

# Too Tough to Kill

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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The big truck coughed and roared up the last few feet of the steep grade and straightened out for the run to Mercury. Pat Collins stared sleepily down the ribbon of asphalt that stretched into the darkness beyond the reach of the lights. Momentarily, he glanced down at Ruth. She was sleeping with her head on his shoulder. Even Deek Peters, the deputy sheriff detailed to guard him, had been lulled to sleep by the droning of the heavy motor and the warmth of the cab.

Pat shook himself, and succeeded in opening his eyes wider. He had been going day and night for weeks it seemed. The three-hundred-mile run to Millvale and back was to be his last trip. Two weeks off for his honeymoon, and then back at a better job. Right now he and Ruth would have been on the train headed west if it hadn't been for the killing.

Why couldn't Augie Petrone have been given the works somewhere else than right in front of his truck as he left Mercury! Because of that they had detained him several hours for questioning in Millvale, and now, knowing him to be the only

witness, they had detailed Peters to guard him. He wished Tony Calva and Cokey Raiss would do their killing elsewhere next time. It had been them all right. He remembered them both from the old days and had seen them both clearly as they pumped shot after shot into Petrone's body as his car lay jammed against a fire hydrant. There had been another man, too, a big gunman. He hadn't recognized him, but he would remember his face.

Suddenly a long black car shot by the truck and wheeled to a stop. Almost in the same instant, three men piled out into the road. Two of them had tommy guns. For an instant Pat hesitated upon the verge of wheeling the truck into them, full speed. Then he remembered Ruth there beside him, Ruth the girl he had just married but a few hours before. With a curse he slammed on the brakes as Deek Peters suddenly came to life.

„All right,“ Calva snarled, motioning with the .45 he carried. „Out of that cab! One wrong move an' I'll blast the guts out of you!“

Peters let out an oath, and whipped up his shotgun. The .45 barked viciously, and then again, and the deputy sheriff slumped from the seat to the pavement. Shakily, Pat helped Ruth down and they stood to one side. Her eyes were wide and dark, and she avoided looking at the tumbled body of the deputy.

„Well, would you look who's here!“ Raiss grinned, stepping forward. „The smart boy who talks so much has brought his girlfriend along for us!“

„All right, you two!“ Calva snapped. „Crawl in that car and don't let's have a single yap out of you!“

Pat's face was white and tense. He squeezed Ruth's hand, but his mouth felt dry, and he kept wetting his lips with his tongue. He knew Tony Calva and Cokey Raiss only too well. Both were killers. It was generally believed that Raiss had been the man behind the gun in most of the gang killings around Mercury in the past three years. Tony Calva was bodyguard for Dago John Fagan. There were two other men in the car, one sat at the wheel, and the other had stopped in the door, a tommy gun lying carelessly in the hollow of his arm.

Ruth got in, and the man with the tommy gun gave her a cool, thin-lipped smile that set the blood pounding in Pat's ears. The gun muzzle between his shoulders made him realize that there was still a chance. They hadn't killed him yet, and perhaps they wouldn't. As long as he was alive there was a chance of helping Ruth.

„You guys got me,“ he said suddenly. „Let my wife go, why don't you? She'll promise not to talk!“

„Fat chance!“ Raiss sneered. „Why didn't you keep your trap shut? If you hadn't spouted off to those coppers in Millvale you might have picked up a couple of C's some night.“ He paused, and turned to stare at Ruth. „No, we'll keep the twist. She's a good-lookin' dame, and we boys may have to hide out somewhere. It gets kinda lonesome, you know.“

Pat's muscles tightened, but he held himself still, watching for a chance. The car swung off down the paving in the direction from which he had come, and then wheeled suddenly into a rutted side road. Sitting in the darkness of the car with a gun behind his ear, Pat tried to think, tried to remember.

The road they were on was one he hadn't traveled in years, but he did know that it led to the river. The river!

Suddenly, the car stopped. While the thin, white-faced gunman held a pistol to his head, he was forced from the car. Raiss was waiting for him, and Calva sat in the car watching Ruth like a cat watching a mouse.

They were on the bridge. Pat remembered the current was strong along here, and the river deep. There were four of them, and they all had guns. He might get one, but that wouldn't help. They might turn Ruth loose, they might just be talking that way to torture him.

„Don't shoot, Cokey,“ Calva said suddenly. „Just knock him in the head and let the river do it. There's a farm up here on the hill.“

Suddenly, Ruth tried to leap from the car, but Calva caught her by the arm and jerked her back. Pat's face set grimly, but in that instant Raiss moved forward and brought the gun barrel down across his head in a vicious, sideswiping blow.

An arrow of pain shot through him, and he stumbled, and almost went down. He lurched toward Raiss, and the gunman hit him again, and again. Then suddenly he felt himself falling, and something else hit him. He toppled off the bridge, and the dark water closed over his head.

Hours later, it seemed, he opened his eyes. At first he was conscious of nothing but the throbbing pain in his head, the surging waves of pain that went all over him. Then slowly, he began to realize he was cold.

He struggled, and something tore sharply at his arm. Then he realized where he was and what had happened. He was caught in a barbed-wire fence that extended across the river about three hundred yards below the bridge from which his body had been tumbled.

Cautiously, he unfastened his clothes from the wire, and clinging to the fence, worked his way to shore. He walked up the bank, and then tumbled and lay flat upon his face in the grass. For a long time he lay still, then he sat up slowly.

He had no idea of how much time had passed. It was still dark. They had, it seemed, tumbled him off the bridge for dead, not knowing about the fence. It was only a miracle that he hadn't gone down to stay before the barbs caught his clothing and held him above water.

Gingerly, he ran his fingers along his scalp. It tingled with the pain of his touch, and he realized it was badly cut. He groped his way to his feet, and started toward the road. He remembered the farm they had said was up above. Almost blind with pain, he staggered along the road, his head throbbing.

Ahead of him the fence opened, and he could see the black bulk of the farmhouse looming up through the night. Amid the fierce barking of a big shepherd dog, he lurched up to the door and pounded upon it.

It opened suddenly. Pat Collins looked up and found himself staring into the wide, sleepy eyes of an elderly farmer.

„Wha—what's goin' on here?“ the farmer began. „What you mean—!“

„Listen,“ Pat broke in suddenly. „I'm Pat Collins. You call the sheriff at Mercury an' tell him Raiss an' Calva waylaid my truck an' knocked me in the head. Tell him they got my wife. Tell him I think they went to The Cedars.“

The farmer, wide awake now, caught him by the arm as he lurched against the doorpost, „Come in here, Collins. You're bad hurt!“

Almost before he realized it the farmer's wife had put some coffee before him and he was drinking it in great gulps. It made him feel better.

„You got a car?“ he demanded, as the farmer struggled to raise central. „I want to borrow a car.“

The farmer's wife went into the next room and he hurriedly pulled on the dry clothes she had brought him.

„Please, I need help. You know me, I'm Pat Collins, and I drive for the Mercury Freighting Company, Dave Lyons will back me. If there's any damage to the car I'll pay.“

The farmer turned from the telephone. „Mary, get this young man my pistol and those extra shells, an' get the car key out of my pants pocket.“ He paused, and rang the phone desperately. Then he looked back at Collins. „I know you, son, I seen you down about the markets many a time. We read in the paper today about you witnessin' that killin'. I reckon they published that story too soon!“

As the farmer's car roared to life, Pat could hear the man shouting into the phone, and knew he had reached Mercury and the sheriff. Coming up the hill from the river the memory of Dago John's old roadhouse at The Cedars had flashed across Pat's mind. A chance remark from one of the gunmen came to him now as he swung the coupe out on the road, and whirled off at top speed.

It had only been a short time since they had slugged him and dropped him in the river. They would be expecting no pursuit, no danger.

Two miles, three, four, five. Then he swung the car into a dark side road, and stopped. The lights had been turned off minutes before. Carefully, he checked the load in the old six-shooter, and with a dozen shells shaking loose in his pocket, he started down the road.

His head throbbed painfully, but he felt surprisingly able. It wasn't for nothing that he had played football, boxed, and wrestled all his life.

He reached the edge of the fence around the acres where the old roadhouse stood. The place had been deserted since prohibition days. Dago John had made this his headquarters at one time. Carefully, he crawled over the fence.

Pat Collins was crouched against the wall before he saw the car parked in the garage behind the building. The door had been left open, as though they hadn't contemplated staying. Through a thin edge of light at the bottom of a window he could see what went on inside.

Three men, Tony Calva, Cokey Raiss, and the white-faced gunman, were sitting at the table. Ruth was putting food on the table.

Pat drew back from the window, and suddenly, his ear caught the tiniest sound as a foot scraped on gravel. He whirled just in time to see the dark shadow of a man loom up before him. He lashed out with a vicious right hand that slammed into the man's body, and he felt it give. Then Pat stepped in, crashing both hands to the chin in a pretty one-two that stretched the surprised gangster flat.

Quickly, Pat dropped astride him and slugged him on the chin as hard as he could lay them in. Afraid the sound had attracted attention, he crawled to his feet, scooping the gunman's automatic as he got up. He opened the door.

„Come on in, Red,“ the gunman said, without looking up, but Pat fired as he spoke, and the white-faced gangster froze in his chair.

With an oath, Calva dropped to the floor, shooting as he fell. A bullet ripped through Pat's shirt, and another snapped against the wall behind his head and whined away across the room. Pat started across the room. Suddenly he was mad, mad clear through. Both guns were spouting fire, and he could see Raiss was on his feet, shooting back.

Something struck Pat a vicious blow in the right shoulder, and his gun hand dropped to his side. But the left gun was still there, and Raiss sagged across the table, spilling the soup. Coolly, Pat fired again, and the body twitched. He turned drunkenly to see Calva lifting a tommy gun. Then Ruth suddenly stepped through the door and hurled a can of tomatoes that struck Calva on the head.

Pat felt his knees give way, and he was on the floor, but Calva was lifting the tommy gun again. Pat fired, and the gangster sagged forward.

Collins lurched to his feet swaying dizzily. Far down the road he could hear the whine of police sirens, and he turned to stare at Ruth.

What he saw instead was the short blocky gunman who had been in the car, the one that had shot down Petrone, and the gunman was looking at him with a twisted smile and had him covered.

They fired at the same instant, and even as he felt something pound his chest, he knew his own shot had missed. He lurched, but kept his feet, weaving. The heavyset man's face bobbed queerly, and he fired at it again. Then, coolly, Pat shoved a couple more shells into his pistol, hanging the gun in his limp right hand. He took the gun in his good left hand again, and then he saw that the other man was gone.

He stared, astonished at the disappearance, and then his eyes wavered down and he saw the man lying on the floor.

Suddenly the door burst open, and the police came pouring into the room.

When he regained consciousness he was lying on a hospital bed, and Ruth was sitting beside him.

„All right?“ she whispered. He nodded and took her hand. Pat grinned sleepily.

