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VANITY FAIR

ALSO BY WILBUR SMITH

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<i>The Sound of Thunder</i>	<i>The Triumph of the Sun</i>
<i>A Sparrow Falls</i>	<i>Assegai</i>
<i>The Burning Shore</i>	<i>Golden Lion</i>
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<i>Rage</i>	<i>The Tiger's Prey</i>
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<i>Monsoon</i>	

The Ballantyne Series

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<i>Men of Men</i>	<i>Darkness</i>
<i>The Angels Weep</i>	<i>The Triumph of the Sun</i>
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<i>Those in Peril</i>	<i>Predator</i>
<i>Vicious Circle</i>	

Standalones

<i>The Dark of the Sun</i>	<i>The Diamond Hunters</i>
<i>Shout at the Devil</i>	<i>The Sunbird</i>
<i>Gold Mine</i>	<i>Eagle in the Sky</i>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Wilbur Smith is a global phenomenon: a distinguished author with a large and established readership built up over fifty-five years of writing, with sales of over 130 million novels worldwide.

Born in Central Africa in 1933, Wilbur became a full-time writer in 1964 following the success of *When the Lion Feeds*, and has since published over forty global bestsellers, including the Courtney Series, the Ballantyne Series, the Egyptian Series, the Hector Cross Series and many successful standalone novels, all meticulously researched on his numerous expeditions worldwide. His books have now been translated into twenty-six languages.

The establishment of the Wilbur & Niso Smith Foundation in 2015 cemented Wilbur's passion for empowering writers, promoting literacy and advancing adventure writing as a genre. The foundation's flagship program is the Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize.

For all the latest information on Wilbur, visit: www.wilbursmithbooks.com or facebook.com/WilburSmith.

Corban Addison is the internationally bestselling author of four novels and was the winner of the inaugural Wilbur Smith Adventure Writing Prize. An attorney, activist and world traveler, he is a supporter of numerous humanitarian causes. He lives with his wife and children in Virginia.

WILBUR SMITH

WITH
CORBAN ADDISON

CALL OF THE RAVEN

ZAFFRE

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the authors' imaginations or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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*This book is for my wife, Nisojon, because my
admiration for her and the unequivocal love she spreads
keeps my heart and mind constantly beating.*



Dear Reader,

It's been forty years since the publication of *A Falcon Flies*, the first novel in the bestselling Ballantyne Series featuring a character that my fans both love and love to hate: Mungo St. John.

Some might say that Mungo St. John is the incarnate of evil itself: a slave trader who steals native Africans and sells them to plantation owners in the United States. But Mungo, charming, intelligent and irresistible to all around him—both men and women—shows compassion for his slaves and even demonstrates a hint of doubt about his place in this dark chapter of the history of mankind. His complex personality makes the beautiful and determined Robyn Ballantyne question her feelings for him and allow herself to see him as something other than a slaver. Like all good characters, Mungo is full of contradictions: he is both evil and heroic, a complex character who reflects the historical times he lived in.

Since launching my Facebook page I have been asked by many of my readers, “When will the story of Mungo St. John be continued?” I went back and revisited *A Falcon Flies* and found myself drawn to this man again, who was both Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde. Where did he come from? What motivated him? Why was he the way he is in *A Falcon Flies*?

Call of the Raven is my answer to those questions. It is, without a doubt, the most interesting historical novel I've worked on in some time as it made me question the history of slave trading and its impact on racism in our world. How does evil become acceptable in society? How is it appropriate for someone to hold another human being as their property?

I was fortunate to work with a co-author who was perfectly suited for the task of helping me explore 1840s New Orleans and Virginia. Corban Addison, a very accomplished novelist and a resident of Virginia himself, helped bring Mungo's world to life.

We hope you will find *Call of the Raven* a fascinating exploration of the dying days of the slave trade. It feels like an important contribution to our understanding of a period in history which continues to throw long shadows into the darkest aspects of the human soul.

As ever,

Wilbur Smith

*No man can put a chain around the ankle of his fellow man
without at last finding the other end fastened around his own
neck.*

Frederick Douglass





I

THE *BLACKHAWK*





The chamber was packed. Young men in evening dress squeezed ten-to-a-row on the benches; more stood around the edges of the room, bodies pressed together. The lamplit air hung heavy with sweat and alcohol and excitement, like a prize fight at a county fair.

But no blood would be spilled tonight. This was the Cambridge Union Society: the oldest debating club in the country and the proving ground for the nation's future rulers. The only sparring would be verbal, the only wounds to pride. At least, those were the rules.

The front of the room was set up like a miniature parliament. The two sides faced each other from opposing benches, divided by the length of two swords. A young man named Fairchild, with sandy hair and fine features, was addressing the audience from the dispatch box.

"The motion before you tonight is: 'This house believes that slavery should be abolished from the face of the Earth.' And, indeed, the case is so self-evident I feel I hardly need to argue it."

Nods of agreement; he was preaching to the converted. Abolitionist sentiment ran high among the Cambridge undergraduates.

"I know in this house we are used to debating the fine points of law and politics. But this is not academic. The question of slavery speaks to a higher law. To keep innocent men and women in chains, to tear them from their homes and work them to death: this is a crime against God and all the laws of justice."

On the facing bench, most of the opposition speakers listened to his oration glumly. They knew they were onto a losing cause. One leaned forward and twisted his handkerchief through his hands. One stared at the speaker with such melancholy he looked as if he might burst into tears. Only the third seemed untroubled. He lounged back nonchalantly, his mouth set in a lazy smile, as if he alone was privy to some enormous joke.

“If you have one ounce of humanity in you, I urge you to support the motion.”

Fairchild sat down to sustained applause. The president waited for the noise to die away.

“To close for the opposition, the chair calls on Mr. Mungo St. John.”

The man who had been lounging on the front bench rose. No one applauded, but a new force seemed to charge the room. Up in the gallery, where a few well-bred young ladies were allowed to observe proceedings as long as they stayed silent, crinolines rustled and stays creaked as they leaned forward to see better.

You could not ignore him. He was twenty, but he loomed half a head taller than any other man in the chamber. His dark hair flowed over his collar in a long, thick mane; his tanned skin shone with a luster that no wan English sun could have produced. His suit was cut to accentuate his figure: a slim waist that rose to broad, well-muscled shoulders more like a boxer's than a Cambridge undergraduate's.

If he felt the hostility aimed at him, it did not shake the easy grin from his face. Indeed, he seemed to feed off the crowd's energy.

“You have heard a great deal this evening about the supposed evils of slavery. But has anyone here ever been to the great tobacco plantations of Virginia, or the cotton fields of the Mississippi?”

His smoky yellow eyes surveyed the room.

“That is my native soil. I was born and raised in Virginia. Slavery to me is not sensational reports in the newspapers, or hell-raising sermons. I have seen the reality of it.”

He lowered his voice. “Is the work hard? Yes. Do rich men profit from the labor of others? Again, yes. But do not be gulled by these fantasies of brutality and violence you are peddled. At Windemere—my home, on the banks of the James River—my father keeps four hundred workers, and he cares for each one.

When they work well, he praises them. When they are sick, he tends them. If they die, he grieves.”

“That is because each one is worth a thousand dollars to him,” said Fairchild.

The audience laughed.

“My friend is quite right,” said Mungo. “But think of something you own that is worth that much. A fine horse, say, or a necklace. Do you beat it and disdain it and leave it in the mud? Or do you take superlative care of it, polish it and watch out for it, because it is so valuable to you?”

He leaned on the dispatch box, as comfortable as if he were leaning on the mantelpiece of his drawing room enjoying a cigar.

“I am a guest in your country. But sometimes, it takes a stranger’s eye to observe what the natives do not see. Go to Manchester, or Birmingham, or any of your other great manufacturing cities. Visit the factories. You will see men and women laboring there twelve, fourteen, even eighteen hours a day, in conditions that would make my father sick to his stomach.”

“At least they are free—and paid,” said Fairchild.

“And what use is freedom, if it is only the freedom to live in a slum until you are worked to death? What use is a wage if it does not buy you enough to eat? The only thing that money buys is ease for the consciences of the mill owners. Whereas at Windemere, every one of our people enjoys three square meals a day, a roof over his head and clean clothes to wear. He never has to worry if he will eat, or who will take care of his family. I promise you, if any English loom worker or coal miner glimpsed life on the plantation, he would swap his life for that in a second.”

On the opposite bench, Fairchild had risen. “A point of order?”

Mungo gave a languid wave to allow it.

“Even if we accept this preposterous picture of African slaves holidaying in some benevolent paradise, the gentleman is rather coy about how those persons came to his country. Will he admit that the slave trade is nothing but a trade in suffering? Or will

he try to convince us that millions of Africans willingly took a pleasant cruise to America to enjoy the benefits of the climate?”

That drew a laugh. Mungo smiled broadly, enjoying the joke with everyone else.

“The slave trade has been illegal in Britain and America for over thirty years,” he said. “Whatever our fathers and grandfathers may have done, it is finished now.”

Fairchild’s face flushed. He tried to calm his emotions—gentlemanly behavior in these debates was prized just as much as sound arguments—but he could not hold them in check.

“You know perfectly well that despite our government’s strenuous efforts, traders continue to flout the law by smuggling blacks out of Africa under the very noses of the Royal Navy.”

“Then I suggest you take up your complaint with the Royal Navy.”

“I shall,” said Fairchild. “Indeed, I may inform the house that as soon as I have completed my degree, I shall accept a commission in the Preventative Squadron of Her Majesty’s Navy, intercepting slavers off the coast of Africa. I will report back from there as to the accuracy of Mr. St. John’s picture of the *delights* of slavery.”

There were cheers and approving applause. Up on the ladies’ balcony, more than one corset strained with admiration of Fairchild’s manly virtue.

“If you are going to Africa, you can report back how these negroes live in their own country,” Mungo shot back. “Hungry, filthy, ignorant—a war of all against all. And then you can go to America, and say if they are not better off there after all.”

He turned to the room. “My virtuous opponents would have you think that slavery is a unique evil, a moral abomination unparalleled in the annals of civilization. I urge you to see otherwise. It is merely a name for what men practice wherever they are, whether in Virginia or Guinea or Manchester. The power of the strong and wealthy over the weak and poor.”

Fairchild had started to object again. Mungo ignored him.

“That may be an awkward truth. But I say to you, I would rather live my life as a slave on a plantation like Windemere, than as a so-called free man in a Lancashire cotton mill. They are the true slaves.”

He looked around the tight-packed chamber. Only the briefest glance, yet every person in the room felt that his gaze had settled directly on them. On the ladies’ balcony, the fans fluttered faster than ever.

“Perhaps what I say offends your moral sensibilities. I will not apologize for that. Instead, I beg you to look beyond your distaste and examine the proposition with clear-eyed honesty. If you sweeten your tea with sugar from the West Indies, or smoke Virginia tobacco, then you support slavery. If your father owns a mill where they spin Alabama cotton, or a bank that underwrites the voyages of Liverpool ship owners, then I say again you support slavery.”

He shrugged. “I do not judge you. I do not lay claim to any superior moral virtue. But the one sin of which I am wholly innocent is this—I will not play the hypocrite and weep false tears for the choices I have made. If you agree with me, I urge you to oppose the motion.”

He sat down. For a moment, silence gripped the room. Then, slowly, a wave of applause began from the back and swelled until it echoed around the chamber. The undergraduates might not agree with his politics, but they could appreciate a bravura performance.

Though not all of them. As the applause rose, so too did an answering barrage of boos and catcalls. Yells of “murderer” and “blood on your hands” were heard.

Mungo sat back, reveling in the discord.

“Order!” shouted the president. “The house will divide.”

The audience filed through two doors, one for “aye” on the right, and one for “no” on the left. The queue for the “ayes”

was noticeably longer, but a surprising number turned the other way. Mungo watched the count from his seat, the grin on his face never wavering.

The president announced the result. "Ayes to the right, two hundred and seven. Noes to the left, one hundred and eighteen."

Mungo nodded, accepting the result with perfect equanimity. He shook hands with his teammates, then took two glasses of wine and crossed the room to where Fairchild was talking with his friends. He pressed a drink into Fairchild's hand.

"Congratulations," said Mungo. "You spoke with great conviction."

Fairchild took the glass reluctantly. By convention, the society's debates were about rhetorical skill and argument; winning or losing was less important than behaving like gentlemen afterward. But Fairchild could not hide his disdain for Mungo.

"You take your loss in good part," he conceded.

"That is because I did not lose," Mungo answered, in the soft drawl of his native Virginia.

"You heard the result. I carried the motion by almost two to one. You lost."

"Not at all," said Mungo. "I wagered ten guineas that I could get at least a hundred votes against the motion. Nobody else thought I would get more than fifty. And though the glory of victory is very fine, I would rather have the extra gold in my purse."

Fairchild stared. All he could think to say was, "I should have thought you had already made enough money out of slavery."

"Not at all. My father has vowed that when he dies, he will free all his slaves. The will is already written. I will have to find some other way of making my fortune." Mungo clapped Fairchild on the shoulder. "So, you see, I will never make a penny out of that institution you revile so much. Whereas you—" he grinned—"will depend entirely on the slave trade to make your living."

Fairchild almost choked on his wine. "How dare you—?"

"You are joining the Preventative Squadron, are you not? You will be paid to capture slave ships."

"Yes."

"And that is a very fine and noble profession," Mungo agreed. "But if you ever actually succeeded in exterminating the slave trade, you would be out of a job. So it is in your interest to see that slavery endures."

Fairchild stared at him in horror. "Arguing with you is like arguing with the Devil himself," he complained. "White is black, and black is white."

"I should have thought you of all men would agree that black and white are created equal. They—"

Mungo broke off. The room was still full with undergraduates milling about, talking and drinking and carrying on the argument. But a young man was barging his way through the crowd, upsetting drinks and knocking people out of his way.

As he reached the front, Mungo recognized him. It was Sidney Manners, a stocky young man who had only got his place at Cambridge because his father owned half of Lincolnshire. With his thick neck, squat shoulders and heavy breathing, he looked like nothing more than a prize bull.

"I have been looking for you," he said to Mungo.

"I hope it did not tax your energies. I was not hard to find."

"You have offered the most grievous insult to my sister."

"Insult?" Mungo smiled. "You are misinformed. I offered her nothing but compliments."

"You seduced her!"

Mungo made a dismissive gesture. "Where I come from, gentlemen do not discuss such matters."

"Then why have I heard of it from five different people?" Manners took a step closer. "They say you had her in the organ loft of Trinity Chapel, while the choir were rehearsing."

"That is not true. It was during Evensong."

Manners's eyes bulged. "You do not deny it?"

"I deny that I made her do anything against her will. Indeed, I could hardly have resisted her advances if I had tried."

Mungo carefully put down his drink, then gave a conspiratorial wink. "I may say, your sister is a perfectly devout young woman. Always on her knees in chapel."

Manners's face had gone a deep shade of puce. His collar seemed to have shrunk around his neck. He struggled to breathe; his mouth flapped open, but no words emerged.

Eventually, his anger burst out the only way it could. He drew back his arm and swung a fist wildly at Mungo's jaw.

His size gave him power, but he had no training. Mungo boxed every week, taking lessons with a former champion of England who had retired to Cambridge. He dodged Manners's blow easily, grabbed his arm, then swept his feet from under him and dumped him on his backside.

Manners jerked on the ground. Mungo looked down at him and, for a second, his eyes flashed with an anger so fierce, anyone who saw it would have feared for Manners's life. In that moment, you could not doubt that Mungo was capable of anything.

Then the anger faded, as sudden as a summer squall. Mungo's smile returned. He nodded to the circle of spectators around him. They edged back, though they could not look away: captivated by the spectacle, yet frightened of Mungo's power.

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen."

The crowded room emptied in front of him as he made his way to the door. He heard Manners staggering to his feet behind him, but he did not look back. Outside, he put on his hat and strode back toward his college. The summer night was warm, but not as warm as it would be at home in Virginia. Windemere would be turning green now, as the young tobacco plants were transplanted from their winter seedbeds out into the fields.

He had enjoyed his time in Cambridge. He had learned everything he could, made some influential friends who might serve

him well later in life, and met more than a few young ladies like Clarissa Manners who were eager to share their charms with him. But he would be glad to be home.

The moon was rising behind the tower of Great St. Mary's Church as he turned into Trinity Street. It was past curfew. The gates of his college would be locked, but that did not trouble him. He had an understanding with Chapman, the porter.

"St. John!"

An angry voice hailed him from the end of the street. Mungo kept walking.

"St. John! Stop, if you are not a coward."

Mungo paused. Slowly, he turned back. "No one has ever accused me of cowardice."

Manners stood there, silhouetted against the street lamp. He was not alone. Two of his friends flanked him, sturdy young men with ham fists and broad shoulders. One of them carried a poker, and the other a wine bottle, which he gripped by the neck.

"If you were a gentleman, I would challenge you to a duel," sneered Manners.

"If you were a gentleman, I would gladly accept. But as that is clearly not the case, I will bid you goodnight."

Mungo tipped his hat and turned away—as if completely oblivious to the armed men behind him. Manners stared after him for a moment, stupefied by his opponent's insouciance. Then anger took over. Snarling like a dog, he charged.

Mungo heard the footsteps on the cobbles behind him. As Manners closed on him, Mungo pivoted on the balls of his feet and delivered a perfectly aimed uppercut to Manners's chin. Manners stopped dead, howling in pain. Mungo followed up with three quick jabs to the ribs that sent Manners reeling away, clutching his abdomen.

As Manners retreated, his friends moved in. They circled around Mungo, with the shambling gait of men who have been drinking. Mungo watched them carefully, calculating the effect

the alcohol would have. It might make them slower—but also more unpredictable.

They waited, calling encouragement to each other. None of them wanted to suffer the same fate as Manners, but they did not want to look weak. At last the one with the poker stepped forward.

“I will give you a lesson, you American bastard!”

He swung the poker at Mungo. Mungo took the blow on his shoulder, moving away so that he barely felt it. As he did, he grabbed the poker with both hands and tugged it forward, pulling his opponent off balance. Mungo thrust the poker back so that it hit him in the stomach, then twisted it out of his hands and cracked him over the shoulders. The man stumbled back.

Now Mungo was armed, he liked his odds better. He swung around, brandishing the poker. Manners’s friends edged backward. They were not so devoted to Manners that they wanted their heads cracked for him.

“Are you afraid of this Yankee upstart?”

Manners had stood up. He snatched the bottle that his friend carried and broke it on the cobbles so that he was left with a jagged and glittering stump. He advanced again, more cautiously this time. Two encounters with Mungo had taught him that much, at least.

“I would not do that,” Mungo said.

If Manners had been sober, he might have heard the lethal warning in Mungo’s voice. But he was drunk, and angry, and he had been humiliated. He jabbed the bottle at Mungo, swiping the broken glass toward his face.

Mungo avoided it easily. As Manners brought the bottle back, Mungo whipped the poker through the air and cracked it against Manners’s wrist. The bone snapped; the bottle flew out of his hand and smashed against a wall.

Manners howled and dropped to his knees. His two friends

took one look at Mungo, the poker raised like the sword of an avenging angel, and fled. Manners was left alone with Mungo.

Mungo could have walked away. He had done so once already that evening. But Manners had tried to kill him, however incompetently, and that had unlocked a rage he had rarely felt before. He stood over Manners like an executioner, the poker raised. Strength coursed through his arms. He was not minded to be merciful. At that moment, all that existed was his rage. He would break open Manners's head like an egg.

But as he moved to strike, a firm hand gripped the poker and stayed the blow. Mungo spun around to see Fairchild's earnest face, teeth gritted with the effort of holding back Mungo's arm.

"What are you doing?" Mungo hissed. "Do you think you can save this loathsome rat?"

Fairchild's grip did not loosen. "I am not saving him. I am saving *you*. From yourself."

"I do not need saving."

"If you kill him, you will be hanged for murder." Fairchild prodded Manners with the toe of his shoe. "Is he worth that?"

The two young men stared at each other, both holding the poker. Mungo knew that what Fairchild said was true, but he could not bring himself to let go. He tried to twist the weapon from Fairchild's grasp, heaving with all his might. Fairchild's fingers flexed; he was not as strong as Mungo. His grip threatened to break. But he had an iron will and would not yield.

They might have stayed locked in that position all night, but at that moment footsteps sounded on the street. A sturdy man in a long dark coat emerged from the porter's lodge and came straight toward them.

"Mr. St. John, sir?"

It was Chapman, the college porter. If he was surprised to see Mungo with a poker raised like a weapon, Fairchild wrestling him for it and Manners kneeling helpless at his feet, he made no comment. Chapman had known Mungo since he arrived three

years ago, and nothing the undergraduate did could surprise him.

“A letter arrived for you, sir. It was marked ‘urgent.’”

Mungo blinked. The poker dropped to the ground. Manners took advantage of his reprieve to scuttle away, whimpering and clutching his wrist. Mungo wiped his hands with his handkerchief, then adjusted his cuffs and his cravat. Only then did he take the letter. It was franked from Norfolk, Virginia, dated six weeks earlier. The address was written in a clear, large script, careful letters formed by a hand that was not used to writing.

Mungo showed no emotion as he slit it open and read the contents.

“What is it?” Fairchild asked.

Mungo ignored him. “Have the servants pack my trunk,” he said to the porter. “I must return to Virginia at once.”

A storm threatened to break. Dense clouds covered the sun and turned the dawn sky gray. In their shadow, the water of the Patapsco River had the look of rain-washed slate. The channel to the inner harbor of Baltimore, normally busy with shipping and pleasure craft, was nearly empty on this morning in August, 1841. The double-masted brig *Aurora*, fifty-eight days out from Southampton, was the only ship presently underway.

On an empty patch of foredeck, a small crowd of first-class passengers had gathered, wrapped in coats against the unseasonable chill. Mungo stood among them, peering through a spyglass. He could make out the battlements of Fort McHenry, where only thirty years earlier the fledgling American republic had come close to surrendering its flag to the British, and the tall masts of the docked merchant ships emerging from the fog behind it.

His thoughts darkened. He was a practical man, who never wasted energy on problems he could not solve. There was nothing to be done at sea, and so he had been able to put the news he had received that night in Cambridge two months earlier out of his mind. Now, with landfall, he could no longer ignore it.

He took the letter out of his pocket and read it again, though he could recite it like the Bible.

Your father is dead. Windemere is bankrupt and they say it is to be sold. There is nothing to harvest for nothing was planted. Come home at once or we will all be lost.

*With love and deepest affection,
Camilla*

He touched the paper to his lips. There was still a trace of scent on it, though almost worn away now. The smell of dogwood blossoms: ripe, sticky and vaguely obscene. Had Camilla

been picking them when she wrote the letter, or had she rubbed the petals on the paper deliberately to remind him of home? He imagined her poring over the paper, tongue sticking out as she concentrated on forming the unfamiliar letters. It must have taken a huge effort. What desperation drove her?

Despite her childish handwriting, Camilla was a full-grown woman, two years Mungo's junior. But she had never sat in a schoolroom. She had been born a slave, and from the age of eleven had served Mungo's mother, Abigail, as her maid. When Abigail died, Mungo had persuaded his father not to sell Camilla.

"I will soon bring home my own wife," he had argued, "and she will expect me to provide a good lady's maid."

That was not the whole truth of it.

Mungo strolled back along the rail toward the quarterdeck. The bosun's mate greeted him with a tip of his cap, as did the officer of the watch when he climbed the ladder. In the nearly nine-week voyage, Mungo had been a regular on deck. He had befriended the officers, swapped stories with the sailors, fine-tuned his knowledge of the winds and currents of the North Atlantic, and even learned to read the sextant. He loved the sea. In another life, he would have liked to be a mariner and then a master of his own vessel.

That was not the life he had come back to.

The *Aurora* docked at the quay, a stone's throw from the Waterfront Hotel. Stevedores shouted and hauled in the lines, and seamen manning the masts furled the sails and stripped them down to bare poles. Mungo collected his sea bag from his cabin and descended the gangplank. Unsteady after weeks at sea, he made his way through the crowd of dock workers to the livery yard at the Admiral Fell Inn. He had planned to hire a hack to ride to Windemere, but when he introduced himself, the groom led him at once to the stables. Two familiar faces greeted him.

"Jack," Mungo cried in delight. "Bristol."

In reply, he received happy whinnies of recognition. Two

Arabian horses trotted forward and nuzzled him. They were the finest horses in the yard, one patterned with high white markings, the other midnight black. They were not large, but they had the strength and stamina to outdistance any other breed.

“How do they come to be here?” Mungo asked.

“A negro boy brought them from Windemere,” answered the groom. “He said you would call. Paid two months’ board in advance and left this for you.”

He gave Mungo a leather bag hung from a nail. Inside was a riding cape and hat, a purse and a slim wooden case, surprisingly heavy. Mungo knew without opening it what it contained. He wondered why she had felt the need to send him a pistol.

There was also a note, again in Camilla’s familiar hand. *Come quick. Be careful.*

Mungo pocketed the paper. He tossed the groom a coin and mounted up.

“Don’t you want breakfast, sir?” the groom asked. “You must be hungry.”

“I have no time to waste.” Mungo put on the broad-brimmed riding hat that Camilla had sent along with the horses. He snapped open the wooden case, loaded the pistol and stuck it in his belt. “I have a long ride ahead.”

He navigated the streets of Baltimore at a trot, then spurred Bristol into a canter when he reached the King’s Highway, with Jack loping behind. He set a pace he knew the athletic Arabians could keep until sundown. The road stretched out before him, a trail of hard-packed dirt and occasional gravel that wound through field and forest, hamlet and metropolis.

He passed by Washington, as the sun climbed the sky and descended again, the humid summer air soaking the cotton of Mungo’s shirt with sweat. Twice, he stopped at a creek to allow the Arabians to drink, but he gave the horses no time to graze. His lunch was a wedge of hard cheese and a handful of carrots, the latter shared with Bristol and Jack. At dusk, as the moon rose

above the leafy trees, he reached the outskirts of Fredericksburg. There, he halted for the night at an inn.

Next morning, he crossed the Rappahannock and turned west on James River Road. The timberlands of the Piedmont, thick with maples and oaks, poplars and sweet gum, gave way to the plains and marshes of the low country. Mungo knew the contours of this land like his own face, every homestead and plantation, every creek and hill and bend in the road. His father, Oliver, had made sure of it, leading Mungo on countless excursions to hunt deer and rabbit and the elusive gray fox.

“This is your heritage,” Oliver had said. “A man should never forget where he came from.”

Could his father really now be dead?

It was the afternoon of the second day, and the oppressive heat was at its peak, when Mungo arrived at the gate that stood at the entrance to his home. Unlike the wooden fences that surrounded it, the gate had been wrought out of black iron and gleaming brass, the pattern of interlinked whorls and fleur-de-lis framing the St. John family crest. Mungo’s great-grandfather had carried it with him from Scotland in the 1750s. The unlatched gate stood half-open. A sign was planted in the earth beside it.

BY ORDER OF THE FIDELITY TRUST BANK OF CHARLES CITY.

And in block letters beneath that, a single word:

FORECLOSURE

Mungo peered closely at the sign. He had never heard of the Fidelity Trust Bank of Charles City, though it was the nearest town and all the estate’s business was done there. A host of questions swarmed in his mind, but they were beaten back by the force of his anger. In a single motion, he drew the pistol from his belt and pulled the trigger. At point-blank range, the lead ball

blasted the wooden stake into splinters and left the announcement lying face down in the dirt.

He spurred Bristol into a gallop toward the house. By the first week of August, the fields on either side of the gravel path should have been green with tobacco plants ready for the harvest. But they were barren. There were no slaves tending them, or children playing—only crows picking through the weeds.

At the end of the drive stood the house, overlooking a lawn and the blue sweep of the river. It was constructed of red brick and laid out in the Georgian style favored by the American colonists. It had two wings: on one side the slave quarters and the kitchen, and on the other a colonnaded addition that housed the drawing rooms and the library.

Mungo left the weary horses tethered to a post beside the garden gate and ran to the porch. There was no one to open the door, but it was not locked. He threw it open himself, so hard that the heavy oak slammed into the pillar behind.

He waited a moment to see if the noise would bring anyone, but no one came. He crossed the threshold. Even though it was his property—his home—it felt different. Like stealing into someone else's house as a thief.

His footfalls echoed on the marble hallway. Everything was in its place and as he remembered it, except for a film of dust on the furniture. His eyes swept the adjoining rooms: the formal parlor where his parents and grandparents had entertained so many distinguished guests, including three of America's first five presidents; the youth parlor where his grandfather had taught him to play chess and poker and where, at his mother's insistence, he had dabbled with Beethoven on her Chickering piano; the dining room with its walnut table large enough to accommodate a party of twenty; and the long staircase to the bedrooms on the second floor.

But Mungo sensed a vast emptiness. Three years ago, when he left for Cambridge, fifteen servants—slaves—had lived and

worked in the house. Whatever the season, the house had always hummed with life. Now it was as quiet as a burial chamber.

“Camilla!” Mungo called out, striding through the empty rooms. He left the dining room by way of the butler’s pantry and walked down the hallway toward the servant quarters. He tried other names: Esther, the family’s talkative cook; Old Joe, the chief carpenter; Charles, his father’s personal attendant; Nora, the maid who maintained the ground floor, and her sister, Amelia, who looked after the upper chambers. He listened closely, sure that someone would respond, but no one did. He entered their rooms and found beds made and clothing still in closets. It was as if the entire staff had simply vanished.

If his father was dead, then they should all have been set free. But where could they have gone?

He went back downstairs and crossed the colonnade to the library in the east wing. This was the only room in the house that was not covered in dust; someone had used it recently. The ink in the inkwell was fresh, and papers were stacked on the desk. He took a handful and scanned them quickly, searching for any clue as to what had happened. Many of them bore the same letterhead he had seen on the foreclosure sign: the Fidelity Trust Bank of Charles City. There were also a great many bills of sale that recorded the dismantling of the estate, all signed with the same name.

From the hallway, Mungo heard a door click. Then footsteps. He listened. Ten minutes ago, all he had wanted was to hear another human sound in the empty house. Now, he was suddenly cautious. His pistol was empty from being fired at the sign and he had no time to reload it, but a penknife lay on the desk. He palmed it, just as the study door swung open.

The man in the doorway stood a head shorter than Mungo, with thinning hair and hunched shoulders that even his well-cut coat could not improve. His face was unremarkable: if you passed him on the street, you would barely notice him. And yet,

if you caught his eyes you would not forget him. They burned with a bright purpose, unsettling in its intensity, as if he was fixed on a future that others could not see.

But now those eyes were staring in shock.

“Mungo.”

“Chester,” said Mungo evenly.

He had mastered his surprise quicker than Chester, perhaps because Chester’s name was the one scrawled on all the bills of sale he had been reading. Chester Marion was the family attorney, a man with a unique talent for turning the St. Johns’ plans into contracts, mortgages and conveyances that advanced the interests of the estate.

In truth, Mungo had never liked him. There was something cold and ferret-like in his bearing. He rarely looked you in the eye, and if he did it was always with an air of calculation.

But now he was the man who might be able to give Mungo answers.

“What happened? The estate—the crop, our people. Where are they all?”

Where is Camilla? he wanted to ask, but he doubted Chester would know one slave from another.

“Your father died.”

“How?”

Chester sucked his teeth. “It is a long story. Perhaps it is best I tell it from the beginning. That way, I can answer all your questions in the right order.”

Mungo nodded.

“Your father did not have a mind for business,” said Chester. “I tried to advise him as best I could, but he would not listen. He was headstrong, like all the St. Johns, but without the good sense your grandfather had.”

Mungo’s grandfather, Benjamin St. John, had been a towering figure. His uncompromising ambition had built Windemere from a smallholding into a great estate, while his ruthless

methods had kept the slaves in such a state of terror that they made it the most productive plantation on the James River. Even Mungo had feared the old man.

“My father wanted to be a better man,” Mungo said quietly.

Oliver had inherited none of Benjamin’s brutal enthusiasm for slavery. Where Benjamin refused to waste money on slave quarters and consigned the hands to wooden hovels, Oliver built solid brick cottages to house them. Where Benjamin had dictated whom the slaves would marry—“the better for breeding good stock,” he had said—Oliver let them choose their partners and live with the families they created. Benjamin would sell a slave the moment he became unproductive; Oliver preferred to keep the old slaves doing light chores, so as not to split up their families.

Did that make him a good man, when every minute of his life was provided for by slavery? Did it matter to the slaves that Oliver kept them in bondage only reluctantly? Perhaps Oliver believed it.

“No doubt his methods flattered his conscience,” said Chester tartly, “but they did nothing for his profits.”

“It was enough for him to live comfortably.”

“No!” Chester banged his hand on the table. “Did you learn nothing from your grandfather? He built this estate by borrowing aggressively. But the only way he could pay his debts was by continuing to expand. As soon as your father decided to rest on his laurels, the debts became unsustainable.”

He leaned forward. The look in his eyes reminded Mungo of a schoolmaster he’d had at Eton, a man whose passionate purpose was to make his pupils understand the Latin subjunctive, or flog them raw if they failed.

“On any plantation, even in a good year, the profit from the crop is spent before the first seed is planted,” Chester explained. “The income from the harvest goes to repay the debts. The structure that your grandfather and I had put in place meant that

the estate had to expand constantly to survive, either by acquiring more land or by making the existing fields more productive. But your father would not take the measures necessary to force the slaves to work hard enough. Instead of rising, production fell. He had to borrow more, simply to pay the interest on what he already owed. Eventually, the bank lost faith in his ability to repay and foreclosed.”

He sighed. “Credit is as vital to a man as the air that he breathes. Cut it off, and he dies.”

There seemed to be more regret in his voice for the financial loss than for the death of Oliver St. John.

Mungo had grown impatient. “This is all very well, but I doubt my father starved to death. How did he die?”

“The old-fashioned way.” Chester pointed out of the window, where a great oak tree spread its branches over the lawn. Mungo’s grandfather had reckoned it over three hundred years old. “The slaves found Oliver there at dawn one morning, with a pistol in his hand and a bullet in his skull. Facing financial ruin, it seemed he did the only honorable thing.”

Mungo closed his eyes, imagining the scene. “He would not have done it merely because of the money,” he said. “My father never cared about that.”

“Not nearly enough,” Chester agreed.

“If he was bankrupt, he would have had to sell the slaves to pay his debts. That would have broken his heart.”

“He was always too soft on them. He never understood that they were assets that should be made to turn a profit.”

“He saw them as human.” Mungo looked out the window, to the empty fields that had once been so full of people. “Where are they now? Have they been set free, as he wanted in his will?”

Chester leaned back against the door frame. A smirk curled on his lips, and Mungo realized how very rarely he had seen the lawyer smile. Chester took a cigar from his pocket and struck a match to light it. The end glowed red.

“The *will*.” The word hissed out with a cloud of smoke. “Such an extraordinary document. I hardly had the stomach to write it down when he told me what he wanted to do. The notion of freeing his slaves to salve his conscience—ridiculous.”

“Your job was to execute his wishes, not judge them.”

“Of course, of course.” Chester leaned forward. The light in his eyes burned brighter than ever. “Why should I dare to have an opinion? Chester the pen-pusher. Chester the numbers man. Chester the loyal dog, waiting in the corner in case someone throws him a bone. Chester who works night and day to make the St. Johns richer than he will ever be, only to see them piss it away. What right do I have to judge?”

He met Mungo’s gaze, clear and full. For the first time in his life, Mungo saw through those shifting, deceitful eyes and into the bitter soul behind.

“What have you done?”

“I sold the slaves.” He saw the protest rising on Mungo’s lips and waved a hand to hush him. “They fetched a good price. It will be a shock for them to finally learn the meaning of a hard day’s work.”

Mungo stared. He had never been lost for words before, but now he could hardly speak.

“You betrayed my father’s wishes.”

“When he died, the will could not be found.”

Mungo gripped the desk tight enough to crack the hardwood. “You were his attorney. Surely you knew where the will was kept.”

Chester shrugged. His attitude only stoked Mungo’s anger.

“I will find the will and prove you had no right to sell them. I will make you track down every last one of our people and buy their freedom.”

“You do not have to look for the will.” Chester reached inside his coat and pulled out a densely written piece of paper. Mungo could not read it at that distance, but he recognized his father’s

bold signature scrawled across the bottom, stamped with the notary's seal. "I have it here."

"Then why . . . ?"

Mungo did not understand what was happening—all he knew was that he had been betrayed. He flung himself at Chester. He wanted to sink his fists into that soft flesh and break every bone in his body. He wanted to wring his neck and rip his head off his shoulders. He wanted—

He did not make it more than halfway. From a holster under his coat, Chester had produced a small pearl-handled pistol. He held it straight out, aimed at Mungo's heart, and even in his rage Mungo had the sense and the self-control to stop moving. Until ten minutes ago, he would never have believed Chester had the courage to pull the trigger. Now, he did not know what the man was capable of.

Chester sucked on the cigar until the end burned bright red. Without taking his eyes off Mungo, he lifted the will and touched the corner to the glowing ember. A dark stain spread across the paper, then burst into flame. Mungo gave a stifled cry, but the pistol in Chester's hand did not waver. Chester twisted the paper this way and that, until the fire took hold, then dropped it on the floor. Mungo could only watch as the paper shriveled into wisps of ash. His father's last wishes—gone.

Chester ground out the embers with the heel of his boot.

"That is not the end of it," Mungo warned him. "Even if the courts believe my father died intestate, I am still the only heir. Windemere is mine."

"You are too late. The property was foreclosed this morning. I signed the deed myself, on behalf of the Fidelity Trust Bank of Charles City." Chester spread his free arm with a proprietorial grin, dripping cigar ash on the hardwood floor. "Windemere has a new owner now."

"You?" The fury boiled up inside Mungo, but reason kept an iron grip on him. "How?"

“Because I own the bank. I used it to acquire the debts your father owed—cheaply, I might add. The other banks were keen to be rid of them. Then I called in the loans. Your father could not pay, so he forfeited the entire estate to me.”

Again, Mungo cursed himself for being so blind to the evil within Chester.

“My father did not bring all this on himself. You led him down the path to bankruptcy.”

Chester did not deny it. “It was not hard. He had no head for business, and he trusted me completely. He did everything I told him, even as it brought him to his own ruin.”

“Whatever my father may have done, you killed him as surely as if you had pulled the trigger yourself.”

If he had meant to wound Chester, he failed. The smile that spread across Chester’s face was terrible to see.

“You are more right than you know. I *did* pull the trigger myself.”

“You?”

Chester nodded, as if accepting a compliment. “I had hoped that bankruptcy would drive him to despair. But even in his ruin, he did not have the wit to see what he should do. So I took it in hand myself.” He sighed. “Even at the end, I had to do everything for him.”

“I will kill you,” Mungo hissed.

“I think not.” Chester reached out a fist and rapped twice on the wood paneling. “Only a fool would kill the wolf and let the cub grow up to avenge him.”

Behind the desk there was another door that led to the billiards parlor. Now it snapped open. Mungo turned to see half a dozen men spilling out of it into the room.

“I saw you coming the moment you crossed the county line,” said Chester, drawing on his cigar. “We were ready for you.”

Two of the men grabbed Mungo’s arms. A third pulled Mungo’s pistol from its holster and tossed it aside. These were not soft

Cambridge undergraduates; they were rough men with strong hands. Stubble darkened their cheeks, they had knives and pistols strapped to their belts, and by the smell of them they'd spent time in Oliver St. John's whiskey cellar. Their leader wore a maroon hat pulled low over his face, and an open-necked shirt that revealed a livid scar circling his throat.

"Granville," Chester said to him. "Take this boy outside and deal with him."

The men hustled Mungo outside. He had no false hopes. None of the neighbors had seen him arrive at Windemere; apart from a stable boy in Baltimore, no one even knew he had come back to America. His family were dead. Chester's men would kill him, and no one would be any the wiser. Wherever Camilla was, she would never know he had received her letter and acted on it.

Bristol, still tethered to the hitching post, whinnied at the sight of Mungo as the men dragged him past. They were taking him to the oak tree on the lawn, the same place where his father had died. Glancing back, Mungo saw Chester watching from the library window. Savoring his final victory.

Mungo had not resisted his captors. He hung his head and slacked his muscles, like a man resigned to his fate. That put his captors off their guard. Then, suddenly, he stopped dead. The men who held him stumbled forward; their grip loosened. Not much, but enough for Mungo to move his arm.

Couched in his hand, he still had the penknife that he had taken from the desk. He let the blade slip out between his fingers, and stabbed it to his right. The man let go with a cry. As he sagged to the ground, Mungo grabbed a long hunting knife from the man's belt and deftly reversed it into the man on his left, who stumbled backward clutching his belly.

Before Mungo could move, two more of Granville's men leaped for him. They grabbed his shoulders and tried to wrestle him to the ground. Mungo was too strong. He took three steps

backward and slammed them into the trunk of the oak tree, so hard they let go and reeled away.

Mungo had been in his share of brawls. Yet he had never experienced this kind of violence before—half a dozen armed men trying to kill him. It did not terrify him; instead it unleashed the same focused fury he had felt with Manners in Cambridge. Everything seemed to move more slowly. The men who had attacked him had pistols in their belts. Before they could get up, Mungo snatched them both, spun, and discharged them both at point-blank range at the rest of Granville's men.

One of the men collapsed, clutching his shoulder where a bullet had shattered his collarbone. But the other ball had gone wide. Through the cloud of smoke that the pistols had disgorged, Mungo saw Granville and one of the others coming at him. Meanwhile, the men he had slammed against the tree were getting to their feet.

Granville swung at Mungo with a knife. Metal rang on metal as Mungo blocked it with a pistol barrel, jarring so hard that Granville dropped the blade. For a moment he was defenseless: Mungo had an opening to attack.

But if he went for Granville, there were three others ready to grab him. He could not beat them all. His only chance was to flee. He ran across the lawn to where Bristol was tethered. He slipped the bridle off the hitching post and swung himself into the saddle. Bristol had smelled the danger and began to move even before Mungo landed on her back. He kicked her flanks hard, leaning low over her neck as she shot away. Her mane blew back in his face; her hooves thundered over the hard ground.

Over the din, he heard the crack of a gunshot. A bullet flew by and buried itself in one of the oaks to his left. He glanced back. Chester had run out of the house and was standing on the porch, holding his pistol. By the tree, Granville and two of his henchmen stumbled after him. But they only had pistols, and against a moving target at that range they stood no chance.

Mungo passed the slave quarters, the drying sheds and the cooperage, and left the house behind. He rode across the soft earth of the empty fields, giving Bristol her head. Where now? After Chester's betrayal, he did not know if he could trust any of Windemere's neighbors. Richmond was a better bet, but it was miles away. Bristol had already done almost two hundred miles hard riding in the last two days. Already, Mungo could feel her beginning to slow. Behind him, he heard the barking of dogs and the neighing of horses. Chester's men must have mounted up to follow him.

Half a mile from the main house, he entered a knot of trees where a creek led in from the river. He guided Bristol down the bank and splashed into the creek. Halfway across, he slid out of the saddle and dropped into the water. The horse looked at him curiously.

"Go on."

Mungo took his sea bag from the saddle where it was still tied on, then slapped the horse on her rump. She trotted away and up the far bank, leaving a deep trail of hoofprints in the mud. At the top of the embankment, she paused again and looked back.

"Go," Mungo said again.

With a whinny, she tossed her head and vanished into the trees. With luck, Chester's men would see her tracks and be led a merry dance before they realized their mistake.

Mungo did not follow her. He turned downstream, holding his bag above his head and breasting through the water. Toward the mouth of the creek, where it met the river, an island had formed in the stream. There had been a bridge once, but it was gone now. A row of rotten pilings poking through the surface were all that remained.

Mungo hauled himself out and climbed onto the island. The thickly wooded ground rose up the slopes of a long hill, a pocket of the pre-colonial wilderness that had survived the St. Johns' improvements to the land. There was only one path, almost

invisible and seldom used. Mungo prayed that Chester did not know it.

The air in the forest was quiet and dank. Briars and branches overhung the path, but it was not completely overgrown. The thicker branches still wept sap from their splintered ends where an ax had pruned them roughly back. In hollows where the earth stayed damp, Mungo saw footprints that must have been made since the last rain.

He took out the pistol case from his sea bag and reloaded the gun he had taken from his captors. He continued cautiously up the path. The forest deadened sound, but in the distance he could still hear the barking of dogs. He hoped the creek had washed clean his scent.

At the top of the hill, the trees thinned out into a clearing. A red brick building stood in its center—an octagonal shape with a domed roof. Mungo's grandfather had built it as an observatory and Mungo had spent many nights there with the old man, studying the stars through the heavy telescope that Benjamin had imported from Italy. After his death, Mungo's father sold the telescope and left the observatory abandoned. The forest had drawn in, and a canopy of leaves now blocked any view of the heavens.

But it had other uses. Someone seemed to be there now; the door stood open, and a pair of skinned rabbits were strung up from the bracket where a lamp had once hung. They were freshly killed; their blood pattered down on the carpet of leaves.

Mungo advanced into the clearing, gun ready. He had been playing in these woods since he could walk, and knew how to move silently. Barely a leaf stirred as he approached the door.

He waited outside. He could hear snuffling inside, a sort of snoring. Someone was in there. But if they were asleep, perhaps Mungo should pass by and not disturb them.

Then some sixth sense prickled down his spine. He turned,

pressing his back to the wall, to see a figure emerging from the forest. Her white dress shone bright among the gray wood.

His heart lifted. For the first time since he had landed in Baltimore, he felt a spark of hope.

“Camilla!” he called.

A stack of firewood tumbled from her arms and she gave a yelp of fear, turning to joy as she recognized him. She ran across the clearing and threw herself at Mungo. He caught her in his strong arms, wrapped them around her and hugged her close to him as he kissed her on the lips. Even in the chaos and ruin of that afternoon, for that moment at least the world seemed to hang still in perfect peace.

She buried her head in his chest. “Thank God you are here. I prayed every night that you would come.”

He held her back so he could study her face. Her skin was the color of mahogany, a beautiful reddish brown that seemed to glow with the fire of an inner warmth. She wore her hair in two braids tied back behind her neck, framing an oval face with full lips and wide round eyes. She must have been in the forest some time; her features were drawn, and she had lost weight. But the spark inside her, the one that Mungo remembered so well, remained undimmed.

“I wish I had come sooner,” Mungo said. A thousand questions crowded his mind, but he had no time to ask them. “Chester knows I am here and has put the hunt up. We must escape.”

“It is not so easy.”

She pulled free and led him into the observatory. Inside was a single dim room, empty apart from a makeshift bed of ferns and dry leaves in the corner. A white-haired man lay there, next to a balled-up blanket he must have thrown off.

“Methuselah,” said Mungo softly.

The old man had worked the plantation as long as anyone could remember. Among the slaves he had served as headman, judge, shaman and spokesman. He was also Camilla’s grandfather.

“What happened?” Livid welts criss-crossed Methuselah’s back, gleaming with the ointment Camilla had rubbed on them. “Who beat him?”

“Chester said all the slaves were to be sold,” said Camilla. “Methuselah said we belonged to the St. Johns, and once Mr. Oliver was dead we should be free. Chester had his man, Granville Slaughter, thrash him nearly dead.”

She raised her eyes to look at Mungo. “Do you know Granville?”

Mungo rubbed his arms, still bruised from the hands that had gripped him. “I’ve met him.”

Camilla shuddered. “Of all the men I ever met, black or white, I never saw one who scared me like him.”

“Did he touch you?”

“No. That night, before we were to go away, me and my Granddaddy managed to get out. He couldn’t go far, but I remembered this place. How you and me used to come here.”

She dropped her gaze shyly, remembering the first night they had gone there together. Mungo had been eighteen, and she sixteen, on the cusp of womanhood.

“If Chester had touched one hair on your head, I would tear him apart like a dog.” Mungo’s voice was cold and resolute. “As it is, a bullet may suffice.”

He rose. “But I do not like the odds at present. We must go.”

“We can’t.” She took Mungo’s hand and pressed it against Methuselah’s forehead. “Feel him. He took sick from his wounds—he’s burning up with a fever.”

Mungo looked into her eyes, hating the pain he saw there.

“If I had been here, I could have put a stop to all of this.”

Camilla looked as if she might be about to cry, but she caught herself. “It’s not your fault.”

Mungo’s touch had woken the old man. Methuselah stirred, and seemed to mumble something. Camilla leaned over and

placed her ear beside his mouth. He murmured again and turned onto his side, pulling his knees toward his chest like a baby.

“Not making any sense,” she said, straining to listen. “Something about a . . . black heart. And . . . thirst.”

A withered hand reached out toward Mungo, clawing the air to beckon him. Camilla moved aside to let Mungo move closer.

Methuselah let out a cough that shook his battered body. His eyelids opened, revealing the yellow-white of his eyeballs. They rolled back in his skull—sightless orbs that fixed on Mungo like two moons.

“Beware the black heart,” the old man croaked, “and the thirst that never quenches.”

A cold shiver went down Mungo’s spine. The words meant nothing, yet they seemed freighted with menace. He knew the slaves venerated Methuselah as much more than an elder or a foreman. Unlike most of them, he had been born in the soil of Africa; he alone had been inducted into the old mysteries of their people. He was their shaman, a seer who could commune with their ancestors’ spirits across the divides of time and oceans and death.

“What do you mean?” Mungo whispered. “What did you see?”

For a moment, Methuselah went rigid: as stiff as a dead man. Then his body relaxed. His eyes closed, his breathing eased and he sank back into the mattress.

From outside the observatory, Mungo heard the barking of dogs again. It was louder now; they must have crossed the creek and picked up his trail. He shook off Methuselah’s grip, angry for letting himself be gulled by the old man’s mumbo jumbo. He should know better.

“We must go,” he said abruptly.

“Leave me here,” Camilla said. “There is nothing they can

take from me. But you know what they would do to you if they caught you helping a runaway.”

“Two years in jail and a thousand-dollar fine,” said Mungo. “I can afford both.”

He said it lightly, though he knew that was the least of it. For a white man to help a fugitive slave, especially the scion of a famous family like the St. Johns, was to betray every principle the South was built on. Mungo would be ostracized. His friends would melt away; his associates would disown him. Strangers would cross the street to avoid him, or stay so they could spit at him. In his fight with Chester, he would be left without a single ally.

“You are not a runaway,” he told Camilla. “You should be free.”

She stiffened. “The law says I belong to Chester.”

“I intend to prove otherwise.”

“Which will be easier if you are not in jail yourself?”

“But I do not care to let him have you.”

Mungo smiled. It was a look she knew well, the same charming smile he had worn when they met in the observatory that first night. The look of a man whose will was as unyielding as granite.

In a part of her mind, she wondered what truly drove him now. Was it love for her, or simply the determination to have what was his? When he had her in his arms, he was so tender she felt that their souls were joined and there was nothing between them. Yet even then, his heart remained impenetrable to her. And whatever she felt for him—a terrifying, breathless knot of feelings—she had never been able to escape one immutable fact. Just as much as the fields and the buildings, down to the last stick of furniture in the great house, she was his family’s property.

The dogs were getting closer. Now she could hear shouts and the snap of branches as men fought their way through the undergrowth.

“Granddaddy cannot travel,” she said.

Mungo ignored her. He lifted the old man off the bed and carried him outside in his arms, like a child.

“Where are we going?”

“Mud Island. You know it?”

Camilla nodded. It was a low-lying islet in the middle of the James River.

“The dogs will not find us there. Old Jonah the boatman used to keep a raft in the creek opposite. We should be able to get across.”

At that moment, a dark shadow sprang out from the trees and raced into the clearing. It was a bloodhound, daubed with mud and snarling through its ferocious jaws. Mungo had the pistol in his belt, but his arms were full carrying Methuselah.

The hound bore down on them. Mungo did not have time to reach his pistol. Then something small and bloody sailed through the air and landed just in front of the hound. Camilla had snatched one of the skinned rabbits hanging by the observatory door and thrown it at the hound. The scent of fresh meat drove out every other thought from the dog’s mind. It stopped its charge and began tearing the rabbit carcass apart.

It would not be distracted for long. Mungo laid Methuselah on the ground, drew the pistol and shot the dog through the chest. The animal collapsed without a sound. Two more dogs had followed it into the clearing; now they halted, sniffing at their fallen companion and whimpering.

Mungo grabbed the pistol case from his bag and began to reload. But he was out of time. Even as he rammed home the ball, the dogs’ owners burst into the clearing. There were six of them, all on horseback and all armed: Chester, Granville and one of his men, and three men in the blue coats of the Charles City County Militia.

They spread out in a loose circle, rifles raised. Mungo stepped forward, putting himself in front of Camilla and Methuselah.

“Have you called in the army now to do your work for you?” he asked Chester, nodding at the militia men.

“We were riding by the gate from our muster when we heard shots. We came to investigate.” The leader of the militia was a stern-looking man of about fifty, with a lieutenant’s insignia on his shoulder. His name was Jeremiah Cartwright and Mungo knew him well; he owned the neighboring plantation to Windemere. “What in God’s name have you done, Mungo?”

“He trespassed on my property, attacked my men and then tried to escape,” said Chester, before Mungo could speak.

“I cannot trespass on what is rightfully mine,” Mungo retorted.

“I am the owner. These two negroes—” Chester pointed to Camilla and Methuselah—“belong to me. And this man has been helping them escape.”

“Don’t listen to him. He is a thief and a murderer,” Mungo replied.

Cartwright looked uncertainly between the two men. Chester Marion was nothing more than a county lawyer, a man of no background or family; the St. Johns had been the masters of Windemere since before the War of Independence. Yet there was no denying the evidence of his eyes. Why else should Mungo be out here in the forest—bloody, filthy and unshaven—with two fugitive slaves?

“Please, Jeremiah,” Mungo said humbly. “Would you do this to my family?”

It was lucky the militia had arrived so soon, Mungo thought. If Chester and Granville had found him themselves, they could have killed him quickly; his body would never have been found. Now there were witnesses, men Mungo had known all his life. The balance had shifted.

“Chester killed my father and he has swindled me out of my inheritance,” he told Cartwright. “For the close bonds that have always tied our families together, give me the chance to prove it.”

The low sun shone through the trees over Cartwright's shoulder, so Mungo could not see his face under the shadow of his hat. He waited, wondering what Cartwright was thinking.

"Oliver St. John was a good man, and I was proud to call him my neighbor," Cartwright said.

In fact, Oliver St. John had been a sanctimonious pain in the ass—treating his slaves too soft, giving them notions above their station. Ideas like that had consequences; slaves gossiped with each other. Cartwright had lost count of the beatings he'd had to give his own field hands because they'd been infected by Oliver's hands' way of thinking.

All that passed through Cartwright's mind as he looked at Mungo. That, and a great many other things. He gave Chester a sideways glance and nodded.

"These are serious charges. Best take him to the jail."

"He doesn't need a trial," Chester complained. "The evidence of his crime is all around you. I say we lynch him here."

Cartwright looked horrified. "That wouldn't be lawful."

"Are you always so nice about points of law?"

"Mr. St. John may be a criminal, but he is a gentleman. We're not stringing him up like some common negro."

Mungo saw Chester's finger twitching against the trigger of his gun. But he could not murder Mungo in cold blood in front of witnesses. He swung down from the saddle and walked across the clearing. He did not look at Mungo, but went straight past him to where Camilla kneeled beside Methuselah.

"I am obliged to you for restoring what is rightfully mine," he said to Cartwright.

He drew his pistol, aimed it at Methuselah's chest, and fired.

The bang echoed around the clearing, startling a flock of black birds from their roosts. The old man's body jerked once and went still. Camilla screamed and threw herself over her grandfather. Mungo lunged for Chester, but Granville read his

intentions. He spurred his horse forward and struck Mungo's shoulders hard with the butt of his rifle as he cantered past. Mungo was knocked flat onto the ground.

Granville dismounted. He grabbed Camilla by her arms and wrestled her off her grandfather, her dress now stained with blood and earth. Chester walked over to Mungo. He planted his boot on the back of Mungo's head and squeezed down, pressing Mungo's face into the mud.

"The old man was worthless," he said, "and I have no time for assets that do not turn a profit." He bent down, lowering his voice to whisper in Mungo's ear. "As for your little black whore, I did intend to sell her with the others. But now she's gotten a taste for freedom, no one will pay good money for her. There's nothing you can do with a bitch who's gone wild—except shoot her down."

Mungo rose out of the mud so suddenly Chester was thrown onto his back. Careless of the armed men around him, Mungo lunged for his enemy. If he could get his hands on him, he would snap his neck and witnesses be damned. He would not let Chester kill Camilla.

But Mungo could not touch him. The militiamen leaped off their horses and piled into Mungo. He fought them off with all his strength, but they were fresh and strong. Even then, they could not overcome him until Cartwright managed to get a loop of rope over his head. He fastened the other end to the pommel of his saddle and spurred his horse forward. The rope closed around Mungo's throat. He had to stagger after the horse or he would be throttled.

He twisted his head back, staring at Camilla on her knees beside Methuselah, mouthing words that only she could see. He would never forget the way she looked back at him. Her eyes were wide with the shocking knowledge she was about to die, the frantic disbelief of a small bird cornered by a cat. Mungo

clawed at the rope around his neck, but Cartwright was moving so fast he could not loosen it.

Back in the clearing, Chester raised his pistol and aimed it at Camilla's forehead. The sight tore at his heart, but Mungo forced himself to keep looking. Even if the world did not recognize it as a crime, he would witness it—and bring Chester to justice.

Chester half turned, almost as if he wanted to make sure that Mungo had gone. He caught Mungo's gaze; his mouth opened in a terrible sneer of triumph. Mungo wanted to shout at him, to warn him of the vengeance he would inflict if he hurt Camilla. But the rope was so tight, it only came out as an impotent gurgling sound.

The trees blocked his view as Cartwright dragged him on down the path. Camilla vanished from his sight.

From the clearing, a solitary pistol shot rang through the forest, then slowly died away.