

⇒ CHAPTER 13 ⇐

Face-to-Face!

BENJI

There are only seven of the original thirteen settlers of Buxton still living here, and they're different from the rest of us. And not just because they're tired and move slow.

Those who escaped from slavery have this way of always looking over their shoulders, and if you believe even half of their stories about the southern United States, that's easy to understand.

What I *can't* understand is why, after more than thirty-five years of being free, they can't seem to relax. There haven't been any slave catchers around here since Hector was a pup, and slavery was outlawed down in America after the rebs got whipped, so the old-timers really don't have anything to worry about. But even knowing that, the hardest thing for them to do is take an easy breath.

I don't know if that same uneasiness is in my blood or if I picked up the watched feeling by being raised in a town full of nervous old people, 'cause many times I feel the

same way. Lots of times, I feel itchy that someone is watching me, mostly when I'm in the woods.

It was happening again.

Some of the time when I'm in the forest and this feeling comes over me, I'll look up into the boughs of a tree and I'm relieved to spot an owl. I tell myself that the owl was what was causing my nervousness.

Owls have a way of looking at you that makes you feel they're thinking, "Not only do I know what you just thought, I also know what you're about to say," and that can't help but make your stomach jumpy.

It's bad enough when it seems like there's a person reading your mind; it's even worse when the thing that's staying two or three thoughts ahead of you is doing it with a bird's brain.

I slowly looked at the trees from top to bottom. No owls.

The feeling wouldn't leave. I *was* being watched.

I noticed one branch of a tree, maybe twenty paces off to my left, sway one time to the right and one time to the left. It was such a tiny movement that I wasn't sure I'd seen it at all.

A good woodsman learns to trust what he's seen, so I had to look away from the branch before I talked myself into believing it hadn't moved after all. The branch *had* moved and whatever had brushed against it was still close, maybe watching from right behind the tree.

I was going to figure out who or what this was. The woods are like a pond: Nothing can go through them without leaving ripples; you only have to be able to read the ripples to know what has moved.

There was no breeze and this wasn't a wild animal. The only animal left in these woods bold enough to follow and watch a human being is another human being.

That was one ripple.

I didn't let on I knew I was being spied on. I poked the stick I was carrying into the ground and dropped my head, as if I were interested in a stone I'd overturned. But my eyes stayed locked upon the area around the branch that had swayed.

Higher up in the same tree, a pair of mourning doves lighted in the branches and, just as quick, squawking like they were being squeezed, they took off.

Another ripple.

Mourning doves are the stupidest birds on the face of the earth; about the only time one will move is if you step right on top of it. Plus, one had flown east and one had flown west, a sure sign something at the base of the tree had startled them.

A third ripple.

My pride was pinched. This person was good. I'd prove I was better.

It wasn't Spence or any of my other chums. The words that describe the way they move in the forest are trounce, stomp, and break. No, this was someone who was just as at home in the woods as me.

This was a hunter.

Which meant there was a good chance they would be armed.

I went from wanting to play a game to knowing I'd better protect myself by losing whoever was trying so hard to keep an eye on me.

Then, like a rock to the head, an idea hit me and made me want to leave the woods as quick as I could. What if this was the Madman of Piney Woods? It was silly, but what if it really was true?