CHAPTER THREE

Frank Finklea heard about South Carolina from some pipe-fitters eating breakfast at the truck stop in Nashville. While he'd been running from the roughnecks in Oklahoma, the rest of the country was enjoying the status of being a world power after its global victory over the Germans and Japanese.

Finklea turned eighteen during the last year of the war, but the draft board rejected him because of a heart murmur. Most young men of his generation would have been disappointed, but not Finklea. He knew nothing of politics, never read a newspaper. He was just glad all that silly rationing was a thing of the past.

What he heard about South Carolina, however, intrigued him. Word was the government was building a huge atomic-bomb plant near a town called Groton and needed thousands of construction workers immediately. Within months, the area was flooded with men like Finklea, who knew nothing about atomic energy or construction, but figured working for the government had to be better than killing cows or drilling for oil.

He hitched a ride out of Nashville with a man delivering a new hearse to a funeral home in Savannah. Two days later he arrived in Groton, a one-block town on a bluff above the river where it wasn't hard to find your way around. The town was bisected north-south by U.S. Highway 301 and east-west by the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad tracks. Everything about Groton, in fact, was symmetrically in sync with the cross that stood high above Swallow Savannah Methodist Church, the biggest church in town.

So it didn't take Finklea long to locate the government recruiting office for the Savannah River Plant, where he filled out some paperwork and was told to report for work on Monday morning. Thus he found himself sitting in old man Fulmer's drug store that Friday afternoon watching the clock.

Other men his age were hanging out on the street corners, whistling at the pretty girls and waiting for the only bar in town to open at 4 o'clock. But Finklea wasn't comfortable around women or alcohol. Both made him sweat.

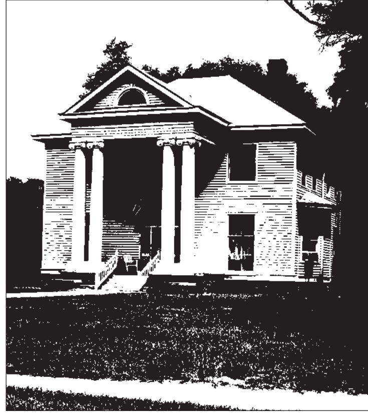
As he sat in Fulmer's, he thought about finding another pack of Lucky Strikes and a place to sleep. Groton was filling up fast with men looking for jobs. Most were veterans. But many were like Finklea, drifters who had no skills other than being able to fill out an application.

Old man Fulmer said the local tourist houses were full; said the government was aware of the problem and was setting up barracks in a pecan grove south of town; said they were even running buses to and from the worksite.

Finklea was pondering all this when Martha Adger strolled through the front door and parked herself on a stool at the other end of the counter. Having spent most of his life in a boys' home, Finklea knew little about women, but was captivated by Martha Adger. The way she came through the door, haloed by the sunlight behind her.

Lacking a family history, Finklea didn't know who to credit or blame for different aspects of his behavior. He accepted instinct as his closest relative.

He turned toward Martha Adger, smiled, used his best Oklahoma accent and said softly, "Howdy, ma'am."



CHAPTER FOUR

Martha Adger, an only child, came into the world at the cost of her mother's life.

She would later say their souls crossed in the mist; that she remembered a pretty lady leaning down and kissing her cheek as they passed between life and death.

Of course, she remembered none of these things. They were just stories her father, Orrin Adger, told to explain the small ruby birthmark on her left cheek. She chose to believe the story because her life, after all, was mostly mystical.

She grew up in Adger House, a big colonial on the edge of town and surrounded by towering pines. She enjoyed the soft Southern childhood that came with being raised by kindhearted colored women who knew she was "special," a polite term for people like Martha, who suffered from the curse of too many cousins in the family photograph.

Her world was considerably smaller than Groton.

Her father was a kind and gentle man, who never thought he would have children. Orrin Adger and his wife, Lucille, were up in years when Martha came along. Childbirth proved too much for the 48-year-old Lucille. She bled to death the next day. Child rearing had much the same effect on Orrin, only it took longer.

Life, it seems, stranded Martha and Orrin, daughter and father, in the same lifeboat. Without a paddle.

Because she was different, Martha was pampered, passing her time sewing, looking at picture books and playing sweet, unrecognizable tunes on the grand piano.

As a child, she created enchanting melodies no one ever heard before, and would never hear again. Martha was unable to reproduce them. With her unusual musical gift, she would sit at the keyboard on summer mornings, playing softly for more than an hour as the servants hummed along in the kitchen. She would giggle when asked about the music. She said she didn't know where it came from, but knew where it went.

In her mind, the musical notes floated out the big windows of Adger House where they were absorbed by the needles in the longleaf pine trees outside. There they were stored for the winter months when she did not play the piano at all. On those chilly, gray days, Martha danced under the evergreens with her hands cocked slightly, palms down, feeling the music only she could hear emanating from the pine needles like tuning forks.

Her life was simple, but sublime, until a sunny day when she walked into Fulmer's Drug Store for a cherry Coke.

Painfully polite, she nodded to a stranger who sat at the far end of the counter smoking cigarettes. Swaying slightly on her stool, carefully counting out her coins on the counter, she was too naive to recognize the presence of evil.