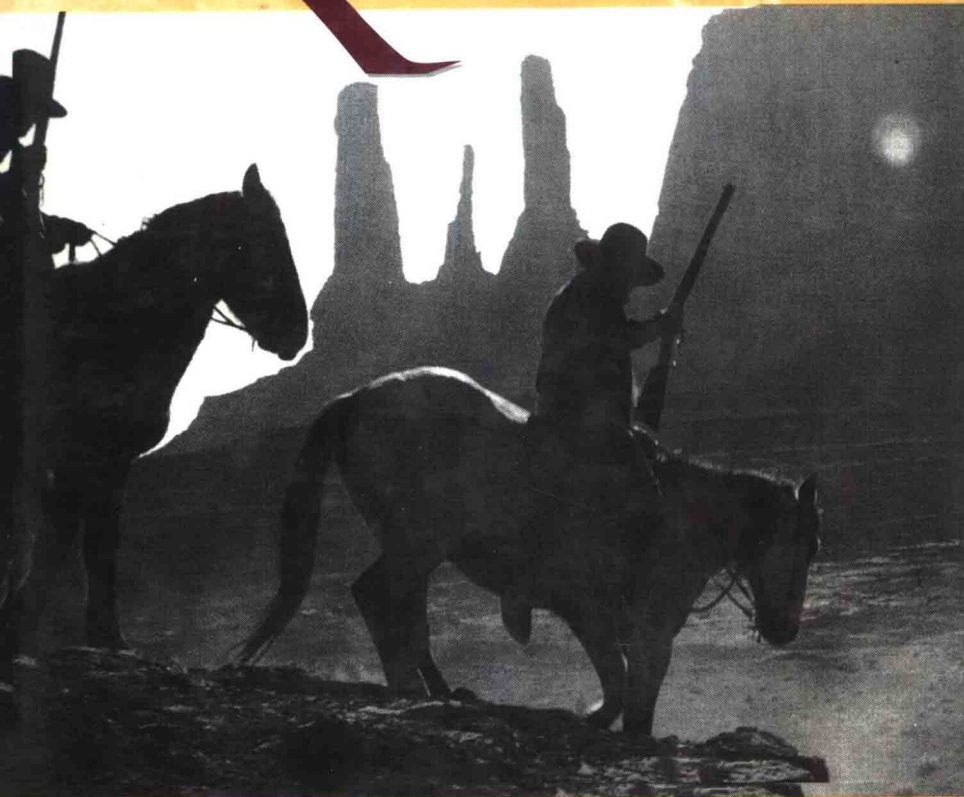


THE SONS OF
**GRADY
ROURKE**



DOUGLAS
SAVAGE

THE SONS OF
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ROURKE**

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**GRADY
ROURKE**

DOUGLAS
SAVAGE

M. EVANS AND COMPANY, INC.
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In memory of
Joseph and Rachel Savage,
to whom America was the *goldeneh medina*

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A man can commit murder here with impunity.

—John Tunstall, 16 November 1876
Lincoln, New Mexico

What they didn't burn, they stole.

—Susan McSween
Lincoln, New Mexico

Introduction and Acknowledgments

AN HISTORICAL NOVEL SHOULD BE SLIGHTLY LESS THAN A post-graduate dissertation and must be slightly more than a pack of lies. Nearly all of the principal players in this story are real, historical figures from the 1878 anarchy in New Mexico now known as the Lincoln County War. Actual names are used for such persons. The author assumes responsibility for offense taken by their living heirs and descendants. Of the primary characters in this story, only Grady Rourke and his sons, and Cyrus, Melissa, and Bonita are fictional.

The author acknowledges his debt and abiding gratitude to the scholars of the Lincoln County War whose texts are the sources for the historical accuracy of this story:

Maurice G. Fulton, *History of the Lincoln County War*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1968 (Robert N. Mullin, editor). Susan McSween's frontispiece quotation is from page 270.

Joel Jacobsen, *Such Men as Billy the Kid: The Lincoln County War Reconsidered*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994. John Tunstall's frontispiece quotation is from page 20.

Donald R. Lavash, *Sheriff William Brady: Tragic Hero of the Lincoln County War*, Sunstone Press, Santa Fe, 1986.

John P. Wilson, *Merchants, Guns and Money: The Story of Lincoln County and Its Wars*, Museum of New Mexico Press, Santa Fe, 1987.

Chapter One

THE DEAD MAN'S JOURNEY—*JOURNADA DEL MUERTE*—THE locals called it: the blistering ocean of sand and sage between the Rio Grande River to the west and the Sacramento mountain range to the east. The bones of men and horses had bleached in the mile-high desert for three hundred years. Spanish conquistadors were the first white men to explore this furnace of southeast New Mexico Territory and the first to perish. Even in the heart-stopping cold of January with its blinding snows, the lifeless land was still the *Jornada del Muerte*.

In the thin air, the two riders coming down the mountain were sharply etched against the hard, blue sky. Steam blowing out of the ice-encrusted nostrils of their mounts and the two pack horses surrounded the horsemen in a white veil of horse breath. Descending down the eastern face of the Sacramento Mountains, the four horses walked slowly and painfully on cracked hooves. What little moisture the high desert had sucked out of the air in the fall had frozen solid in the sandy ground. The icy earth offered only a steep path paved with shards of glass. Blood seeped around well-worn iron horseshoes. Behind the traveling band, the White Mountain ridge crept slowly toward the setting sun as the trail pointed down and to the east; toward the headwaters of the Rio Bonito.

Thick fur coats made the two riders look like mounted

bears. Their little caravan followed the southern side of the river where the water had stopped flowing from west to east three months earlier. With ice crunching under his animal's feet, the lead rider looked north, over his left shoulder toward Capitan Mountain. It formed the snow-capped northern side of the steep valley that the Rio Bonito split down the middle. Three frozen rivers cut parallel scars through the arid land: the Rio Bonito to the north on the riders' left, Eagle Creek to the south, and the Rio Ruidoso still further south. All of the frozen streams joined the Rio Hondo over the eastern horizon.

When the riders looked at the sky, they saw that the white sun would stay high long enough for them to make Fort Stanton, ten miles into the valley. Both riders knew the trail since boyhood. Words were not wasted in country where opening a man's mouth would make his cracked lips bleed like his horses' soles. Beyond the fort lay the clapboard settlement of Lincoln. By January 1878, the bleak one-road town had been at war with itself for a year.

"THOUGHT THEM BOYS was dead." The cold traveled through the younger man's teeth until his forehead throbbed. He secured the tent flap behind him.

The clerk at the sutler's tent did not stay outside long. He braved the evening cold only until he was satisfied that the sound of horses was not warning of a thirsty squad of the 9th United States Colored Cavalry.

"Don't matter," the older man said. He had known better than to go into the gray cold. If the riders were Buffalo Soldiers, they would find their way to a barrel of corn whiskey on their own. The sutler's tent was the one place at Fort Stanton where the all-black cavalry troopers were equal to their white officers. "You sure it's the Rourke brothers?"

"Damned sure," the clerk said as he rubbed his hands furiously over the pot-bellied stove at the center of the large

tent. A stove pipe climbed toward the top seam of the canvas shelter. "I knew the older one before the war."

"Oh. Which brothers was they?"

"Sean, the oldest. Think the other one with him must be Patrick, the middle brother. Liam was just a kid when I last seen them over ten years ago. Heard he was riding with the Seventh. Maybe he got himself killed with the rest of them at Bighorn. Likely as not."

"Likely as not. Come help me with the firewood."

The clerk took an armload of dried pine and shoved it into the stove. Resin crackled and hissed. He paused when he heard horses whinny from the wind stinging their watery eyes.

"Guess they come home to claim the old man's land." The old sutler took off his gloves when the last log went into the large stove. "Such as it is." A stream of tobacco juice landed and sizzled in the fire.

In the darkness under a brilliant moon, Fort Stanton was an indistinct change in the icescape. It was not a walled structure, but merely a collection of snow-covered log buildings erected in the valley halfway between the Sacramento Mountains and Lincoln. The buildings stood along the perimeter of a parade ground. From a distance, the thirty-three-year-old fort looked as though a hillside worth of trees had simply collapsed, rolled down Capitan Mountain, and stopped in a dirty pile of timber beside the frozen Rio Bonito. Confederates had occupied the place briefly during the war. Apaches finally drove the Rebels out. Paths through the knee-deep snow carved a lacework pattern between the buildings, huts, and corrals for the post's horses. Thin horses huddled against the nighttime cold under rough-hewn lean-tos built within the pens. Steam rose from fresh manure that hit the snow hard and round from poor forage.

Sean and Patrick Rourke tied their weary animals to a hitching post outside the fort's administrative hut. A black private in blue greatcoat escorted the brothers into Captain

George Purington's office. The white officer came around his desk to extend his right hand. His cigar remained clutched between his teeth.

"I'm Captain Purington, brevet lieutenant colonel of this post. You boys look like you could use a drink."

"Thank you, Colonel." Sean spoke for the two brothers. "That would be welcome."

The two civilians sat down opposite the small desk. The sentry went back to the frigid darkness as the commanding officer poured three glasses before returning to his seat behind the desk. The newcomers removed their heavy mittens and opened their fur coats. With chapped red hands, each brushed melting snow from his wild beard. The fort's commander handed the men glasses and kept one for himself.

"The hair of the dog, boys," the soldier smiled, lifting his glass.

A lantern on the officer's desk cast cozy yellow light on the riders' weathered faces. The lamp light made only faint shadows on the young face of Patrick Rourke, not older than twenty-five. But on Sean's face, only seven years older, the flickering light crashed against creased and bluish flesh to the right of Sean's nose. A jagged fissure was gouged from the bridge of his nose. Between his beard and his hairline, the right half of his face was badly mangled. Beneath his eye, the skin lacked the wintery red of his left cheek. The world had not been kind to the young man.

Sean felt the officer's eyes quickly studying his burned face. Brevet Colonel Purington's eyes narrowed for a moment. Without meaning to, Sean's right hand touched his poorly healed wound.

"Shiloh. I was sixteen. Wore the gray."

Purington nodded. He frowned, remembering worse wounds.

"I wore blue in the east under old 'Useless' S. Grant. Saw the elephant in the clouds above Chattanooga. Already

seems like a lifetime ago; like it was someone else and not really me."

"Yes," Sean sighed. His right hand went down to his tattered knee. His left hand lifted his glass again.

"So you're old Grady Rourke's boys?"

"Yes, sir." Patrick spoke for his brother whose face was still remembering. "We've been on the trail for a month. Snow laid us up on the train six weeks ago. Not even the Southern Pacific could break through in the west."

The soldier played with his cigar.

"Understand Grady was in the Army? Mexico, wasn't it?"

"Yes." Patrick spoke warmly. "He was decorated at Sierra Gordo in '47. He was discharged in '50. He was real proud of his years in uniform."

"I understand that. Too bad: his accident and all." The officer seemed saddened. "No details that I can really give you boys. Stoved up by his horse is all I really know. My condolences."

"Thanks. Guess we need a place to sleep. Stable would be fine, Colonel."

"Nonsense. You're sons of a military man. I can put you up with my non-commissioned officers. Sorry you'll have to bunk with darkies. But they're damned good soldiers. The Ninth is a good bunch."

"That would be fine, sir. The way we smell, they may take more offense at Patrick and me."

The officer stood in a cloud of cigar smoke.

"Then you'll be going on to Lincoln tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir. First light—weather permitting, of course."

"We'll put some hot food into you first. I'll have the orderly hay your animals tonight, too." He flicked his ash onto the earthen floor. "Ain't one of Grady's boys in the service now?"

"Yes," Patrick said proudly. "Liam's mustering out soon from Colonel Miles' command up north."

"The Nez Perce campaign?"

"Yes, sir. Gone after them runaway Indians making for Canada. We left California before he could wire us."

"I can tell you that they rounded up every last one of them. Chief Joseph himself surrendered in October. The other chief—Looking Glass—was killed. Sad business."

The two brothers shuffled toward the door. Their long fur coats nearly touched the dirt floor. They carried their battered, wide-brimmed hats.

"Thank you, Colonel. Liam must be on his way then."

"Till tomorrow, boys. Good night." Captain Purington opened the door to darkness and a biting wind. Powdery snow blew in and dusted his beard.

"Private, escort these men to the sergeants' hut. They'll bed down there tonight. And have someone tend to their animals."

"Yes, sir. Follow me, please."

Grady Rourke's sons pushed their hats down low over their ears and bowed their faces into their collars to avoid the wind. Without looking up, each brother instinctively found his horse's forehead and rubbed his animal's nose as they passed. The trooper blinked new snow from his eyes as they walked toward one of the camp's small cabins. Yellow lamp light cast inviting warmth from dirty windows fogged by the breath of two soldiers who watched the men approach out of the darkness.

"Colonel's orders," the young trooper said as the night wind and swirls of powdery snow blew the three men into the warm cabin. Half a dozen black men stepped back from the freezing air. Two of the troopers still wore their blue flannel blouses. The others were already in their long woollies.

"Take a load off, sir," the man closest to the door said as he smiled toward Patrick. "Hang your coats there by the fire to dry."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Sean said for the brothers. "We don't mean to be in the way."

The trooper pointed toward pegs in the log walls near a stone hearth that blazed with pine timbers. Patrick suspended both coats on the pegs. Melting water quickly formed a mud puddle on the dirt floor.

"Carry on, Private," the sergeant nodded. The young trooper sighed and marched grimly into the night. The wind stopped whistling when the door closed heavily.

"I'm Sean Rourke. This here is my little brother. I used to soldier."

The sergeant squinted at the older brother's wrecked face. He recognized a soldier's face and he knew that extending his hand was premature civility. So he only nodded and pointed toward a small table.

"The coffee is hot, sir, and you're both welcome to bunk down tonight. The biscuits are hard. But they're warm and will fill you till morning."

The two brothers sat down and sighed at the sudden comfort. The congenial sergeant stepped toward the fire and retrieved a small sack from the mantel. When he laid it on the table between the brothers, he could smell the whiskey.

"Help yourself to our tobacco. Save yours for the trail."

The brothers thanked the big man in unison.

"We have four empty bunks, so you can take your pick."

"Thank you," Sean said wearily. He felt his scarred cheek warming from the fire and sensed how hard his southern accent fell on the sergeant's ears. The older brother looked up and extended his right hand toward the soldier. The trooper touched the veteran's hand carefully, as if it were a fragile thing of value.

"We're much obliged, Sergeant."

The soldier nodded and released Sean Rourke's firm handshake. Then he pulled his government issue suspenders off his wide, blue shoulders. The braces dangled against his sides.

"Then we'll turn in, Mr. Rourke. We've had a long day out in that there cold."

"If you don't mind, Sergeant, my brother and I'll just sit by the fire for a little while until we thaw." Sean's torn face and graying beard opened into an honest smile.

"Very well, sir. Light up, if you want. We can sleep through hail and high water, that's for damned sure." The noncommissioned officer glanced sideways with a narrow grin. His head and kindly face gestured toward a clay jug wedged into a corner where the thick logs came together.

"There's some medicine in the jug if you need to help your circulation."

Grady Rourke's sons smiled and nodded gratefully.

The other troopers had said nothing. With a chorus of "night, then" one at a time, each of the still dressed cavalrymen stripped down to his long woollies. The men climbed into their bunks and pulled heavy gray blankets up to their chins. The sergeant who had been talking laid an armload of new logs into the hearth before he bedded down last.

The quarters were warm and comfortable. Within five minutes, six soldiers were sleeping soundly. Patrick stood up, leaned toward the corner, and fetched the jug and two tin cups. He poured a dose of sour mash whiskey into each cup on the coarse table. When he sat down again, Sean nodded without a word. After lifting the cup to his cracked lips, he sighed deeply.

The fire crackled and sent embers looping upward into the stone chimney.

The two brothers sipped their whiskey for half an hour in silence. The wind moaned against the frosted windows almost as loudly as the severe snoring that rumbled from the soldiers.

Sean squinted toward the windows on either side of the doorway opposite the hearth. He watched the bright fire reflecting on the glass. Ice crusted around the edges of the panes and refracted the flames like cold prisms of crystal. As the cabin's warmth and the bitter medicine worked together, the one-time Confederate looked hard at the win-