

Prologue

Sometimes nature loses its balance. But usually not for long. Late one Saturday night in November, for example, a large layer of cold air wafted in from the Northeast, hovering over the deep, wide Calawassee River. For weeks, the waters there had remained unseasonably warm for this time of year. The mismatch of colder air and warmer water lifted fog and mist into the air. The blurry blanket of humidity settled into every indentation and nook in the narrow streets of the historic district in nearby Cornwall, South Carolina.

Not bad, thought the tall, red-bearded man as he approached tonight's target. Foggy enough to cloud the vision of the increasingly vigilant neighborhood residents trying to stop him. But not foggy enough to hinder his work.

He did up the top button on his tattered taupe corduroy jacket against the pre-dawn chill as he again surveyed the target. It was a three-story, two-century-old townhouse with wide front porches on the second and third levels, four red-brick chimneys, wood siding and a steep shingled roof.

It was hardly an ideal target, certainly not as richly symbolic as some of the others. But it would do. It came close enough to representing the yuppie-Yankee-scalawag gentrification taking over the downtown. Its exemplars had pressed for the restrictive rules that had driven his father out of business and to an early grave. And his brothers into the streets and shelters.

A couple of nearby homes were vacant and up for sale. No one was on the street. The only sound was the crackling the dampness set off in some of the light fixtures. Fortunately, the one directly across from the townhouse wasn't working.

The red-bearded man had watched the owner -- and sole occupant -- leave hours before. It was time to act. And so he did. He walked by the townhouse, using the sidewalk on the opposite side of the brick-paved street. He crossed at the next corner, and followed the cross street to the alley. Taking slow, deliberate steps, he strode back toward the rear of the townhouse.

He had hidden his materials behind two smelly bins in a trash area recessed into a brick wall lining part of the alley. He retrieved a cardboard box containing the liquid-filled jars,

which, to his relief, were undisturbed. Before placing them at his staging area hours before, he had made the necessary preparations. Wearing the same surgical gloves he wore now, he had rolled gunpowder in balls of tissue, used rubber bands to attach them to fuses and the fuses to short candles. Then he had inserted the assembled items through the holes he had cut in the metal lids of the jars and screwed the lids on.

He gathered up the jars, approached the rear of the townhouse and placed the jars along the bottom slats of wooden siding on two low porches. Then he moved one of the jars a few inches.

Satisfied with that adjustment, he reached into his jacket pocket, extracted a book of matches and lit the candles he had attached to the fuses. Then, with the same measured pace with which he had approached the rear of the townhouse, he walked back up the alley.

The arsonist was most of the way to the end of the alley when he heard a loud whump and the tinkle of shattering glass. Seconds apart, the sequence of sounds repeated itself twice. He looked back and saw three huge plumes of flame climbing the rear wall like fiery blossoms from hell. Within seconds, an overhanging porch was ablaze. In a few more, flames licked at cedar shakes on the overhanging edge of the roof.

With effort, he turned away from the mesmerizing orange glow that intensified as it reflected in the mist, and continued his orderly retreat. He wondered for an instant how his beard might have looked in the firelight had he remained at the scene. By the time he reached the street, he heard the first sirens. *They're responding faster this time*, he thought; *I'll have to be more careful*. He removed the gloves and stuffed them in his pockets as he scanned both side of the street in both directions. Then he crossed and disappeared into the dark, foggy reaches of the next stretch of alley.

In Columbia, the white walls of the federal-style governor's mansion shimmered in the afternoon sun. The rays seemed to grow harsher each day as the arc of the passing orb sank lower in the sky.

Downstairs, three officials sat around an ornately edged, brilliantly polished mahogany table in the mansion's large drawing room. The oval antique was a few feet from a huge white mantel with the state seal carved on each end.

Until a few minutes before, Gov. John Dodge had sprawled on a blue Sheraton-style sofa said to be almost 200 years old. Then he left to greet college presidents at a reception in the garden of the nearby Caldwell-Boylston House.

It was Sunday, and chief-of-staff Robert Gervais was, like his colleagues, dressed casually. He wore pleated khakis, Docksidiers, and an oversized forest-green golf shirt that only half-disguised his paunch. With him were his assistant, Thurmond Clarke, who coordinated the governor's schedule, and Maureen Moran, the governor's press secretary.

The meeting's topic: a hastily thrown-together trip by Dodge to the medium-sized coastal town of Cornwall, a foray that would be coordinated, after a fashion, with an almost-as-quickly arranged visit by U.S. Sen. Hilary Rodham Clinton.

"Why would she spend time down there?" Moran asked. "She's gotta know there's not lotsa votes there. The place has been trending Republican for ten years. We wouldn't have any seats there if we hadn't had the votes in the legislature at the beginning of the decade to draw the district lines our way."

"Well," drawled Gervais, "there's a fair hunk of old money down there that still comes our way, especially with that kind of drawing card. More to the point, I think, her old college chum is married to the county chairman."

They were nearly done, having gone over most of an itinerary Clarke had handed each of them. Gervais looked out the window at the big fountain in front of the mansion.

"What about the media?" he asked.

"We carved out some time late in the afternoon," Moran replied as Clarke nodded. "Half an hour with local TV, twenty minutes with the radio folks, and a half hour -- maybe we can trim a bit off that -- with the *Times-Herald* editorial board. As he said before he left -- by the way, nobody tell Mrs. Dodge he sat on that couch -- he'll stick to his usual talking points: keeping a tight rein on the budget but keeping up the pressure on fighting crime. One thing he didn't mention, though you know about this, Bob; he'll throw the locals a bone. He'll say the state's not going to build another prison down there."

"What about the sexual predator treatment center?" Clarke asked.

"What sexual predator treatment center?" Gervais shot back mockingly.

Everyone laughed.

“Any problem with the paper?” he asked, this time seriously. “There could be real reporters there.”

“They and the editorial writers will trip over each other,” Moran said. “There won’t be much time for any aggressive follow-up on questions. The governor will walk all over ‘em.”

“What about Mike Taylor, the political writer?” Clarke asked. “He can be a mean SOB.”

It was Moran’s turn to nod.

“He won’t be there,” Gervais said.

“How do you know?” Moran said.

“I just do.”

Beaufort is one of the jewels of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Gateway to at least a dozen sea islands, it’s known for its riverfront mansions, fragrant gardens, outdoor cafes, horse-drawn carriages and shrimp boats. Its tabby ruins are silent witnesses to three centuries of history. But not everything there shares the same storybook quality.

On Highway 21, the main approach to town, stood the Black Horse Inn. It had seen better days. Back in the mid-eighties, the bar and grill was a favorite watering hole for tourists and upscale locals. The quaint two-story structure sported inviting decks, lush landscaping, good service and even better food.

But after lengthy street closures for repairs, a cocaine bust and a shooting in the parking lot, business sagged, and the clientele slid downscale. Under new owners, the interior walls were redone in warehouse red. Matching Naugahyde booths were installed. Over the years, smoke darkened the red into a brownish purple and the booths acquired rips and tears. Outside, some plants died, while others overgrew their beds and pots. The building looked like it was held together by successive layers of paint. The asphalt parking lot cracked and crumbled.

By the time Marcus Kicklighter started drinking at the Black Horse, the tourists and professionals who used to hang out there had departed for the more wholesome ambience and the vintage wines of the taverns down on Bay Street, near the river. The new patrons

consisted of bikers, Marines and good 'ol boys -- though some might be tempted to call them bad 'ol boys -- such as Kicklighter.

A Marine brat, he had dropped out of Beaufort High School. He'd worked on and off as a shrimp fisherman and in a garage. He drank a lot a beer and smoked plenty of dope. He'd also been jailed a couple times for assault and battery. In addition to tattoos of a nude woman and an eagle -- one on each arm -- Kicklighter bore other visible marks. The most conspicuous were a scar on his cheek -- a legacy of a bar fight -- and a crooked nose left by another.

On Sunday night, Kicklighter had entered the Black Horse, sat at the nearest empty table and ordered a pitcher. Almost immediately, he noticed that a huge guy at the bar, a biker type with a bandanna and leather pants and vest, had been glaring at him. Kicklighter wasn't in the mood for ass-kicking tonight. Besides, he thought, from the looks of this guy, it might be his own ass that got kicked. So he did his best to ignore the hard stares. Maybe the friends he expected would walk in any minute now. Still, when the big man wasn't looking, he patted his hip pocket. His insurance policy was there.

Kicklighter waited until the hulk seemed to be hitting on the big-haired blonde next to him before daring to walk past him to the restroom. On the way back, he tried to avoid walking too close to the biker. When he had almost reached his table, a tall, slinky redhead swooshed by him at almost a run, chased by a guy with a buzz cut, apparently a Marine. He ran directly into Kicklighter, who caromed into the stool of the biker, who bumped into the blonde and spilled her drink.

"All right, asshole!" the hulk yelled, lunging at Kicklighter.

But Kicklighter was quick with his hands and had downed less beer. He swung hard. His fist smarted as it slammed into the biker's cheekbone.

"You little shit!" the biker bellowed after blinking. "You're dead."

He grabbed his quart bottle of Budweiser, smashed the bottom against the bar and again moved toward Kicklighter, pointing the jagged end at him. He sneered as Kicklighter seized a glass of beer, as if to break it to fashion a similar -- even if smaller -- weapon for himself. But, instead Kicklighter hurled the beer in the biker's face. That made him pause a couple seconds. It was long enough for Kicklighter to extract a switchblade from his pocket, snap it open and thrust it between the biker's ribs. Blood spurted, but the big man

closed in on him. Kicklighter ducked under an awkward jab of the bottle and stabbed him again. As he withdrew the blade, he moved against the biker's body to offer less of his own as a target. Still, he felt the jagged glass lacerating his shoulder and back. He stabbed one more time, this time in the biker's side. Now the man was falling on him. Kicklighter shoved him hard and twisted away as the biker, clutching his wounds and moaning, crumpled to the floor. Covered with the biker's blood and his own, Kicklighter dropped the knife and ran.

A helicopter flew the biker to the trauma ward at Memorial Medical Center in Savannah. He was dead on arrival. Alerted by bar patrons, police trapped Kicklighter in the restroom of a nearby gas station. He offered no resistance. A doctor stitched up his cuts and officers booked him into Beaufort County Jail on a homicide charge.

Noting the Black Horse's history of violent brawls, the Beaufort *Gazette* published a substantial story on the incident.

But papers in outlying areas treated it as what sometimes is called a "misdemeanor murder." Some ignored it. Others ran tiny accounts deep inside regional news sections, relying on a brief press release hastily written by an overworked desk sergeant at the Beaufort Police Department. One such brief story appeared next to tire ads; another next to a promotion for a lingerie sale.