? No one can say. But she has bequeathed us one point five million dollars in her will, so we must not dishonor her little nightmares. I thought of cutting the stems long, that they might loom over the whole show like so many Grim Reapers—a metaphor for how Jane's death looms over *us*. Looms yet never quite *happens*, does it? But that would demote the Popsicles. You see my dilemma? I have to feature both Popsicles *and* bat flowers. I must create some hideous compromise."

"Mother?"

"Yes, dear."

"You asked to see me."

She turns to give him a full look.

"Right. Well. Yesterday Johnny Cooper came by."

Johnny Cooper manages Musgrove Investigations—one of the many

little sidelines created by Ransom's father and still in Morgana's possession.

He says, "You still haven't sold that?"

"No, but I've rather neglected it. Of course, it's never brought me a dime in profit. But then it didn't for your father either. Frankly I believe profit wasn't the point for him. I believe he used it in his business dealings. To keep track of his rivals."

Ransom's gaze flicks away from her: he turns to the portraits, his scowling forebears. She catches the shift.

"Darling," she asks, "are you hiding a smile?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you think he was keeping track of *me*."

Just at that moment though, Betty reappears, with a pitcher of her lemony tea and two of the pineapple-crystal glasses inherited from Great-great-aunt Inez.

"And Betty," says Morgana, "do you suppose you could stop by Mooney's and collect those three hams?"

"Right away, ma'am."

"None but the long-cured. If he tries to pass off one of those honey-glazed tourist things, tell him to shove it back up from whence it came. You hear?"

"Uh-huh."

"And get Mr. Riley to check the oil on the beast."

"Yes ma'am, uh-huh, I will." Adding, as she withdraws: "Oh handsome Ransom, you need to come live here with us."

Haaaand-some Raaaan-som.

Then she's gone.

Morgana puts down the shears, and takes a seat.

The house is still but for the grandfather clock with the slight lisp and her sigh. "Well, maybe he *was* having me followed. I mean I'd have deserved it. I wasn't a good wife. Not then anyway. I felt I had to live in a state of constant romantic excitation. I was reading too many eighteenth-century novels. I recall thinking, what's the point of living if you can't live

in a swirl of scandal? I wonder if there *is* a file on me? I wonder if there are any good surveillance photos of me?"

She sips from the pineapple glass. She has a wistful look.

"At any rate," she says, "I know your father loved that business. He loved going with Johnny on stakeouts. And taking you along. You remember?"

"Yeah. I liked going. Dad would pick up a bucket of wings from Church's and we'd eat in the car. Then I'd fall asleep and Dad and Johnny would watch the Thunderbird Motel all night."

"And when you got home I'd always make you tell me everything. I'd say, Report, and you would. You recall that?"

He nods. But feels a bit impatient. "So, Mother. What did Johnny want?"

"Oh, well, it seems our little detective agency has been approached by a big client. Or rather the lawyer for a big client. The client himself is in jail."

"For what?"

"Arson. Also I'm told the state has reached for a murder charge."

"Jesus. You're talking about Archie Guzman?"

"You know the case?"

"Everyone in Savannah knows the case. What's he want from you?"

"Well, naturally, an investigation. Why, does that seem strange? You think he should go to one of the bigger outfits? Such as that fetid place that does all the repossessions? What's that called again?"

"Screven."

She makes a face of disgust. "Yes yes, Screven Security. Honestly I was wondering myself: Why pick little us over them? So I called Burt Randolph—Guzman's lawyer—and put it to him. And you know what he told me? He said ours is an old and esteemed agency."

Ransom can't help but roll his eyes. "Old, for sure. You got a seventy-year-old gumshoe who needs a hip replacement. Plus your three wino part-timers, they're old, plus that rotting old office over the souvenir shop."

“But in fact he said *greatly* esteemed. Also he raised, unprompted, the question of a retainer.”

“How much?”

“Oh they’re being quite generous.”

“How much?”

She sniffs. Waits a beat. “Two hundred thousand dollars.”

Ransom gives a low whistle.

“Plus three hundred more,” she goes on, “should we happen to uncover evidence leading to Guzman’s exoneration.”

“Good God. That’s insane.”

“It *is* rather a large—”

“No, I mean it’s insane that Guzman thinks *anything* will lead to his exoneration. Have you read the papers?”

“A bit. I know he’s somewhat unpopular—”

“Despised. By everyone. Rich and poor, young and old, it’s unanimous. Everyone hates the Gooze. He bulldozes anything that’s beautiful, he builds the ugliest crap imaginable and sues everyone for the right to do it, and he’s the meanest slumlord in town. Treats his tenants like dogs. For himself he built that pig mansion out in Thunderbolt, you’ve seen it, it’s a pile of crap. And now he’s gone and burned a man alive.”

She presents her mild face. “Well, he says he didn’t do that.”

It’s this look particularly, the lamblike expression she sometimes employs to suggest she has no angles, that she’s really *not* relentlessly seeking the hidden switches in the psyches of everyone close to her, but only searching for *the truth*: this is what gets under his skin. He feels the poison rising. His voice comes out too loud. “Mother, they found the gas can in a dumpster. With his fingerprints all over it. The house was eaten up by termites and he’d lost his C. of O., and he’d been telling his workers he was gonna torch the thing. And he *knew* folks were camping on the second floor. He *let* them do that. If they were working for him, that was part of their pay. But this detail must have slipped his mind, in his eagerness to collect that insurance. So poor Luke Kitchens wakes up and the house beneath him is in flames and he can’t get out. Doors were all

chained up. Place was a deathtrap. The Gooze *knew* that. Tell me you're not taking him as a client."

She keeps the soft face. "Why, what's the problem?"

"What's the temptation?"

She thinks for a moment. "Well. Greed, I suppose."

She smiles. Admiring her own candor.

But she adds, "Also, my beloved, the man does maintain his innocence. Even if he is, as you say, universally loathed—a sort of modern-day Deadeye Dick—we might at least examine him on the question."

"We?"

"You must accompany me to the jail."

"No."

"But you must. I need you."

"Still. No."

"You still have your license to practice law, I checked. Burt Randolph has attached you to the case. And we can go and have a nice privileged chat with Mr. Guzman, without his people there. Draw our own conclusions. You can drive. You know I *hate* driving on the Southside. Those awful strip malls, all that traffic. Which reminds me, your friend Moses Jones? The paraplegic? I know he likes to go to that café by Forsyth Park in his wheelchair, and I hate to think of him negotiating the traffic around there. I've been thinking the Society might set him up in a little carriage house just around the corner from the café. So there'd be no busy streets for him to cross. Don't you think?"

"Jesus. You trying to bribe me?"

"Of course. And extravagantly, I might add, since all I'm asking in return is a ride to the jailhouse. I'm not asking you to come back home. Or go through rehab. I'd just like you to sit in on one meeting."

"I told you, no. Get my brother."

"Don't be absurd. I need a curious mind on this. Besides, Guzman has asked for you."

"Why?"

“That’s a real *mystery*, isn’t it?” she says, stretching the word with a playful drawl. Then she rises and returns to her flowers. Leaving him to his decision.

It is, he can’t deny, an intriguing offer.

At his encampment under the Harry S Truman Parkway exit ramp there are at least a dozen folks who are homeless because of the Gooze. Owing to deformities in Georgia tenant law, landlords are not obliged to give thirty days’ notice. With Guzman you’re lucky to get twenty-four hours to hump your stuff out to the street. He’ll put you out on Christmas at midnight if the whim strikes him, and you can sit on your couch on the sidewalk, in the freezing rain, while carolers stand before you and sing hymns of peace and loving-kindness. It would be a treat to see him in shackles.