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The feud goes on

MCCABE'S LUCK

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By

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Chapter One

Cornered

Late spring days can be hot in the northeastern Kentucky hills, and I was feeling every bit of the heat. It didn't help that I was lying flat on my stomach in the underbrush, my face and hands being scratched by thorns and twigs. I didn't dare raise my head to get my bearings. The last time I'd tried, two bullets had whizzed past my head and buried themselves in the maple trees behind me. Even moving around to ease the pain in my back and legs brought a fresh fusillade of bullets into my area. I couldn't even be sure how many of them there were out there. What I knew for sure is that they wanted to kill me.

I managed to roll to my right to take shelter behind a thick tree trunk. The movement brought a couple of searching shots from the trees across the stream in front of me, but they weren't coming as close this time. I tried to gather my thoughts and make sense of the situation I found myself dealing with. I had gone on a short hunting trip. Only my younger brother and I lived in the old family cabin. Neither of our parents were still alive, so it was just the two of us in the cabin. My mother had died giving birth to me. My dad had signed up for the Union army when I did. I had survived the battle at Shiloh, but my dad hadn't been so lucky. His unit had been pinned down in the fighting at the Hornet's Nest area on that first bloody day of battle. Relief troops came too late to help him. Dad was one of many buried at that battlefield.

I had come home after the war, almost eight years ago, at age twenty-two. I hadn't been made to feel very welcome when I came home, and now, at age thirty, things didn't seem any different in that regard. Kentucky was supposed to be a neutral state, but where I lived, nearly everyone else had joined the Confederate army. Only one family near us was willing to let bygones be bygones. My older brother Russell was a peaceful man who hadn't fought on either side. He wanted only to be left alone—to live his life in peace. Increasing hostility from the people around us, particularly the Mueller clan, had made that much harder these days. Russell had gotten to where he barely wanted to leave the cabin. I'm a calm man with a slow fuse, but I don't have quite as peaceful nature as my brother. Today's attack was the last straw for me.

My name is Jake McCabe and I have mostly known hard times. Today was going to be another one of those hard times. I had been riding back to the cabin, and I estimated I was about two or three miles away from it when a rifle shot rang out. The shot had notched a tree next to me, close enough that my cheek was bleeding from the tree bark torn off by the shot. I hadn't survived four years in the army without developing some survival instincts. I had grabbed my Spencer carbine from the scabbard and thrown myself on the ground, then crawled in to the thickest underbrush I could find. I estimated that maybe nine or ten shots had followed that first one. My horse lay dead on the ground behind me.

I lay flat on the ground and studied the woods in front of me. I had to get a better idea of how many of them were out there, and where they were. I pulled a long tree branch toward me very slowly, then pulled off my old Union army cap and cut a small hole in it. Then I placed it over a twig at the end of the branch. I pushed the branch back away from me slowly, then lifted it up above the cover of the underbrush, watching the ground in front of me carefully. Three puffs of smoke appeared almost simultaneously, accompanied by the sound of rifle shots. The hat was torn off the branch and sailed into the bushes behind me. The smoke puffs had been grouped close together. If they had been smart, they would have spread out and bracketed me a lot better. Then again, of course, nobody ever accused those Mueller boys of being smart. And I had a feeling I was dealing with the Mueller boys.

I had seen a bit of color, maybe somebody's shirt, showing from the spot farthest to my left when the smoke puffs had appeared. I thought I had a pretty good bead on that position. I crawled a little farther to my left to position myself behind a fallen log. Then I laid the Spencer across the log, sighting in on where I'd seen that color. I grabbed a rock lying on the ground beside me and tossed it over into the underbrush at about the spot where I'd raised my hat. I saw color again as he came off the ground and presented me with a target while he fired. I took aim and squeezed off my shot. He pitched over backwards and his rifle fell into the brush behind him. I shifted the rifle and fired one shot each into the other two places where I had seen the smoke. I heard a scream coming from the center position, then pressed myself down behind the log when they sent answering rifle fire just over my head. I was pretty sure there was only one gun now, returning my fire.

I could see the second man I'd hit crawling on the ground, trying to reach the rise at the top of the stream bank. It was one of the Mueller brothers, just as I had thought. I could see from here, about fifty yards away, that he was bleeding pretty badly. I let him go. My army experiences told me that with the size of the blood trail he was leaving, he probably wouldn't last out the day. I glanced over and could see the feet and legs of the first man I had shot, lying in the underbrush. He hadn't moved since landing in that position. I was pretty sure he was dead. The third brother broke from his concealed spot in the brush and ran up the slope toward the wounded man, who had almost reached the top of the rise. The last brother foolishly stopped running, turned, and lifted his rifle to take one more try at me. I dropped him with one shot.

I stayed where I was for a while, not willing to expose my position, just in case there was anybody else out there. After about fifteen minutes, I stood and walked back to my horse. I pulled off my saddle bags, then looked at the deer carcass I had strapped on to the horse, glancing overhead after a moment. The buzzards were already circling up there. I pulled out my knife and took a few small cuts of venison, wrapping them up in a cloth and pushing them into my saddle bags. Then I turned and started walking to the cabin.

My family settled on our little piece of land in Kentucky when I was only about one year old, before my brother Russell was born. We had struggled to make a go of it. We'd been flooded

out once, burned out twice, and suffered several years of poor crops and hunger. Folks around here had taken to calling it McCabe's luck. The feud with the Muellers had started when the four of them, including old Ezra Mueller, the father, had enlisted in the Confederate army. Dad and I had marched off to join Sherman's troops and there were some hard feelings. Up until now, it hadn't been deadly. Once in a while, one of our pigs or chickens turned up missing, and we were pretty sure the Mueller boys were taking them. Day before yesterday, I had seen somebody making off with one of the chickens and had fired a warning shot just over his head. Maybe that had set them off.

I walked reluctantly, forcing myself to keep up the pace. I had to get home and find out if they had targeted Russell and the cabin also. When I had gone only about a mile, I crested a small rise and saw what I had feared from the minute the Mueller boys had ambushed me back there. There was a column of smoke rising into the sky from our cabin site.

I could see Russell's body lying in the center of the clearing around the cabin just as soon as I rounded the turn on the trail. I broke into a shambling trot, not really wanting to see what I knew had happened. Russell had been shot in the back, probably trying to reach the cabin to get his rifle. I turned him over gently, checked him quickly, then sat in the dust next to Russell, my face buried in my hands. I didn't seem to have any tears. Behind me, I could hear the flames still licking at the remains of the cabin.

After a while I stood and walked to the edge of the clearing around the cabin, my hands stuffed into my pockets. I stared out into the woods. They must have come here first, looking for both of us. When they had finished here, they probably hid out in the woods near the trail, waiting for me to come home. They probably hadn't waited very long. I stood there for a long time, then eventually I walked around to the small garden we kept behind the house. We didn't really have a tool shed. A shovel and a hoe lay on the ground next to the garden. I picked up the shovel, walked back around to the clearing, and began digging the grave.

I supposed I was all that was left of either family involved in this senseless feud. Both my parents and my brother were gone now, and I didn't think any of the Muellers had been left alive. Old Ezra Mueller had died in the war, and his wife had died shortly after hearing the news of Ezra's death. The three no-account brothers were the only ones left from their family, and I was pretty sure all three were dead after today's ambush attempt. I didn't even plan to go back and give them a burial.

I finished the grave and laid Russell to rest. I took off my hat and said a few words over him, filled in the grave and rigged a little headstone for him. That done, I didn't plan to stay here for even one more day. There was nothing to keep me here now.

I walked back around the old cabin site, giving it a wide berth because of the heat from the flames and ashes. One glance told me there was nothing I could recover from inside the cabin. I tossed the shovel back into the garden, then followed a small, narrow trail back into the woods. Russell had been a very mistrusting man where most of his neighbors were concerned, for good reason as it turned out. He had left me two parting gifts.

I followed the twisting trail for about a half mile until it ended in a small clearing. We had built a little makeshift corral in the clearing where we kept our best horse, a buckskin I had named Sherman. I didn't think General Sherman would mind having a horse named after him. He was a pretty good horse, after all. Sherman whinnied as I walked over. I rubbed his ears, but left him where he was for a moment. I turned and walked back to a fairly large rock at the edge of the trail, then bent and heaved the rock to one side. I scooped out the dirt underneath with my hands for about a minute, until I felt the tin can we had buried there.

I scooped away the last few handfuls of dirt and pulled the can from the ground. I turned it over and dumped the contents into the clearing. Fifteen twenty-dollar gold pieces spilled out of the can and came to rest on the ground. I picked them up and tucked them away in my pockets. They were going to be my grubstake to allow me to move away and leave this place behind me. Maybe with a new home I could change the bad luck the McCabes had found here.

I went back over to get Sherman and led him to a tarp we had stretched over two piles of logs. In the space between the logs were a blanket, bridle and saddle. After Sherman was saddled up, I mounted and rode him back down the trail. I paused for a moment beside Russell's grave, then turned away from the scene of this morning's ambush and rode down the trail toward the one family I wanted to see before I left this place.

The Hawkins family comprised just about all the people I counted as friends in this little corner of northeastern Kentucky. We'd never been the most popular people around, but the choice I'd made to join the Union army seemed to end all the friendships I had around here. With the exception, that is, of the Hawkins family. Ike Hawkins had served in the Confederate army. He had lost a leg early on and had come home to his family. He had never held it against me or my father that we had chosen the other side. He simply said that a man had to do what he believes is the right thing to do. His wife Jeanne was a withdrawn, quiet woman. The last several years must have been hard on her, because she seemed to pull back farther and farther from other people.

There were two boys—Pete, about sixteen years old, and Isaac, maybe fourteen. They were friendly, respectful, hard-working boys. They had come over a time or two to help Russell and me when there was a lot of work to be done. It was the daughter in the family, though, that I thought was special. Julia Hawkins was about five years younger than me, and I had ridden over to see her often. The family made it clear that my feet were welcome under their dinner table, and Julia never failed to send me home with something special she had baked for me. I thought she understood me better than probably anybody I knew.

I wondered for about the fiftieth time if I shouldn't have pushed for something more with Julia. I had always felt that a man needed more to offer a woman than what I had to offer Julia. The smoking ruin of a shack back there and the little piece of ground we called home didn't seem like much of a future to offer a woman. I sighed and nudged Sherman around the last little turn in the trail. It was too late to worry about that now. I had come to say goodbye to all of them.

Ike Hawkins stood in the doorway when I rode up, leaning on his crutch. It wasn't lost on me that he held his rifle at his side. I wasn't too sure how well he could shoot with that since he'd lost his leg, but I wouldn't want to be the one who put him to the test. He gave me a brief wave and surveyed the trail behind me. "Saw some smoke over your way," he said as I dismounted and walked up to the door. I nodded and stared at the ground as the rest of the family gathered behind him in the doorway. "Russell's dead. The cabin's been burned down," I told them. I heard a collective gasp and they stood aside to let me inside.

I sat down on the fireplace hearth and Julia came to sit beside me while I told them about the ambush, and how I had found Russell dead and the cabin burned. I finished by telling them that I felt sure I had killed two of the Mueller brothers, and most likely all three. There was a long silence. "You did what you had to do," Ike finally offered. I nodded mutely.

They asked me to join them for a meal, and I accepted mainly because I needed the company. I didn't do the food justice like I usually did. I found myself picking at it for a short while before finally pushing it away. They all offered to come over and help me rebuild the cabin, and I said nothing for quite a while. Finally, in the long silence that followed, Julia leaned over, took my chin in both her hands, and asked: "What will you do now, Jake?" My eyes travelled slowly around the table, taking in each of them. I didn't seem to be able to say what I needed to. Finally, I looked back around at Julia. "Can I talk to you outside?" I asked her.