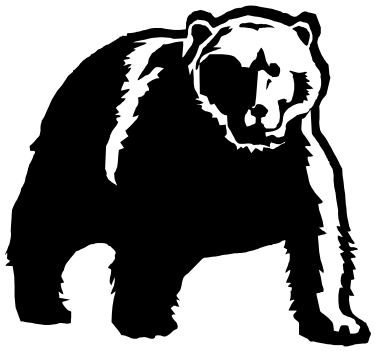
# Part One

## *The Forgotten Covenant*



# Chapter One

**T**wo hundred-odd feet down in the wet and dark of the Axum mine, Hamby McFee was drilling a round of shot holes in a thick vein of mica-bearing quartz. It was an overhead vein and Hamby had to hold the big Ingersoll air drill up at an awkward slant while keeping enough forward pressure on it to make the bit cut firmly into the rock. Though the drill was braced on a jack's leg, still it bucked like a wild horse and it took all Hamby's strength to hold it steady.

Its hammering racket deafened him. Its exhaust blew the narrow chamber full of stinging grit. He wore a bandanna tied over his nose and mouth but even so, he couldn't help breathing in the grit and it scoured his throat and gave him continual spells of dry coughing. His only light was the pale glow of the carbide lamp fixed to the front of his hat and because of the dust and rock debris the drill showered down on him, he had to keep his eyes slitted almost shut and so was working nearly blind as well as deaf.

From time to time he would pause for a few seconds to rest his arms and the muscles of his back. Then, if he leaned close to the face of the drift, the dim blue light of his lamp would show him the gleaming edges of a big book of red mica running crosswise in the matrix of yellowish quartz. The sight made him grin.

He was setting the holes in such fashion that when he shot it, the round was going to pull the rock and break that big book loose all of a piece and in the morning when the damn muckers came in, they would find the whole of it laying there on top of the muck shining like one big slab of pure garnet and they would know it for Hamby's work and the sight of it would make them swear with rage to think the damn high

yaller had shot another round neater and more perfect than any white on the gang could shoot, even Clyde Rainey. And they'd report it to Rainey and Rainey would know, goddamnit, know *again*, that Hamby McFee was a better driller and powder man than anybody, better especially than Rainey himself; would know that hell, even if the owners of the Axum were paying Hamby ten cent an hour and Rainey twenty-five, Hamby could still blow a privy sky-high and not even singe the hair of a man taking a shit inside it.

Finishing at last with the drill-holes, he untied his bandanna and wiped his face with it and afterward lugged the Ingersoll into the main shaft and stowed it and then dismantled the jack's leg and made ready to shoot the face. Aboveground that morning, he had made up several waxed-paper cartridges of black powder and now he loaded the holes with the cartridges and inserted a slow-match Bickford fuse into each. He tamped the charges with moist clay scooped from the floor at the edge of the iron turning-sheet leaving the Bickford rat-tails hanging out. Then using the flame of his lamp he lit the rat-tails one by one and came into the main shaft hollering, "Fire in the hole!" and rang the bell five times and clambered up the balsam-wood ladder to the first ledge and pulled the ladder up after him, hanging it by a rung from a hook sunk in the rock. Then he settled on his hams to wait.

All was quiet in the mine save the drip of the seepage and from time to time the ragged hack of his own coughing. Between coughs he took big open-mouthed gulps of air. The air was thin and damp and smelt of sulphur and very faintly now of the burning of the rat-tails below.

*Pull, you son of a bitch*, he said to himself, and then the charges began to go.

*Wump-wump-wump-wump* they went, and at each shot the rough wall of the shaft behind him gave a slight shiver and he hunkered there counting them in sequence as they pulled, *wump-wump-wump-wump*, cut-holes, relievers, edgers, lifters, every damn one of them was touching off and he heard the rumble of the plug of rock down there as it fell and then he visualized that lovely big book of red mica laying in the middle of the muck on the turning-sheet and he laughed out loud. In his head he said, *Take that, Old Rainey. Cram it up you ugly white ass*.

When the winch brought him up into sunshine and warmth Hamby climbed wearily out of the muck bucket and stood awhile in the headworks gazing off along the spine of the ridge toward the peak of Young's Knob in the distance. He kept on coughing. His old high-necked sweater and his

jeans britches were sopping wet and even in the sun he shuddered with the chill that the mine-drip had put deep in his bones. He dragged off his rosin-stiffened hat and scrubbed his face again with the bandanna and this time the cloth came away smeared with blood from the cuts the rock debris had made falling on him as he drilled.

But he paid these small hurts little mind. He was forty-eight years old or thereabouts and used to hurts of every sort. He lit his pipe and presently ambled down the path a ways and sat in the bare dirt and unwrapped the lengths of fuse from around his pantlegs that kept the rock litter out of his brogans and then he stretched himself on the ground propping his head on one hand under the huge bright dome of afternoon sky. Contentedly he smoked, coughing between puffs, letting the sun dry him.

The spine of the ridge as it sloped away from him bristled with the dark pointed tops of the spruce trees and further down its side the ridge was black where their wedge shapes grew thick and crowded, and it was only when you saw the trees near at hand, just yonder beyond the slashing at the edge of the camp, that you could see the green in them as well as the black. The green was dense and shaggy and forbidding too but the shadows under the green and the straight rust-colored trunks of the trees and the bed of red needles they stood on were good to look at and made you want to go and lie there in the cool and dark and take a rest in spite of what the darkness of the woods wanted to say to your heart.

It was very different country from what he could not stop himself calling home. That was a place where the bottoms were broad and gently rolling and the mountains were round and plump as a woman's bosoms and stood far off and sometimes had a cast of delicate pale blue that might have been the color of the sky itself, if the sky were not bluer still. There was space around you. Light. Air. There was good rich dirt that would grow anything.

Here, the darkness was in everything and the land stood on end steep and brushy and sharp-topped and shoved together, the trees were soot-black, the valleys so cramped between sheer hills that the sun only lit them in the middle of the day, the creeks ran icy cold, the soil was stony and gave scant yield. High up, as here, it was pretty enough. But down below it was hard, damn hard.

He had not thought of the home country in a long time. It had been eight years since he left it and for much of that time he had not let it come into his mind at all because if he thought of it he would get mad about what had happened there at the end. But now the notion of it had stolen up on him unawares, and he found to his surprise that it had not made him mad after all, but only wistful. He let himself remember the

slow-running Hiwassee and his place on Downings Creek and the Curtis farm and Carter's Cove. He remembered the woman who had been his sister in all but blood and hue, and he remembered what had befallen her and he was sorry for it but not so mad any more. He was marveling about this when Considine came down the path and knelt beside him and broke into his mood asking, "Any of them holes miss?"

Now that he had finally allowed into his head what he'd been staving off so long, Hamby hated to let it go; he was annoyed at Considine for making him do it. Besides, what Considine had asked was goddamn stupid, given Hamby's dead-perfect record. He sat up, blew a jet of smoke, snorted, "Hell, no. Ain't nobody drilling into no miss on a'ry round *I* shoot. You want to fret about misses, go and see old Rainey. He shooting tomorrow, ain't he?"

Considine frowned and furled his heavy lips. "You ought to lay off of Rainey, you know."

A gust of coughing shook Hamby. Bitterly he burst out, "Rainey a sorry-ass powder man. He gone kill somebody."

"You need to watch how you talk, McFee. I'm telling you that for your own good."

Hamby leaned and hawked up a bright blob of blood, jabbed the stem of his pipe back in his mouth and lustily puffed. "Rainey be shooting tomorrow. You watch and see. He leave a miss, next day some poor son of a bitch go to drilling, hit a lifter, you be washing guts up with a water hose."

Considine wagged his head. "You know what Rainey is?"

"Hell, yes, I know," Hamby laughed with a hollow note. He looked off down the ridge. To the west the sun was lowering toward the notch of the gap so the shadow of the gap was slowly climbing the flank of the ridge, leaving the narrow divide between them sunk deeper and deeper in gloom. But the top of the ridge shone like hammered brass. "I been knowing that kind all my damn life." He sighed. "Piss on Rainey. And piss on them. And on they goddamn nightgowns too. Rainey *still* a sorry-ass powder man. You the foreman. You ought to fire him. You don't, one day you be spreading quicklime on the mess he make."

Considine rose and stood. He still wore that scowl. He turned his head aside and spat and then remarked, "McFee, I can't figure how you've managed to live as long as you have."

Hamby shrugged. "Me neither."

At dusk he went down to the cookhouse and got his eats on a tin plate and came out again and sat on a stump by the compressor. When he had finished, he fetched his plate and cup and flatware back inside where the others were still at table and the whole time he was in the cookhouse he felt Rainey peering at him with his damn little beady pig's eyes but managed to act as if the son of a bitch wasn't there at all, not because he was scared of Rainey but because he was too give out to mess with him. The others watched warily between them and Considine stood motionless by the door ready to step in if things turned bad, though he plainly hoped he wouldn't need to. But nothing came off and afterward Hamby walked out to the little muddy fenced-in lot where Strickland kept the winch mule. He dumped a pail of corn in the manger of the lean-to stable and then folded his arms on the peeled top log and lounged there looking on while the mule drowsily munched.

That was one tired old mule. His ribs showed through his hide like the tines of a hay fork. There were nasty sores on his withers that had come of the constant rubbing of the hoist harness, and his flanks were raw from the whipping he got every time Strickland wanted to turn the drum of the winch. Strickland, the bastard, loved to ply that lash of his. There was a mess of maggots in the sores and hurts. So when the mule got done eating, Hamby climbed in and cleaned them and dabbed ointment on them and then stood petting the mule and pulling his ears and talking to him, at the same time cussing Strickland with the part of his brain that wasn't soothing the mule, and presently the dark settled in and the stars came out and the moon glowed and the whole ridgetop turned to silver around them, and Hamby stayed by the mule an hour or more, till it was time to turn in.

His sleeping place was not in the bunkhouse but in a corner of the headworks where he kept a bedroll and a few belongings wrapped up in oilskin that he used for a pillow. That night he laid himself down extra easy, for he was sore as hell from the rock debris dropping on him and worn out from coughing and from breathing the bad air of the mine and from the aches in his bones from the damp and from the jolting of the heavy Ingersoll. It was true that he was accustomed to his torments and didn't mind them much; but not minding them didn't stop them hurting, and tonight he had to admit he felt nearly as used up as that poor damn winch mule of Strickland's.

Lying there on the hard concrete, racked on occasion with a rattling cough, he thought again of the home country and recalled how

badly he had once longed to leave it, how much he had wanted to wander free in the great world. Well, he'd wandered all right. He'd worked a steel mill in Alabama and a salt works on the Kanawha. Made tar and turpentine down in the pine barrens by the Great Dismal. Mined coal in Kentucky and stoked an iron bloomery in Georgia and sharecropped tobacco in South Carolina. Fought game chickens in Chattanooga and mucked stables in Knoxville. Graded right of way on the Chester & Lenoir Railroad. Run a sash mill on the Cape Fear River. Dug corundum in Macon County and copper at Copper Hill and cobbed feldspar on the South Toe River. Mined mica at the Sink Hole near Bakersville and the Ray Mines above Burnsville and for Jake Burleson at Penland and on Cane Creek and Georges Fork and now for Reed Considine here at the goddamn Axum.

Wandered? Hell, yes, he'd wandered. But wandered free? He made a wry face and rolled over and spat past the edge of the slab. Freedom. Nobody had ever offered *that*. But he reckoned he'd got some anyway. Got it by taking it, by God. Yet he wasn't sure he would ever get more than he'd already lost. Maybe in leaving home he'd put aside as much freedom as he was going to get in life. Maybe freedom was just having a name folk knew and to which they gave a deal of credit. That little and that much. He wondered if there was anybody left in the Hiwassee country who remembered the name he used to have and gave it credit. He was wondering that when he fell asleep.

Next morning he was sitting on his stump beside the compressor eating breakfast when Rainey came by on his way to the cookhouse. Rainey had a fashion of looking that he seemed to think showed how dangerous and full of rough dealing he was, though Hamby believed it just made him resemble more than ever a sow hog sated full with slop. Rainey stopped and looked down at Hamby that way now and commenced to nod as if to agree with himself that nothing as revolting as Hamby had ever come to sit on a stump anywhere near him. Hamby kept on eating in hopes Rainey's desire for breakfast would make him lose interest in baiting him. But it didn't. Just then Loomis came up the path from the bunkhouse and as Loomis approached, fat old Rainey turned and remarked to him, "You know what the trouble with this country is, Loomis?"

Loomis was more dumb even than Rainey and he stopped and scowled in a dull way and said no and Rainey laughed his guttural laugh and explained, "Why, they's too many goddamn niggers in it, that's what."

The pair stood guffawing while Hamby nibbled his pone. *Long as*

*they been hating coloreds*, he mused, *seem like they could think up a slur you you ain't already heard a million times.*

Buffum had stepped out of the bunkhouse just as Rainey spoke and now he strolled up the path toward them with his hands stuck in the back pockets of his overalls and he was laughing too. He was smarter than Loomis and Rainey and unlike either of them he had a sense about Hamby that made him a little careful of him, so he didn't laugh very loud or very long after he got a glimpse of the spark of light in Hamby's blue-gray eye. Instead he stopped on the cinder path and watched close while Hamby sat sopping up the last of his bacon grease with the pone and then slowly ate the pone. Buffum kept that waitful air as Hamby put the tin plate by and tilted his cup aloft and drank down the last of his coffee and turned and set the empty cup on top of the plate and then stood and took a step in on Rainey, and Buffum moved back a yard or two.

"Hell," Hamby grinned, pushing his face so close to Rainey's that he could smell Rainey's rancid breath and dirty underwear, "I reckon a whole lot of niggers be just what this place need." He nodded. "Raise up the tone." He worked his nostrils elaborately and sniffed near Rainey's bevy of chins. "Improve the air." Then he turned and bent and picked up his plate and cup and started for the cookhouse.

Rainey and Loomis had quit their sniggering somewhere in the middle of Hamby's talk and for a second or two afterward the power of speech seemed to have left them. But by the time Hamby reached the cookhouse door Rainey got hold of his tongue. "Hit's you niggers that stink!" he hollered. "You coons and them others. They's Dagos and Arshmen too. Bohunks. Sheenies." In his rage he sputtered and blew beads of spit. "Ruining the country. Taking white men's work. Not a one of you knows how to act." Loomis and Buffum looked on ashen faced as Rainey waved a sausage-sized finger in the air. "You got to learn how to be. Us that knows, we got to teach you. I warn you, McFee, I've got friends . . . "

Hamby nodded. "Thass good," he said. "I 'spect you be needing 'em." Then he passed inside.



Later in the morning Rainey was sitting cross legged on a sheet of canvas fifty feet from the headworks loading his cartridges from the powder keg when Hamby happened by pushing the muck car along the rails toward the dump. Rainey would be shooting a round in another hour and Hamby had been down in the mine and seen the face and hadn't liked its looks. So he stopped and leaned on the rim of the muck car and told Rainey there was a big cracked rock hanging in the top of

the drift that ought to be dug out before the round was shot. "Otherwise," he warned, "you go and shoot, that old rock come down. Block the face. Take us a whole goddamn shift just to break it up."

Rainey glared. All of a sudden it looked like his face was a balloon that somebody had started puffing up; but oddly, the more his face swelled, the smaller and closer together grew his little sow's eyes. He flung down his wooden powder spoon and little copper hammer. "By Christ," he burst out in a choked voice, "if you ain't smarting off, you're telling me my business like I don't know it."

Hamby watched him levelly. "If you knowed your business, I wouldn't have to tell it to you." He shrugged. "Go on ahead then. Shoot the damn thing. Maybe that rock drop on *you*."

Rainey looked up at him almost in appeal. Under stiff yellow lashes his pale eyes showed a glimmer of wet. He shook his big head. "You don't never stop, do you?" He sounded plaintive and sad and puzzled, maybe even hurt. "You don't leave a man a inch of space." He paused. Then he said, "You're a *nigger*, McFee. Don't you know it? Don't you know it yet? Ain't nobody ever taught you?"

Hamby was an old dog and knew the signs. He took a long breath and stepped away from the muck car with his arms hanging loose. Rainey uncrossed his legs and put both hamlike hands flat on the tarp and pushed himself to his feet and Hamby knew from the heavy way he moved and from the bloat and congestion of his face that Rainey had got past his fear at last and there would be no more bluster and the time had come as it always must come, sooner or later, everywhere, to all like Hamby who had the same feature of blood.

Yes, it was fear that men like Rainey felt. Hamby knew that, had finally learned it. And once you learned it, you could even feel pity. He felt the pity now as he retreated another step and held his hands away from his body. His razor hung inside his shirt from a lanyard around his neck but he wasn't about to go for it no matter what Rainey did. Not even he could afford that. Not here. Not with this one.

Out of the tail of his eye he saw Considine coming at a half run. Considine said Rainey's name but Rainey seemed not to hear. His eyes had emptied out. He pulled a folding knife from his pants pocket and put it sideways in his mouth and opened the blade with his teeth and bent down in a clumsy crouch weaving the knife before him and Considine called his name again but he came at Hamby anyway flicking the knife first down and then up as if to gut him. Hamby whirled away from him and got behind the muck car and snatched a big hunk of quartz out of the muck car and when Rainey made his next pass he walloped him over the ear with it and it made

the hard hollow *thwock* of a buckeye dropping on a fence rail and Rainey gave a grunt of surprise and sagged sideways and fell.

Though it was but Wednesday, Considine paid Hamby six dollars for a full week's work of ten-hour shifts. He said he'd got three dollars' worth of fun just watching Rainey's eyeballs roll back in his head before he pitched over. Still, Hamby was fired. And he'd better get down the mountain pretty damn quick before Rainey came to. "That old boy'll send for his Kluxers," Considine warned, "and they won't dilly dally." Ruefully he drooped his head and sighed. "I hate to lose you, McFee. You're about the best blaster I ever had. But you're a troublous sort of a darkey, ain't you?"

Hamby shrugged. They shook hands then and Hamby stood and left the little office walled off with beadboard from the cookhouse, and came down the wooden stoop and picked up his hickory staff with his budget of goods tied on the end and laid the staff over his shoulder and then waited awhile looking around him. He looked at the mouth of the mine with its wooden trap door in the middle of the headworks and at the hoist with the mule hitched to it and at Strickland standing by the winch drum and at the muck cars and the rails they ran on and at the muck dump and at the whole ugly sore of the Axum there on the side of ridge and then at the ridge itself rising beyond it in its long run toward Young's Knob and finally at the black-green forest that clothed it and at the sky.

When he'd looked his fill, he walked over to the hoist and petted the winch mule for a spell and stroked one of its ears while Strickland glowered and cussed at him. He said to Strickland, "I told this mule. You whup him, he be kicking you deader'n hell." Strickland gave a scraping laugh. Hamby turned off and left the headworks and crossed to the waiting mica car. Buffum walked down after him. Climbing in, he sat on the shiny heaped-up books of mica holding his staff and poke of goods straight before him like the flag of a just cause. Standing by the car Buffum gave him a solemn bob of the head and Hamby nodded back and then Buffum threw the levers and the chains clanked and the car jerked and started down the mountain. At the foot of the slope where the sled road commenced, the empty mica car began to climb up toward him on the parallel set of rails. He watched it come.

Then as it passed him, he leaned and spat a gout of blood into it.