

The Road to Mountain Laurel

AUGUST 1793

Western Pennsylvania

“Go with God then, Ian” had been his mother’s parting words. *“By all that’s holy, lad, dinna throw away another chance to settle”* had been his father’s. Four hundred miles and a fortnight later, Ian Cameron reckoned he couldn’t have confounded both their hopes more thoroughly had he tried. Crouched behind a jut of rock, he aimed his rifle at the one stretch of rutted track below not obscured by trees and dusk-fall. There was no sign of his mounted pursuer. There ought to have been, by now.

Ian swore in silence, retracing the day’s unfortunate coil for the precise turn in its downward spiral that had doomed him once again to familial censure—should he live long enough for his parents to learn of it. Could he blame it on the weather? He’d never done well in the heat.

After two days of pushing the horses over drought-baked countryside, the summer air as thick as steaming porridge, the roan gelding and the pack mare hadn’t been the only ones in need of respite when he’d stumbled upon the tavern nigh the Maryland border. He’d had

coin enough for their feed, space in the stable for a few hours' rest—hours that might have unfolded without incident had the tavern not boasted a back parlor, with a game of loo getting underway. Heat delirium, habit, plain idiocy—whatever impulse mastered him, he'd been lured into the game.

They'd taken him for what he appeared, a drifter in dusty hunting shirt and breeches, stinking of cook fires and horseflesh, sun-browned from days in the saddle. Playing the bumpkin to their townsmen, he'd sipped his ale, grinned at their jests, and quietly picked them clean. He'd have sworn no one marked his hasty exodus from the village with his winnings, until the hoofbeats sounded hard on the road behind him. Though he'd caught no more than a backward glimpse of the rider before plunging off the road into the wood, Ian Cameron had been a hunter long enough to sense when he was prey.

The day's heat radiated from the rock outcrop now pressed against his shoulder, soaking his shirt with sweat. Dusk was fast leaching color from the landscape, flattening shapes, obscuring depth. The ridgeline above made a ragged silhouette against a sunset beribboned in orange. Below him a firefly winked. Others responded, until the hillside on which he perched pulsed with their tiny yellow bursts. Above the whine of mosquitoes he finally heard it: the approach of hooves. Not the expected clip on the track below; a heavy thud on duff that reverberated through his boots, descending from the slope above.

Panic coiled in his chest. The hillside fell off nearly sheer beyond where he crouched. If he broke cover and retreated, he'd never reach the horses. Not if the man had a pistol primed. A rustle skittered from the nearby laurel thicket where the horses waited. The sound twanged through his nerves a second before the pack mare loosed a ringing whinny.

"That's done it," Ian breathed, as a stone clattered downslope and struck the tip of his boot. Saddle leather creaked as horse and rider hove into view. In one fluid motion Ian stood, planted a boot on a jutting stone, and took aim.

The approaching horse balked, nearly sitting on its haunches as it swung its rider's face into the fading light. A face Ian knew all too well.

It was his last sight before the stone beneath his braced foot rocked free of its moorings and pitched him sideways. His fingers clenched in reflex.

Through a cloud of reeking powder smoke and the thunderclap of his own rifle's report, Ian Cameron fell.



“Is thy companion gravely injured?”

The query jarred Ian to consciousness with all the gentleness of a trumpet's blare. It also woke a hammering of a headache. When he could hear again past the screaming pain in his head, a different voice was speaking.

“. . . and he got hisself a pumpknot back of his noggin. But Mastah Ian got the thickest skull of anyone I know. 'Spect he'll come right soon enough. Thankee kindly for stopping, sir. Have some coffee for yo' trouble?”

A clamorous clank of tin. A thunderous pouring of liquid. Ian clenched his eyes tight. It couldn't be *his* “noggin” up for discussion. The bones of his skull felt thin as quails' eggs. The merest tap and he'd be left with shattered bits and oozing brains.

“Coffee would be a kindness, friend. Though thee needn't call me *sir*. Verily, I'm no man's master. As for this one claiming the designation, has he roused since he sustained his head injury?”

The rich smell of coffee stirred the coals of Ian's memory. He ought to know the speakers. One of them at least. Not the loud one with the biblical vernacular. Was he dead, he wondered with a spurt of alarm, and this some angel dispatched to drag him off to judgment?

“He ain't woke since he took his fall. I got us settled here last night—heap of trouble that was, dragging his dead weight off'n the hillside. Jez waitin' on him to wake is all.”

Ian recognized *that* voice at last—it was no angel's, and he wasn't dead, though he began to wish it. His lips formed a word: *quiet*. What he managed was a fair imitation of a strangled crow.

“Mastah Ian? What that you say to your boy?”

Ian glared into the face hovering over him—the face he'd seen before

the rifle fired: Thomas Ross, the childhood friend who'd hounded him south from Boston for the past fortnight. Why the devil was he using that slave talk? Ian had made it abundantly clear he was having none of it.

"I said . . . *be quiet.*"

Thomas's face pulled back. Light smote Ian's eyes. The sun was high in a blue-white sky, the air sticky with heat. He was half naked under a blanket, surrounded by a camp he'd no memory of pitching. He pushed himself to an elbow. Pain seared up the back of his scalp. Every inch of him hurt. Then he recalled why. The weightless moment of falling. His body careening downhill, jarring over stone and tussock. The bloom of red behind his eyes as his head struck something hard.

He blinked, bringing the figures standing opposite the fire into wobbly focus. The stockier one was Thomas, dressed in patched shirt and fraying trousers, brown hands gesticulating as he spoke. The other was taller, lean, suited in sober gray, cradling a tin cup between long white fingers.

Ian's own cup. *Coffee.* The man sipped the steaming brew. Ian swallowed reflexively. "What is the time?"

Thomas approached, casting a shadow across him again as he knelt. "Getting on to midday," he murmured, sounding more himself. "Thought you'd never wake up." He raised his voice to carry, altering it again. "Hope you pleased, Mastah Ian, me setting up camp like I done."

Ian winced and hissed, "Blast it, Thomas—I nearly put a bullet through your skull."

Thomas grinned, lowering his voice. "I was ready for that. Saw you slip out of that tavern back yonder. Some poor yokel take exception to your absconding with his last shilling?"

Ian had forgotten the tavern, the game. Remembering it now, and how he'd come to be there, he narrowed his glare. "Ye're a fool if ye mean to hound me all the way to Carolina."

"No doubt. But I'm a fool with a *plan.*"

"I don't want to hear it. Go back to Boston—while ye still can."

Thomas shook his head. "I've already come too far for turning back."

"Thy companion is well awake, I see. Is he well?" The stranger's voice made the back of Ian's eyes ache as he shifted his focus. The russet hair bracketing the man's face showed no silver, though Ian put him closer to thirty than his own three-and-twenty. The man nodded, acknowledging his gaze. "My name is Benjamin Eden, friend. This good man who attends thee gives thy name as Ian Cameron, saying that thee travels to the home of thy uncle, Hugh Cameron, of County Randolph in North Carolina."

Ian cocked an eyebrow. "Oh, aye? Does he give aught else?"

Apparently deaf to sarcasm, the man motioned to a bay mare hitched to a laden cart, parked at the edge of the camp. "There was time for no further exchange before thee woke, friend, as I am only just arrived."

Ian fingered the bridge of his nose, swollen and tender. One cheekbone felt scraped raw. Feeling about gingerly, he found the entire back of his head matted with blood. Beneath it rose a knot the size of a corn dodger. Add a week unshaven to his overall state and he must look a tatterdemalion to the immaculate fellow in his plain suit of clothes, who returned his stare with equanimity.

"Thy accent is faint," the man said, "but I gather thee is a Scotsman?"

"Scotland-born, aye. Though my da's pleased to think his sons Americans—having fought a war to make it so." The headache intensified. His belly joined the fray, heaving like a ship's deck. He swallowed. "And where do ye hail from, Mr. . . .?"

He'd forgotten the man's name already.

"Eden—my name, not my place of origin." The man smiled at his thin jest, displaying long teeth as spotless as his neckcloth. "I come from Easton Town. Like thee I journey to Carolina—to Hillsborough, there to join my cousin's Meeting as a sojourning member and, I dare to hope, schoolmaster."

A Quaker. Of course. "Ye've strayed a fair piece west to be heading south from Easton Town, Mr. Eden. Sit ye, if ye will."

"Call me Benjamin." Accepting the invitation, the Quaker settled

on a log drawn to the fire, cradling his coffee. "As to my present location, I was forced hither by the yellow fever ravaging Philadelphia."

Faint alarm gripped Ian, which must have showed, for the Quaker raised a reassuring hand.

"I did not enter the city but received the news from refugees on the road. I meant to take the Great Road from thence, but after tarrying a day, awaiting the Inner Light—"

"The what?" Ian interjected.

"The light of God that indwells us all," Benjamin Eden said, smiling. "After tarrying a day, I was convinced of the wisdom of altering my course. Would this be thy reason for traveling the backcountry?"

"Ain't on account o' fever we come this way." Thomas poured a second cup of coffee and handed it to Ian. "Wager Mastah don' know nothin' 'bout it."

Benjamin Eden shot Thomas a scrutinizing look. "Is that so?"

"I passed west of the city," Ian explained, "and wasn't minded to dally for news."

He'd been riding hard, thinking he'd outwitted—or outdistanced—a friend intent on sticking closer than a brother.

"Then my guidance was true, for here—" Benjamin Eden indicated the wooded hills backing their isolated camp—"in such unlikely environs I find thee in need. Do thy wounds require tending?"

"Mastah Ian ain't got much liking for physicians, though reckon he need his head examined."

The Quaker's gaze flicked again to Thomas, this time with a keener speculation. "I claim no such lofty title, friend. I am, however, widely read on subjects of a medicinal nature." He turned to Ian. "Would thee permit my ministrations?"

Benjamin Eden was no angel come to end his present suffering—or whisk him away to a greater. Rather a Good Samaritan, determined to meddle.

Ian peeled a stiff strand of hair away from his cheek. It was matted with bits of leaf, sticky with congealing blood. Truth, he couldn't very well examine the wound himself, much less clean it. He pulled a sip of coffee, felt it burn down his throat, settle in his belly. "Since we cannot

amputate my head should the wound fester, I'd be obliged if ye'd have a keek, Benjamin. And my *boy* here," he added, pinning Thomas with a look, "will be happy to assist ye."



Shirtless, clad only in breeches, Ian dangled his feet over the stone ledge that projected above the runoff from a nearby spring, while Benjamin Eden worked another twig from his hair. "Shall I live?" he inquired.

"Thy scalp boasts an impressive gash. And some bruising . . ." Ian jerked at a tender spot too boldly probed, then jumped when Eden placed a hand on his bare shoulder. "If thee would bow thy head, I shall rinse the wound to better examine it."

Disagreeable as it was submitting like a beast to a groom's hand, Ian was less happy to kneel like a penitent prepared for baptism. Thomas, ready with a leather feedbag filled from the spring, obligingly tilted it over his head. Ian bore the sluicing in clenched silence. While runnels of red-tinged water streamed down his chest, Eden's fingers descended again upon his head. After a bit more probing the Quaker presented his verdict. "No undue reddening. The edges are clean and already closing. I believe we may forgo suturing."

"Ye needn't sound so disappointed." Fingering his dripping hair back from his face, Ian heaved himself up to follow Thomas toward the camp.

Eden drew abreast of him, turning down his shirtsleeves. "Thee goes halt, friend. Does thy leg pain thee also?"

"It's an old wound." He'd had months to grow accustomed to the limp, which had all but vanished until recent misadventures aggravated the ache.

"Aside from old wounds, how does thee fare?"

Ian slanted a look at the man keeping pace with him, solicitous to the bone. He grasped at patience. "Like my brain's half again too big for my skull." And more than a little dizzy, he didn't add.

"*Commotio cerebri*. Not uncommon with such an injury. Were I a physician, I should advise thee to rest and continue thy journey on the morrow, provided thee be sound enough then."

"I'm sound enough now," he said, though he was having trouble focusing on anything more distant than the attentive Quaker narrowing hazel eyes at him.

"Thee took a fall, Thomas said. Did thy horse unseat thee?"

"Ruaidh never pulls such tricks."

"I see." A frown tightened the Quaker's ruddy brows. "Thee has three horses. Which one is . . . Roy, did thee call him?"

"Ruaidh," Ian said, giving the name its more guttural Gaelic pronunciation. He nearly corrected the man's tail-count as well but let the misapprehension stand. No slave would own the gelding Thomas called Black Huzzah. Why he didn't just call Thomas's bluff and end the charade . . . "It means *red*. *Roy* is near enough."

"The roan then. His is an uncommon conformation. May I ask where thee came by him?"

Over the back of the dun pack mare a white-speckled head lifted, cinnamon ears pricked in Ian's direction. "Won him gaming with a Frenchman, in Upper Canada. I cannot be certain of his origin, only that he's—"

"An Indian pony?"

"Aye. Not the comeliest horses, or tallest. But they're fast and steady-hearted. And there's a good few hours of daylight left, which I don't mean him to waste."

"Thee cannot mean to go on directly?"

The question hardened Ian's resolve. His course was set. For better or worse, he'd hold to it, and, if he was lucky, finally outdistance Thomas Ross.

"Aye, Benjamin. I do."



"You cannot be serious. When your brother cracked his head that time, wasn't he abed a fortnight?"

Crouched by the saddle he'd carried to the grazing horses, Ian eased a clean shirt over his sore head, pushing through to confront Thomas's glare. "Ned was all of ten and Mam forced him to it." He stood, catching himself as he swayed. "And between my brother and me I've the

thicker skull—so I hear. Anyway, I’m leaving. *Alone*. Ye can have all the coin I won last night if it’ll help get ye back to Boston.” He gestured toward the fire, where Benjamin Eden sat nursing a fresh pot of coffee. “Ye seem to be getting on well with yon Quaker. Bide ye here and plague him instead.”

Thomas squared his jaw. “I go where you go. I’m your slave.”

“So ye’ve said, though I fail to see the point.”

“This is the point.” Putting his hand into the colorless, disreputable-looking coat he’d donned, Thomas produced a slender book, corners rubbed and pages heavily thumbed. Ian frowned at the title: *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*.

“One of my da’s?” Ian asked, though he’d no need. Even with a battered skull he’d could have told his father’s work, and Ned’s. The volume was bound by neither Cameron. “*Olaudah Equiano*,” he read. “What sort of name is that?”

“African,” Thomas said proudly. “He was stolen from his tribe, made a slave. He bought his freedom and wrote of his enslavement.” He turned to a marked passage and before Ian could stop him read, “*Indeed, on the most trifling occasions, they were loaded with chains; and often instruments of torture were added. The iron muzzle, thumb-screws—*”

“Thomas,” Ian hissed. “My uncle doesn’t commit savageries against his slaves. I’ve been there, aye? I’ve seen them.”

“As a boy. You probably didn’t notice.”

“I’d have noticed iron muzzles!” He’d been twelve that spring he’d visited Mountain Laurel, giddy with the notion of traveling nigh the length of their new-won nation with his da, smug in thinking for once he’d been chosen over Ned. It was years before he understood Robert Cameron hadn’t asked him along purely for the pleasure of his company. “It’s no concern of yours. Nor is my business.”

Thomas squared his jaw. “A slave goes where his master goes, so your business is mine.”

“Ye’re not my slave!”

“I could be.” Thomas’s eyes burned with a dark fire. “I mean to see if what Equiano writes of those Southern plantations is true. See with my own eyes. Your kin need never know who I am.” Before Ian could

reply to that Thomas opened the book again. “Listen to this. *But is not the slave trade entirely at war with the heart of man? And surely that which is begun by breaking down the barriers of virtue, involves in its continuance destruction to every principle, and buries sentiment in ruin!*”

Though the topic of slavery—specifically his uncle’s slaves—hadn’t been broached since Hugh Cameron’s letter arrived in early spring, asking Ian to reconsider a planter’s life, the troubling subject had never been far below the surface of conversation. Surely his parents had spoken of it in private, opposed to slavery in principle as they were. It was telling of his da’s despair of Ian that he’d given his reluctant blessing to a venture he once rejected.

Ian let out a breath. “What of your coopering?”

“Your uncle grows tobacco,” Thomas replied so readily Ian knew he’d anticipated the argument. “He’ll need hogsheads.”

“Ye walked away from a steady position in a thriving port like Boston on the chance a backcountry planter won’t already have a cooper?”

“Like you walked away from your apprenticeship to spend the past five years trapping furs?”

“I didn’t walk away.”

“True, Ian. You skulked. You ever mean to tell me what happened to end it so badly? I never set foot in Cambridge, never saw your master—or his wife. Half his age, they say. And there you were a lad in their home, growing up in front of her eyes. Occurred to me she might’ve been the one to start it—”

“This isn’t the time or place!” They were nearly nose-to-nose before Ian glanced across the clearing. Benjamin Eden was staring at the fire, but Ian sensed he’d been watching them seconds ago. Head pounding with renewed fury, he bent and hefted the saddle. “How if I sell ye to Eden? He’s bound for Carolina. Go be his slave.”

“He’s a Quaker. They don’t in general keep slaves.” Thomas slipped the book by the African back into his coat. “I won’t be a burden. I’ll tend to myself—and to you. Starting with this.”

He tried to take the saddle; Ian clung to it. “Ye’ll tend to *me*? Have ye never heard it said what follows on the heels of pride?”

Thomas's mouth curled. "A fall, I believe."

He was losing this battle, with the saddle, with Thomas, with his own woozy head. Pain was going off inside his skull like an Independence Day rocket. Half-blind with it, he shoved the saddle into Thomas's chest, turned his back, and started walking.



Thomas had carried the battle, but Ian wasn't ready to declare defeat. Skirting a tangle of blackberry canes, he emerged onto the track he'd followed from the tavern. To the north, smoke from their camp rose above the trees. He went south.

The sun beat down, bathing him in sweat. He'd left his hat in camp. And his rifle. At least he'd the knife and tomahawk at his belt. When he spotted a ramshackle cabin tucked into a draw, he paused, noted it was overgrown and abandoned, then veered toward it, following the trace of a footpath through encroaching weeds. The cabin was roofless. The door lay in a tangle of sedge grass, but the squared-timber walls stood intact. Inside, leafy oak boughs filtered sunlight in shifting dapples. In the center of the acorn-strewn floor stood a trestle table and bench.

The bench creaked but bore his weight. He sat, head in hands, trying to cobble together an argument with force enough to turn one stubborn cooper back north to the free life he should be leading. He'd burdens enough to bear on this journey without adding Thomas to the load. But the fall had knocked some centering internal force off-beam. He laid his head on the table, unmindful of debris and bird droppings.

Thunder rumbling at the edge of his hearing woke him. The sun was gone behind cloud. In the cabin doorway, Ian gazed down the draw at a pale moon riding up out of the east. *Rice Moon.*

He was still marking time in Chippewa fashion. The people of the lakes would be out among the reedy fringes, bending the stalks to knock loose the wild rice, poling their harvest shoreward in their canoes. Callum Lindsay, his mother's brother, would be with them. It had been Callum who brought Ian back to Boston, Callum who told him about the letter. Ian was hazy now on the timing of events

following his forced return from the wilds of Upper Canada, in danger of losing his leg to wound fever. He minded Callum at his bedside, telling him of a chance to settle in Carolina, to put disgrace behind him.

“Ye’ve hid out with me a muckle great while, laddie, and though I flatter myself I’ve made a man of ye, trapping’s no’ the life for your likes. Not ’til ye make peace with your da. And the Almighty, forbye.” A grip on his arm, a muttered prayer, and he’d seen no more of the uncle who for five years had been his refuge, his forbearing haven. Callum had returned to Canada, leaving him in Boston.

Ian hadn’t made peace with his da, or the Almighty, but he’d taken Hugh Cameron up on his offer. Another uncle. Another refuge, far from a disappointed father. He only wished he could be sure this road to Carolina had its ending in atonement—as sure as Thomas seemed of *his* course, in the face of all good sense.

One thing was certain: he hadn’t it in him to resist the force of that conviction.



The rain had begun before he’d reached the track. The camp had been shifted to the shelter of a pine thicket, their collective baggage piled beneath a canvas lashed to branches. Shadows lay thick under the pines. Ian caught the swish and champ of the horses off through the trees as he passed soft-footed under cover of the falling rain, into the range of Benjamin Eden’s voice.

“. . . prodigious crop of mosquitoes this season. Others attributed the fever to a cargo of coffee abandoned on the wharf to rot.”

Coffee. Ian smelled it above the scent of rain-starved earth. Runoff dripped from the canvas awning, striking the fire with a hiss. Ian ducked a bough and halted behind the baggage.

“Them Philly doctors sure it ain’t a summer ague?”

“Rush, a noted physician in the city, called it by its color and reported scores dead. Symptoms named by those I met with bear him out. Languor and nausea, vomiting, delirium, yellowing of the skin, livid spots on the body akin to the bites of mosquitoes.”

“Reckon we all spotted with them.” A pot lid clanked. The smell

of cooking beans set Ian's mouth to watering. "Mastah Ian be looking poxed, time he find his way back."

Keeping to shadows, Ian crept around the shelter for a better view. Beneath the canvas the Quaker had set up a camp stool. A journal lay open on his knees. Firelight glinted off an inkwell nestled in pine straw at his feet, but the hand holding the quill had stilled.

"I would speak a concern to thee, friend." Eden leaned forward, urgent and intent. "Thee needn't go with this man. A house, and people disposed to aid thee, lies eastward on the Susquehanna. Or hast thee a wife or child in bondage, to hold thee to Ian Cameron?"

"Neither." Squatting at the fire, Thomas stirred the beans. "Reckon Mastah Ian look after me in Carolina. Won't let no meanness trouble me."

Eden pressed his fingertips together. "Do not believe it, friend. I have observed the effects of slaveholding upon even a man deemed God-fearing. That narrative in thy possession says it best."

"But is not the slave trade entirely at war with the heart of man?" Thomas quoted, as no slave ought to be able to do. *"And surely that which is begun by breaking down the barriers of virtue involves in its continuance destruction to every principle."*

Eden eyed him, startled but thoughtful. "Would thee say Ian Cameron is a God-fearing man?"

Silence fell, troubled by the rain's patter, the fire's snap, the song of tree-frogs in the wood. Thomas rinsed out the fry pan and tossed the contents beyond the awning's cover. "Don't know as it be my call to say who or what he fear."

"Surely 'tis thy concern. The acquiring of chattel wealth is a slow corruption to the soul. It will be to *his* soul. I entreat thee to consider my offer."

Half inclined to let Thomas thrash his own way out of this self-woven web, Ian retreated into the trees, coughed, and made his way back to camp. "Something smells inviting," he said, stepping from the trees. Aside from beans and coffee, there were johnnycakes in the ashes and bacon on a tin plate. He set his own offering on the ground, blackberries heaped in a makeshift grass basket.

“Did thee construct the basket?” Eden asked—nimble, for one nigh caught in the act of stealing a man’s supposed property.

“Mastah Ian lived with savages, up in Canada,” Thomas said, his grin stuck back in place as he hunkered by the fire. “Learnt hisself all manner of Injun tricks.”

The Quaker’s gaze traveled with interest over Ian’s beaded belt and axe. Ian narrowed his eyes at Thomas. “So I did. Come aside with me a moment, aye?”

With his back to their guest, Ian rummaged in his saddlebags for another dry shirt. Thomas crouched beside him while he peeled off the rain-sodden garment.

“My thanks,” he said, low enough not to be overheard, “for looking after Ruaidh and the mare—and me. Mind ye, that’s the last time ye’ll hear me thanking ye for doing me a service on this journey, at least in the hearing of anyone else.”

Thomas leaned close. “You mean . . . ?”

“When it comes to stubbornness, ye hold me at a disadvantage.” He eased the dry shirt past scrapes and bruises. “But devil take me if I know how to treat a slave.”

Thomas raised a brow. “Best learn quick how they do in the South. You’ll be obliged—”

“Thy beans could use a stirring, friend.”

They pivoted on their heels. Eden had lifted the pot lid, revealing the bubbling contents. “Thee wouldn’t wish to them to burn.” As Thomas leapt to the task, the Quaker nodded to the heap of oilcloth-wrapped bundles stowed beneath the awning. “For a man who made his living as a fur trader, thee travels much encumbered.”

“I was a cabinetmaker,” Ian said, returning to the fire. “In my mispent youth.”

“A trapper and a cabinetmaker? Thee cannot be past five-and-twenty—young to have engaged in both vocations.”

“Or irresolute. Depending on who ye ask.”

Supper’s timing curtailed the discussion. The Quaker stowed his journal.

Breaking a steaming johnnycake, Ian sopped it through the beans, then noticed the Quaker, head bowed. Prayer concluded, Benjamin Eden produced from his coat a set of bone-handled cutlery, with which he commenced to eat with neat precision, tin plate balanced on his knees.

“Thomas tells me thee planned to travel down the coast to Philadelphia,” Benjamin Eden said as Ian crammed the johnnycake into his mouth, “and take the wagon road from thence. We can pick it up near Watkin’s Ferry. In Maryland.”

Ian swallowed and set down his plate. “Ye’re welcome at our fire tonight, Benjamin, but come morning *we*—Thomas and I—will be on our way and wishing ye safe journey to Hillsborough.”

Nothing daunted, the Quaker said, “Thy journey and mine run together across the whole of Virginia. Should that prove insufficient grounds to induce thee to admit me into thy company, perhaps more compelling is this: my friendship on the road will afford a certain benefit to thee and thy *servant*.”

Thomas paused with a spoonful of beans halfway to his mouth. The Quaker had placed a disturbing emphasis on that final word.

Ian narrowed his eyes. “Oh, aye?”

Benjamin Eden set down his plate and leaned forward, hair glinting in the firelight, its fox-red color at odds with his plain Quaker garb. He held them in his gaze while rain pattered the canvas overhead. “Though I confess myself mystified as to why thee should wish to maintain the pretense, if thee is set on giving the impression of master and slave, then thee—especially thee, friend Thomas—will need to be a deal more convincing to carry off the charade.”



He’d lost his taste for towns. Particularly towns on market day.

Ian shouldered his way down Hillsborough’s main thoroughfare, senses assaulted by the smells and sounds of mercantilism in full bloom. Stalls and wagons lined the street, displaying clayware, woolens, and linen, baskets, brooms, and other sundries, as well as garden produce

and livestock—animal and human. Across from the courthouse a slave auction was underway, with a crowd of frock-coated men gathered to speculate on the men, women, and children waiting their turn on the block.

Skirting the crowd's edge, Ian caught the auction master's pitch: "No particular skills, this boy, but he's tough as cordwood. Prime specimen for all manner of fieldwork." The slave was turned to show an unmarked, if sagging, back. "Nary a scar from beating. This boy'll give no trouble—"

"On account he's too decrepit to bother!" Laughter from the crowd encouraged the heckler. "I've a shilling says you've blacked his hair. That *boy's* forty if he's a day!"

In response, the auctioneer put the slave through a series of drills to prove his soundness, prodding him on with a stick.

Ian pushed through the crowd, swallowing down a sourness at the back of his throat. Having located a likely tavern with floor space to let, he was making his way back to the side street where he'd left Thomas minding the horses. Progress slowed as a wall of skirts hove across his path—three town matrons bedecked in silk and frippery. Hemmed by a tide of bodies flowing from the opposite direction, Ian minced his steps until the phalanx sheered aside toward an arrangement of soaps.

Lengthening his stride, he craned to see over the hat of the gentleman ahead of him. Half a block away, Thomas, clinging to the horses' reins, was deep in conversation with a gray-clad figure.

Ian stifled a growl. Benjamin Eden was meant to be away to his cousin's farm, east of town, yet there he stood, stuck to Thomas like a cocklebur.

He couldn't say how Thomas had gotten his way—about going south, about Eden's company on the road, about turning aside near the village of Roanoke, in Virginia, and continuing to Hillsborough with the Quaker. He'd a vague recollection of an argument at a crossroads, Thomas gesturing, Eden with his cart pulled politely out of earshot. "This road takes us south from Salem, Thomas," he'd said. "Then all we need do is take the Cape Fear Road southeast a few more miles to my uncle's farm."

“Are there no roads west out of Hillsborough?” Thomas had countered.

“The old trading path, but it’ll add days to the journey. . . .”

And so it had, though Ian had no clear memory of folding to the notion. Though his cracked head was mending, and the ferocious headaches plagued him only of an evening now, the past week of travel was still a muddle.

“—know yet whether I’ll manage it,” Thomas was saying, unmindful of Ian’s approach. “But I aim to—”

The clatter of a passing vegetable cart drowned the rest of Thomas’s words, and part of the Quaker’s reply: “—aid thee, friend. I’ll raise thy concern to my cousin’s Meeting.”

Ian had caught similar earnest snatches of late, while the pair chatted on the road by day or read from the African’s book by firelight—Thomas expressing doubt about some aspect of passing himself off as a slave, the Quaker offering instruction and, failing that, the promise of prayer.

“I thought ye’d taken your leave,” he said when the vegetable cart had passed.

The pair sprang apart as though he’d shoved a heated poker between them, but Eden recovered swiftly. It being market day, he explained, it had occurred to him the cousin whose home for which he was bound might be in attendance.

“Would thee mind my horse and cart—” pulled at present behind their mounts— “whilst I seek him?”

Ian consented, mentally granting the man a quarter hour for his search. Once Eden’s sober plumage was lost in the crowd like a sparrow among parakeets, Ian rounded on Thomas. “Bit late for having second thoughts.”

“Second thoughts?” Thomas said, expression uncannily blank. “No sir. Not this boy.”

Ian felt a jolt to realize he’d no notion if Thomas was lying. “Well done,” he started to say, when a shout brought him round to see a disturbance among those gathered at the auction, half a block away. The crowd rippled, heaved, and spat forth a wiry black man clad in ragged

trousers, who sprinted toward a side lane leading from the market. Three townsmen gave chase. In seconds the crowd shifted once again, and a gray-clad figure hastened after them.

It happened too fast to be sure it was Benjamin Eden, yet Ian saw his suspicion mirrored in Thomas's eyes. He cursed under his breath. He waited. The quarter hour passed. The horses stamped in the heat and swished at flies. The Quaker's cart obstructed the narrow lane, causing passersby to glower. Ian's stomach growled like an edgy dog. "Where the devil has he got to?"

With the words still on his lips, the trio that had rushed after the slave returned. One man hauled the escaped slave. The remaining two clutched the man in gray between them, hatless now, his uncovered hair a blaze of red in the sunlight.

Ian caught Thomas as he tried to push past him. "Where d'ye think you're going?"

Thomas yanked free, nostrils flaring. "It's Benjamin!"

"I can see that."

"You mean us to go our way, just leave the man's cart untended in the street?"

"No—but ye'll stay out of it, seeing as ye're but a slave. Bide with the horses."

Mentally cursing slave traders, meddling Quakers, and his own vexing conscience, Ian parted the crowd to the auction area. The escaped slave had fought his captors, splitting the lip of one of his apprehenders. Punishment came swift. While the slave was strung up by the wrists to dangle from an oak limb, Ian pushed through the onlookers to the inner ring, where Benjamin Eden was held in custody.

"Sir. A word, if ye please."

The man clutching Eden's arm in a beefy fist was flushed red, still breathless from the chase. "Make it quick."

Aside from an initial glance, Eden hadn't acknowledged him, but stood in the slave trader's grip, mute and unresisting. His hair clung to his temples. His skin held the sickly hue of man who'd taken a blow to the gut.

“What has this man to do with these proceedings, that ye hold him bound?”

The slaver’s mouth flattened. “He’s bound right enough—for gaol. And a fine for abetting a runaway. We’ve a law on the books now against meddling with another man’s property. A fugitive law.”

Over the grumble of the crowd a whip cracked. Ian kept his back to the oak. “Has he been given leave to speak in his defense?”

“Ain’t no need. I’ve folk ready to stand witness to his crime. After this,” the trader added with a chin jerk at the oak, “I aim to march him to the courthouse and have charges writ—”

An agonized cry cut the trader short. Ian glanced over his shoulder at the slave’s dangling body and looked quickly away again.

“I have a horse,” Eden said, the sound of his voice as startling as if he’d been a statue come to life. “This man has been kind enough to tend it. May I be permitted to give him further instruction?”

The Quaker was released long enough to fish a letter from his coat. Ian met his gaze. “Did ye have to involve yourself? What hope had ye—?” Glancing aside at their glowering audience, Ian let the question hang, but Eden answered it.

“Are we not enjoined of the Almighty, *Whatsoever thou wouldst that men should do unto thee, even so do thou unto them?*”

The slave trader snorted. “Quakers ain’t the only ones ever opened a Bible. *And that slave what knows his master’s will and don’t do it will be beaten with many stripes.* What say you to that?”

Benjamin Eden said nothing. He offered the letter to Ian. “Would thee undertake for me this favor, and convey my horse and cart to my cousin’s home? Thee will find the direction in his letter.”

The whip had fallen silent. Against his will, Ian looked. By all rights the slave should have crumpled to the ground when let down from the tree. He stood. Ian was near enough to see the pattern of raised tribal markings on his forehead and cheeks. An African. The slave’s eyes passed over him, glazed with suffering yet defiant, and Ian wondered uneasily what *this* man might one day put into a book.

Turning his back, he tucked Eden’s letter into his coat. “I’ll see it

delivered. But tell me this: what exactly did ye do that these men wish to see ye in gaol? Your kin will ask it of me, aye?”

A spasm passed over Eden’s features; only then did Ian notice the tears running down the Quaker’s cheeks. “Little enough, friend Ian. Thee may say that of me.”

To be continued . . .

Mountain Laurel

[Available for preorder](#)

Releasing September 1, 2020

Tyndale House Publishers