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Murder, al fresco

Mary Musgrove

Queen of Savannah

Frances Patton Statham

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For Tim

Mary Musgrove
Queen of Savannah

Chapter 1

The woman sat on the wide porch of the island plantation house and waited for the miracle of dawn to unfold, a ritual that she had observed for the past week.

As the sky lightened, shapes distorted by the gray mists that surrounded the lush barrier isle gradually began to attach themselves to tree, marsh, and grass. Then, from the sea the sun slowly emerged, persuasive, demanding.

In the distance the sudden nickering of a marsh tacky, bastard descendant of a conquistador's horse, was answered by the hungry cry of a sea gull spying its first catch of the day. But the woman barely recorded these early morning sounds, for her attention was directed toward the giant oak tree beyond the cypress wall.

A few minutes later, the swirling mist began its unhurried dispersal upward, revealing the lower limbs of the oak, clothed in Spanish moss. Then the trunk became visible, followed by the taller limbs, until the

mist touched the crown of the tree and then was gone. Seeing the vast empty space at the top, the woman relaxed. She had been given another day's reprieve.

Despite her lingering illness, Mary Musgrove Matthews Bosomworth, Queen of the Upper and Lower Creeks, sat erect, with the remnants of a strange, exotic beauty still visible upon her face. Hair the color of blackest swamp water, where no light fell, reached to her waist. For a moment her dark blue eyes, inherited from her English fur-trading father, held a regal serenity. But then in an instant they changed, taking on a passionate fierceness as she remembered the anguish and pain her father's people had caused.

This was her island, part of her Indian heritage that General Oglethorpe had promised to return to her on the fourth day of the Windy Moon. But like all men, he had forgotten his promise once he had achieved his purpose.

For twenty years Ossabaw, Sapelo, and the land around Pipemaker's Creek had been kept from her. And after the fighting and intrigue were over, only one island—St. Catherines— had been returned by the English. The years of denial now made the familiar smells and sounds all the sweeter—as much a part of her heritage as the land itself. Yet, as the sixty-five-year-old woman sat under the canopy of the silverlace vine and greeted the dawn, she knew that, too soon, she would be forced to leave everything behind.

She lifted her head in appreciation as the salt of the marsh mingled with the fresh aroma of acorn coffee. Mercifully, the sudden zephyr fluttering the

palmetto fronds drowned out the kitchen whisperings between her third husband, Thomas, and her young bondservant, Sarah.

"Treats me like an annoyin' fly, she does; *her* with her uppity ways."

Thomas frowned as he watched the buxom young woman place the white porcelain pot of steaming coffee onto the serving tray.

"Don't complain, Sarah. Especially now."

Sarah's petulant voice softened. "No. The mistress can't last much longer, can she? I noticed how weak she was this mornin' when I helped her to her porch chair." Sarah straightened her linen lace-trimmed cap and turned to face the middle-aged man. "Ye haven't changed your mind from last night, have ye?"

The Reverend Bosomworth was not pleased at being reminded of his indiscretion. He deliberately pretended to misunderstand her. "No. As soon as I'm your legal owner, I plan to forgive your bond."

Sarah's coquettish smile turned into a pout. "I was talkin' about your other promise. To make me your wife."

"Everything in its order, Sarah. For appearance sake, I'll have to observe a proper period of mourning."

"And for appearance sake, Master Thomas, I hope ye won't mourn unduly long. I'm late for my time this month."

"Keep your voice down. I don't want anyone to overhear us. Now go and serve your mistress her morning coffee before it gets cold."

She did as she was told, leaving an alarmed Thomas behind. He reached for his own cup of coffee. Although his face was bland, the rattle of the cup against the saucer gave away his nervousness at Sarah's news. But then he took a deep breath, swallowed the hot coffee, and smiled. Even if Sarah were already expecting his child, it didn't matter. Mary would be dead long before Sarah began to show her impending motherhood.

Movements in the compound surrounding the plantation house indicated that the servants were already at work on the land. Hearing the commotion, Thomas straightened his shoulders and walked from the kitchen. He also began a praise to the morning. But it was not for the beauty of the land. His ambitions in leaving England were finally coming to fruition. Soon now he would be a gentleman of means—owner not only of St. Catherines Island, but of Mary's entire fortune.

As Sarah spanned the short distance between the summer kitchen and the long covered porch of the main house, she walked with a jaunty air. From the moment she'd been brought to this island paradise, she had pretended that she was the mistress issuing orders rather than the servant receiving them. Of course, she'd had to be careful, especially around the mistress, who always acted as if she could see straight through her with her sharp, piercing eyes.

With a shift of the silver tray to her other hip, Sarah paused, changed her expression to one of meekness, and then walked up the side steps to the long wooden porch.

When she had set the tray on the table in front of Mary and poured the coffee into the fragile porcelain cup, Sarah turned. "Will there be anything else, mistress?"

"Yes." From around her neck, Mary slowly removed a leather thong with a small key attached to it. "At the bottom of the linen press in my bedroom, there's a black wolf pelt. Bring it to me."

"What would ye be wantin' with that molty old thing?"

As soon as the words were out, Sarah realized she'd made a mistake. She wasn't supposed to know the contents of the locked linen press. She clapped her hand over her mouth, but it was too late. Once again, Mary's all-seeing eyes caused her to shiver.

"Just do as I ask."

"Yes, ma'am." Quickly the servant took the key and fled from the porch to do her mistress's bidding.

While Mary waited for Sarah to complete her errand, her thoughts returned to the oak tree. For the past three twilights, the vulture had come to roost in the top, and for the past three mornings, the bird had flown away. But it had been sent as a reminder. She could no longer put off the exhausting journey into the past, to make her final peace with the Great Spirit of her Indian ancestors and the God of the white man.

"Here's the fur, mistress. And your key."

With a nod of her head, Mary dismissed the servant. Wrapping the ancient black wolf pelt around her, she closed her eyes and began to stroke the furrows of fur, forcing from the hide latent memories that had been stored with it.

St. Catherines Island, the sea, and the marsh vanished. Caught up in a vortex of images, Mary was propelled backward to Coweta Town on the Chattahoochee River. And once again she was a small ten-year-old child—Princess Coosaponakeesa—waiting for the arrival of her fur-trader father, Ian....

Chapter 2

"Come, Little Blue-eyed One. Your father's boat has been spotted. You must be at the landing to meet him."

At the sound of the old woman's voice, Princess Coosaponakeesa stopped her rocking back and forth in rhythm to the wind stirring through the trees.

"I have not finished saying good-bye to my mother," the young girl replied. "Go now, Sanawa. Leave me alone for a while longer."

The old woman sighed. "As you wish. I will wait at the end of the path for you."

Coosaponakeesa returned her attention to the burial mound before her and began to rock back and forth again. "Mother, did you hear Sanawa's words? My father is coming, just as you said he would."

"I know you told me not to be afraid to go with him, but I am. I would much rather stay here with Sanawa. But I gave you my promise." She brushed away the beginnings of a tear and continued. "You will always live in my heart, my mother. And I will