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# THE HUNT

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Andrew C. Watzek

Edited by Michael McIrvin

## **Chapter 1**

### **A New Life Begins**

Adam “Mac” McCulough awaited the birth of his fourth child as he sat in front of the fireplace in his small ranch house. The wind blew coldly off the snow-packed rim down into the Elkhorn Valley below. It was late spring of 1872 in the Arizona Territory. Mac sat quietly staring at the flames, wondering if this child would be a son. He dearly loved his daughters—Sara, age seven; Julie, age five; and Becky, four—but there was just something about having a son to pass things on to.

Sara, the oldest girl, was in the bedroom with her mother and Emma, the wife of their neighbor, Amos Johnson. Emma had helped with the birth of all four children now. Sara was allowed to watch, and to help out as best she could, because she had been so curious about Abby’s pregnancy.

As Mac chewed on the stem of his pipe, he remembered the fear, the anticipation, and the excitement when his first daughter was born. He remembered the look on his wife’s face as she handed him Sara for the first time, but mostly he remembered the way he shook from his heels to his head as he held his daughter in his arms. Mac, like most men who had made their own way in hard country, was not scared of much, but holding his first baby girl had him, big as he was, trembling like a maiden. Although the anticipation got easier with the arrival of the next two, each of his girls was very special in her own way, and Mac could not imagine what he would do if he lost one of them. The thought sent a stabbing pain through his entire body, and he shuddered as if chilled.

Mac was troubled about Abby with this child. She seemed to have more trouble handling the everyday pains of being pregnant. Although the doc said there was nothing to

worry about, Mac could sense something was wrong. Abby was never one to complain, but a husband can tell when things aren't the way they should be. She had been quieter than usual, and her face often looked drawn, her expression one of quiet suffering. She would brighten when she caught him looking at her, but still, he knew.

Just after midnight, Sara came into the room where her father sat. His little girl was obviously tired, but there was a look of amazement on her tiny face. The birth of a new brother or sister was all she had been able to talk about for these last many months. "The time is gettin' close, Papa. Is there anything I can get you before I go back in to help?"

"No. I'm fine," Mac replied.

As Sara left the room, Mac thought about how his little girl seemed to be getting more like a young lady. She was only seven, but she was a great help to her mother, learning to cook and to do a lot of other things around the house, as well as tend to the animals. Sara had been most helpful taking care of her younger sisters of late, giving Abby the rest she seemed to need more with this pregnancy than with the others. Sara would start school in the fall, which gave Abby only about six months to get used to doing without Sara's help. Julie and Becky were still too young to be anything but a worry, and Mac knew he was never one to rely on around the house. He was a rancher, which took a fair amount of his time, especially during some seasons of the year, like calving in the spring; but he was also the sheriff of nearby Elkhorn. The town really never needed a lot of tending, but Mac liked being close in case something did happen.

Then Mac heard the sounds of his wife in labor coming from the bedroom, her sighs turning to groans, and then to something more mournful he could not name but had heard before. It wouldn't be long before he knew if he had a son. Mac may have gotten somewhat used to holding a helpless baby, but

he had never gotten used to this part—hearing his wife in pain, and the waiting.

He consciously turned his thoughts elsewhere to ease the anticipation—bordering on fear—rising in his chest. His thoughts turned to his life before his family, before he met Abby and settled down. He still marveled at the fact that he was now a rancher and father after spending most of his life hunting men. Mac had been an Arizona Ranger, and he now remembered the last men he hunted, the manhunt that had caused him to quit the Rangers. He liked to think it had been Abby, her soft ways and her insistence that they start a family right away, but he knew otherwise in his heart.

Mac had been sent to hunt down four men accused of beating a man, George Davidson, nearly to death and raping his wife and fifteen-year-old daughter. Mac visited the home where this took place before he went after the men. The more he knew about the people involved, the place and the time and how these terrible things had happened, the more he would know about the men who did it. He was stunned by the amount of blood on the walls and the floor in the room where the mother and daughter had been assaulted. Although most of the blood had come from the father when he was beaten as he tried to stop the men, Mac's heart had quailed at the thought that any of it belonged to the girl. He listened to people give their accounts of hearing screams but being too afraid for their own lives to help, and Mac knew, just as these bystanders did, that these men were ruthless and had no regard for human life. Hunting men who cared not one bit about killing anyone who tried to stop them meant that he—only one man against the four of them—could not give them any kind of chance.

The attack took place in Prescott, and the men had a two-day head start. Mac headed southeast, following their trail and reports that the men were headed for Tucson. Mac had a friend, Ezra Hawks, who helped him track men on occasion. Ezra was half white and half White Mountain Apache, and

so, as was the case for most half-breeds Mac ever knew, Ezra wasn't really popular amongst whites and spent most of his time alone. Ezra did winter with the Apaches because he was more welcome there, and he told Mac it made the winters easier to tolerate. But Mac knew he did not have to go looking for his friend anyway. Somehow, Ezra would show up whenever Mac needed him, and Mac knew it would not be any different this time. The odds of finding these men with such a head start were slim, and the odds of bringing them in if he did catch up to them were even longer. He could certainly use Ezra's help this time.

The first night after Mac left Prescott, he camped in a small ravine below a rock bluff. Mac heard a noise coming from the bluff above him, and though it could be deer moving through the sagebrush, he hoped it was his friend coming to help once again. Mac had reached for the coffee pot as a tall figure, silhouetted in the moonlight, appeared just beyond the reach of the firelight.

Ezra grunted to make sure his friend knew he was not some stranger, and then approached the fire. The two men sat and drank coffee for a few minutes in silence, and then Mac relayed the horrors that had taken place in the victims' home. Ezra stated what Mac already knew: these men would not be easy to take back alive.

They left before daylight to pick up as much time as they could. They agreed they would travel for eight or nine hours, sleep for a short time, and then hit the trail again. They would eat in the saddle and stop only to water the horses. They rode with their bedrolls around them through the night. Early the next day, the two men came to the town of New River, where they learned from the storekeeper that two more men had joined those they hunted. Mac remembered being even more grateful for Ezra's help on this one at that point. The storekeeper also said Mac and Ezra were only one day behind their quarry. Unless the men were riding hard—and there was