

# The Strength of the Pines

By Edison Marshall

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### SYNOPSIS

**CHAPTER I.**—At the death of his father, Bruce Duncan, in an eastern city, receives a mysterious message, sent by Mrs. Ross, summoning him peremptorily to southern Oregon—to meet "Linda."

**CHAPTER II.**—Bruce has vivid but baffling recollections of his childhood in an orphanage, before his adoption by Newton Duncan, with the girl Linda.

**CHAPTER III.**—At his destination, Trail's End, news that a message had been sent to Bruce is received with marked displeasure by a man introduced to the reader as "Simon."

**CHAPTER IV.**—Leaving the train, Bruce is at his apartment, surrounded by his neighbors, though he has never been there.

**CHAPTER V.**—Obedient to the message, Bruce makes a journey to Martin's crossroads store, for information as to reaching Mrs. Ross' cabin.

**CHAPTER VI.**—On the way, "Simon" sternly warns him to give up his quest and return East. Bruce refuses.

**CHAPTER VII.**—Mrs. Ross, aged and infirm, welcomes him with emotion. She hastens him on his way—the end of "Pine-needle Trail."

**CHAPTER VIII.**—Through a country peevishly familiar, Bruce journeys, and finds his childhood playmate, Linda.

**CHAPTER IX.**—The girl tells him of wrongs committed by an enemy clan on her family, the Rosses. Linda, occupied by the clan wars stolen from the Rosses, and the family, with the exception of Aunt Elmira (Mrs. Ross) and herself, wiped out by assassination. Bruce's father, Matthew Folger, was one of the victims. His mother had fled with Bruce and Linda. The girl, while small, had been kidnapped from the orphanage and brought to the mountains. Linda's father had died his lands to Matthew Folger, but the agreement, which would confute the enemy's claims to the property, had been lost.

**CHAPTER X.**—Bruce's mountain blood responds to the call of the blood-fond. He follows the trail of the Rosses.

**CHAPTER XI.**—A giant tree, the Sentinel Pine, in front of Linda's cabin, seems to Bruce's excited imagination to be endeavoring to convey a message.

**CHAPTER XII.**—Bruce sets out in search of a trapper named Hudson, a witness to the agreement between Linda's father and Matthew Folger.

**CHAPTER XIII.**—Hudson and Dave find the former's traps. A wolf caught in one is slain, and the trapper strikes down Hudson, Bruce, on his way to Hudson, shoots and wounds the Killer, driving him from his victim. Hudson, learning Bruce's identity, tries to tell him the hiding place of the agreement, but death summons him.

**CHAPTER XIV.**—Simon, believing Bruce knows where the document is concealed, lays plans to trap him.

**CHAPTER XV.**—Dave discovers Linda and Aunt Elmira, from their home. The girl, nearly dead, is struck down by the aged woman. Elmira's son has been murdered by Dave, and at her command, after securing Linda, the desperado, Linda leaves them alone.

**CHAPTER XVI.**—Returning, Bruce finds a note, presumably from Linda, telling him she has been kidnapped by the Turners.

**CHAPTER XVII.**—Bruce falls into Simon's trap, and is made prisoner.

**CHAPTER XVIII.**—Charging Bruce with attempting to rescue the blood-fond, his clan, after a mock trial, decides to leave him, bound, to a pasture on the spot where the Killer had slain and half eaten a calf the night before. They look for the return of the grizzly and the probable slaying of Bruce by the animal.

**CHAPTER XIX.**—A grizzly, known as the Killer, is the terror of the vicinity, because of his size and ferocity.

**CHAPTER XX.**—Dave Turner, sent by Simon, bribes Hudson to swear falsely concerning the agreement, if brought to light, he knowing its whereabouts.

**CHAPTER XXI.**—Bruce, helpless, awaits arrival of the Killer and death.

**CHAPTER XXII.**—Simon makes Linda an offer of marriage. The girl refuses, telling him she loves Bruce. Enraged, the man brutally strikes her, and leaves. The girl is confident he will go to Bruce, and she follows him.

spirits. I will try to be brave, Bruce. And if we don't live through the night, my last remembrance will be of your bravery—how you, injured and weak from loss of blood, still remembered to give a cheery word to me."

"I'm not badly injured," he told her gently. "And there are certain things that have come clear to me lately. One of them is that except for you—throwing your own precious body between—I wouldn't be here at all."

The feeling that they had lost the trail grew upon them. Once they halted to adjust the blankets on the saddle, and they listened for any sounds that might indicate that Simon was overtaking them. But all they heard was the soft rustle of the leaves under the wind-blown snow.

"Linda," he asked suddenly. "Does it seem to you to be awfully cold?" She waited a long time before she spoke. This was not the hour to make quick answers. On any decision might rest their success or failure.

"I believe I can stand it—a while longer," she answered at last.

"But I don't think we'd better try to. It's getting cold. Every hour it's colder, and I seem to be getting weaker. It isn't a real wound, Linda—but it seems to have knocked some of my vitality out of me, and I'm dreadfully in need of rest. I think we'd better try to make a camp."

"And go on by morning light?" "Yes."

"But Simon might overtake us then."

"We must stay out of sight of the trail. But somehow—I can't help but hope he won't try to follow us on such a night as this."

He drew up the horse, and they sat in the beat of the snow. "Don't make any mistake about that, Bruce," she told him. "Remember, that unless he overtakes us before we come into the protection of the courts, his whole fight is lost. It doesn't alone mean loss of the estate—for which he would risk his life just as he has a dozen times. It means defeat—a thing that would come hard to Simon. Besides, he's got a fire within him that will keep him warm."

"You mean—hatred?" "Hatred. Nothing else."

"But in spite of it we must make camp. We'll get off the trail—if we're still on it—and try to slip through tomorrow. You see what's going to happen if we keep on going this way?"

"I know that I feel a queer dread—and hopelessness—"

"And that dread and hopelessness are just as much danger signals as the sound of Simon's horse behind us. It means that the cold and the snow and the fear are getting the better of us. Linda, it's a race with death. Don't misunderstand me or disbelieve me. It isn't Simon alone now. It's the cold and the snow and the fear. The thing to do is to make camp, keep as warm as we can in our blankets, and push on in the morning. It's two full day's ride, going fast, the best we can go—and God knows what will happen before the end."

"Then turn off the trail, Bruce," the girl told him.

"I don't know that we're even on the trail."

"Turn off, anyway. As long as we stay together—it doesn't matter."

She spoke very quietly. Then he felt a strange thing. A warmth which even that growing, terrible cold could not transcend swept over him. For her arms had crept out under his arms and encircled his great breast, then pressed with all her gentle strength.

No word of encouragement, no cheery expression of hope could have meant so much. Not defeat, not even the long darkness of death itself could appall him now. All that he had given and suffered and endured, all the mighty effort that he had made had in an instant been shown in its true light, a thing worth while, a sacrifice atoned for and redeemed.

They headed off into the thickets, blindly, letting the horse choose the way. They felt him turn to avoid some object in his path—evidently a fallen tree—and they mounted a slight rise or dip. Then they felt the wet touch of fir branches against their cheeks.

Bruce stopped the horse and both dismounted. Both of them knew that under the drooping limbs of the tree they would find, at least until the snow deepened, comparative shelter from the storm. Here, rolled in their blankets, they might pass the remainder of the night hours.

Bruce tied the horse, and the girl unrolled the blankets. But she did not lay them together to make a rude bed—and the dictating of conventionalities had nothing whatever to do with it. If she got more warmth could have been achieved by it, those two would have lain side by side through the night hours between the snow-blankets. She knew, however, that more warmth could be achieved if each of them took a blanket and rolled up in it; thus they would get two thicknesses instead of one and no openings to admit the freezing air. When this was done they lay side by side, exchanging the last atom of warmth.

The night hours were dreary and long. The rain beat into the limbs above them, and sometimes it sifted through. At the first gray of dawn Bruce opened his eyes.

His dreams had been troubled and strange, but the reality to which he awakened gave him no sense of relief. He fought a little battle, lying there under the snow-covered limbs of the fir tree. Because it was one in which no blows were exchanged, and no words were called into action, it was no less a battle, trying

and stern. It was a fight waged in his own spirit, and it seemed to rend him in twain.

The whole issue was clear in his mind at once. The cold had deepened in these hours of dawn, and he was slowly, steadily freezing to death. Even now the blood flowed less swiftly in his veins. Death itself, in the moment, had lost all horror for him; rather it was a thing of peace, of ease. All he had to do was to lie still. Just close his eyes—and soft shadows would drop over him.

They would drop over Linda too. She lay still beside him; perhaps they had already fallen. The war he had waged so long and so relentlessly would end in blissful calm. Outside there was only snow and cold and



At the First Gray of Dawn Bruce Opened His Eyes.

wracking limbs and pain, only further conflict with tireless enemies, only struggle to tear his agonized body to pieces; and the bitterness of defeat in the end. He saw his chances plain as he lay beneath that gray sky. Even now, perhaps, Simon was upon them. Only two little rifle shells remained with which to combat him, and he doubted that his wounded arm would hold the rifle steady. There were weary, innumerable miles between them and any shelter, and only the terrible, trackless forest lay between.

Then why not lie still and let the curtains fall? This was an easy, tranquil passing, and heaven alone knew what dreadful mode of egress would be his if he rose to battle further. All the argument seemed on one side.

But hush and bright above all this burned the indomitable flame of his spirit. To rise, to fight, to struggle on. Never to yield until the Power above decreed! To stand firm, even as the pines themselves. The dominant greatness that Linda had found in this man rose in him, and he set his muscles like iron.

He shook off the mists of the frost in his brain. Quickly he knelt by Linda and shook her shoulders in his hands. She opened her eyes.

"Get up, Linda," he said gently. "We have to go on."

She started to object, but a message in his eyes kept her from it. His own spirit went into her. He helped her to her feet.

"Help me roll the blankets," he commanded, "and take out enough food for breakfast. We can't stop to eat it here. I think we're in sight of the main trail; whether we can find it—in the snow—I don't know. We must get further into the thickets before we stop to eat."

They were strange figures in the snow flurries as they went to work to roll the blankets into a compact bundle. The food she had taken from their stores for breakfast he thrust into the pocket of his coat; the rest, with the blankets, she tied swiftly on the horse. They unfastened the animal and for a moment she stood holding the reins while Bruce crept back on the hillside to look for the trail.

The snow swept round them, and they felt the lowering menace of the cold. And at that instant those dread spirits that rule the wilderness, jealous then and jealous still of the trustfulness of man, dealt them a final, deadly blow.

It was as if a giant hand had crashed in a distant thicket and a pungent message on the wind that their human senses were too blunt to receive. The horse suddenly snorted loudly, then reared up. Bruce saw as in a tragic dream the girl struggle to hold him; he saw her pulled down into the snow and the rein jerked from her hand. Then the animal plunged, wheeled and sped at top speed away into the snow flurries. Some terror that as yet they could not name had broken their control of him and in no instant taken from them this one last hope of safety.

**CHAPTER XXX**

Bruce walked over to Linda, waiting in the snow on her knees. It was not an intentional posture. She had been jerked down by the plunging horse, and she had not yet completely risen. But the sight of her slight figure, her raised white face, her clasped hands, and the remorseless snow of the wilderness about her moved Bruce to his depths.

He saw her but dimly in the snow flurries, and she looked as if she were in an attitude of prayer.

He came rather slowly, and he even smiled a little. And she gave him a warm, strange little smile in return.

"We're down to cases at last," he said, with a rather startling quietness of tone. "You see what it means?"

She nodded, then got to her feet. "We can walk out. If we are let alone and given time; it isn't that we are obliged to have the horse. But our blankets are on its back, and this storm is steadily becoming a blizzard. And you see—time is one thing that we don't have. No human being can stand this cold for long unprotected."

"And we can't keep going—keep warm by walking?"

His answer was to take out his knife and put the point of the steel to his thumb nail. His eyes strained, then looked up. "A little way," he answered, "but we can't keep our main directions. The sun doesn't even cast a shadow on my nail to show us which is west. We could keep up a while, perhaps, but there is no end to this wilderness and at noon or tonight—the result would be the same."

"It means—the end?"

"If I can't catch the horse, I'm going now. If we can regain the blankets—by getting in rifle range of the horse—we might make some sort of shelter in the snow and last out until we can see our way and get our bearings. You don't know of any shelter—any cave or cabin where we might build a fire?"

"No. There are some in the hills, but we can't see our way to find them."

"I know. I should have thought of that. And you see, we can't build a fire here—everything is wet, and the snow is beginning to whirl so we couldn't keep it going. If we should stagger on all day in this storm and this snow, we couldn't endure the night." He smiled again. "And I want you to climb a tree—and stay there—until I come back."

She looked at him dully. "What's the use, Bruce? You won't come back. You'll chase the thing until you die—I know you. You don't know when to give up. And if you want to come back—you couldn't find the way. I'm going with you."

"No." Once more she started to disobey, but the grave displeasure in his eyes restrained her. "It's going to take all my strength to fight through that snow—I must go fast—and may be life and death will have to depend on your strength at the end of the trail. You must save it—the little you have left. Since I must take the rifle—to shoot the horse if I can't catch him—you must climb a tree. You know why?"

"Partly to hide from Simon if he comes this way. And partly—"

"Because there's some danger in that thicket beyond?" He interrupted her. "The horse's terror was real—besides, you heard the sound. It might be only a puma. But it might be—the Killer. Swing your arms and struggle all you can to keep the blood flowing. I won't be gone long."

He started to go, and she ran after him with outstretched arms. "Oh,

Oh, Bruce," she cried, "Come Back Soon—Soon. Don't Leave Me to Die Alone."

Bruce, she cried, "come back soon—soon. Don't leave me to die alone. I'm not strong enough for that—"

He whirled, took two paces back, and his arms went about her. He had forgotten his injury long since. He kissed her cool lips and smiled into her eyes. Then at once the flurries hid him.

The girl climbed up into the branches of a fir tree. In the thicket beyond a great gray form tacked back and forth, trying to locate a scent that a second before he had caught but dimly and had lost. It was the Killer, and his temper was lost long ago in the whirling snow.

His anger was upon him, partly from the discomfort of the storm, partly from the constant, gnawing pain of three bullet wounds in his powerful body. Besides, he realized the presence of his old and greatest enemy—those still, slight forms that had crossed him so many times, that had stung him with their bullets, and whose weakness he had learned.

And then all at once he caught the scent plain. He lurched forward, crashed again through the brush, and walked out into the snow-swept open. Linda saw his vague outline, and a first she hung perfectly motionless, hoping to escape his gaze. She had been told many things that grizzlies cannot climb, yet she had no desire to see him raging below her, reaching possibly trying to shake her from the limb.

He didn't seem to see her. His eyes

were lowered; besides, it was never the grizzly way to search the branches of a tree. The wind blew clearly in the opposite direction. She saw him walk slowly across the snow, head lowered, a huge gray ghost in the snow flurries not one hundred feet distant. Then she saw him pause, with lowered head.

In the little second before the truth came to her, the bear had already turned. Bruce's tracks were somewhat dimmed by the snow, but the Killer interpreted them truly. She saw too late that he had crossed them, read their message, and now had turned into the clouds of snow to trace them down.

For an instant she gazed at him in speechless horror; and already the flurries had almost obscured his gray figure. Desperately she tried to call his attention from the tracks. She called, then she rustled the branches as loudly as she could. But the noise of the wind obscured what sound she made, and the bear was already too absorbed in the hunt to turn and see her. As always, in the bearing presence of a foe, his rage grew upon him.

Sobbing, Linda swung down from the tree. She had no conscious plan of aid to her lover. She only had a blind instinct to seek him, to try to warn him of his danger, and at least to be with him at the death. The great tracks of the Killer, seemingly almost as long as her own arm, made a plain trail for her to follow. She too struck off into the storm-swept canyon.

And the forest gods who dwell somewhere in the region where the pine tops taper into the sky, and who pull the strings that drop and raise the curtain and work the puppets that are the players of the wilderness drama, saw a chance for a great and tragic jest in this strange chase over the snow. The destinies of Bruce, Linda and the Killer were already converging on this trail that all three followed—the path that the runaway horse made in the snow. Only one of the great forces of the war that had begun at Trail's End was lacking, and now he came also.

Simon Turner had ridden late into the night and from before dawn; with remorseless fury he had gazed on his exhausted horse, he had driven him with unyielding strength through coverts, over great rocks, down into rocky canyons in search of Bruce and Linda, and now, as the dawn broke, he thought that he had found them. He had suddenly come upon the tracks of Bruce's horse in the snow.

If he had encountered them further back, when the animal had been running wildly, he might have guessed the truth and rejoiced. No man would attempt to ride a horse at a gallop through that trailless stretch. But at the point he found the tracks most of the horse's terror had been spent, and it was walking leisurely, sometimes lowering its head to crop off the shrubbery. The trail was comparatively fresh, too; or else the fast-falling snow would have already obscured it. He thought that his hour of triumph was near.

But it had come none too soon. And Simon—out of passion-blinded eyes—looked and saw that it would likely bring death with it.

He realized his position fully. The storm was steadily developing into one of those terrible mountain blizzards in which, without shelter, no human being might live. He was far from his home, he had no blankets, and he could not find his way. Yet he would not have turned back if he could. The securing of the document by which Bruce could take the great estates from him was only a trifle now. He believed wholly within his own soul that the wilderness—without his aid—would do his work of hatred for him; and that by no conceivable circumstances could Bruce and Linda find shelter from the blizzard and live through the day. He could find their bodies in the spring if he by any chance escaped himself, and take the Ross-Folger agreement from them. But it was not enough. He wanted also to do the work of destruction.

Even his own death—if it were only delayed until his vengeance was wreaked—could not matter now. In all the ancient strife and fury and ceaseless war of the wild through which he had come, there was no passion to equal this. The Killer was content to let the wolf kill the fawn for him. The cougar will turn from its warm, newly slain prey, in which its white fangs have already dipped, at the sight of some great danger in the thickets. But Simon could not turn. Death lowered its wings upon him as well as upon his enemy, yet the fire in his heart and the fury in his brain shut out all thought of it.

He sprang off his horse better to examine the tracks, and then stood, half bent over, in the snow.

Bruce Folger headed swiftly up the trail that his runaway horse had made. It was he thought his last effort, and he gave his full strength to it. Weakened as he was by the cold and the wound, he could not have made headway at all except for the fact that the wind was behind him.

The snow ever fell faster, in deeper flakes, and the trail dimmed before his eyes. It was a losing game. Trifled not only by the beast that had strayed in the thicket but by the ever-increasing wind as well, the animal would not linger to be overtaken. Bruce had not ridden it enough to have tamed it, and his plan was to attempt to shoot the creature on sight, rather than try to catch it. They could not go forward, anyway, as long as the blizzard lasted. Which way was best and which was worst he could no longer guess. And with the blankets

(Continued next week.)

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