



The Reaper's Song

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

Springfield, Missouri

Early Summer, 1885

"He's dead."

"But ... I didn't come to kill him. I just wanted to know ..." Zeb MacCallister stared at Abe Galloway, the man lying on the ground, blood pooling in the dirt by his side. Now it would only continue. The fight between the MacCallisters and the Galloways was turning into a repeat of the Hatfields and McCoys back east. To this day Zeb didn't know what had started it. Now he might never know.

"You tried to stop this thing, but 'twon't work now. You better git." The wizened man scrubbed a lined hand across the crevices of a face weathered by storms of both soul and climate. "Ah knowed no good would come a this." Jed used a dirty finger to close the dead man's eyes. "They say dead men look peaceful, but ya gotta have peace in yer soul first."

Zebulun shook his head. Peace was what he'd been seeking. He hadn't meant for this to happen. Would the sheriff believe self-defense? Not much chance. Too many men had heard Zeb's father, Zachariah MacCallister, order his only son to swear on the family Bible that he would seek vengeance for Zachariah's spilled-out blood. It didn't matter how many years ago that promise had been made, nor how many times Zeb had tried to restore the friendship between the neighboring families. Old Abe Galloway was as dead as he could ever be, and Zebulun MacCallister had pulled the trigger.

Zeb stared down at the rifle clenched in his hand. The desire to fling it into the oak scrub brought his arm up, poised to release the stock and send the gun spinning into eternity. Guns had been used for killing folks far too long already, and there was no end in sight. But years of having his pa's creed hammered into his head enabled him to keep the grip firm, and he brought the Winchester back to his side. He could hear the words as if Pa stood right beside him. *"Treat your rifle better'n you do any woman, for only your rifle will remain faithful to you."*

Today bore out that truth. His rifle had saved his life.

"Yer bleedin', son."

Zeb looked at the trail of red oozing down his arm. "Only a flesh wound."

" 'Twere mighty close."

"Granny says 'an inch is as good as a mile.' "

"That she do. What you want to do with the body?" Jedediah MacCallister, Zeb's nearest uncle, nudged the dead man's leg with the toe of his boot.

"You think there's any chance they'll think he's run off if we bury him?"

Old Jed shook his head. "They knowed he was comin' to meet with ya."

"Then leave him here." Zeb spun on his heel. "Maybe Ma's got breakfast ready. Come on."

"Sure ya don't want ta dump 'im in the cave?"

Zeb paused. "That might slow 'em down a mite." He turned and grasped the dead man by the ankles. "You take the head and I'll lead. We'll clean up the trail on the way back."

Grunting, the old man did as Zeb told him. In spite of the snow white hair, now hidden by his slouch hat, Jed rarely gave his opinion unless asked and had never volunteered for the job of family head, in spite of being the eldest remaining male of the direct MacCallister lineage.

I couldn't a stood lookin' at his face, Zeb thought as they lugged their burden through the thickets and down into a shallow valley. Behind a moss-covered boulder, the mouth of a limestone cave welcomed them with a damp, cool breeze. Some said the Ozark Mountains were so riddled with caves that an earthquake would collapse the southern half of Missouri and most of Kentucky. Zeb didn't much care about the rest of the country. Right now he was only concerned about his own hide.

Why did Abe go for his gun? He knew we was only comin' to the clearing. The thoughts crowded his head while he stumbled farther into the cave, looking for the pool of water that collected there every year. If they weighted the body, the discovering of it might take even longer.

He knew the cave well. He and his sisters had played there often on hot, muggy August days, as the cave was always cool. A shiver ran up his back. Never had he tried to hide a dead body there, though. The temperature changed, as he knew it would, telling him the

pool lay right ahead. He stopped and listened. Only the drip of water off the shelf to the back of the pool broke the stillness.

"Fill his boots with sand, and I'll add some rocks to his britches and pockets." Zeb went about his business even as he spoke. Within minutes they rolled the body forward and heard the water welcome its treasure with a gentle splash. "Wish I could say 'rest in peace, Abe,' but there ain't no peace where you are, I'm sure."

Together they turned and left the coolness of the cave, brushing their footprints away with a branch. Back in the clearing they made sure the bloody forest duff and leaves were hidden, knowing full well that if the Galloways brought their hounds, the dogs would find the trail no matter how well they tried to hide it. When they got back to the horses, they swung into the saddle and headed for home, no longer trying to hide their trail. Speed made more sense now.

The MacCallister hounds set up their own ruckus before the men even reached the home farm. Zeb could hear old Blue leading the chorus, singing a song of welcome, since the dogs already recognized who was coming. The tone would indeed be different for an approaching stranger.

Something caught in Zeb's throat, and he coughed several times trying to clear it. He sniffed and hawked, but that lump in his throat wouldn't be spit out.

He would have to leave home.

Mary Martha, four years older than he and more mother than his ma had ever been in his younger years, jumped down from the weathered porch. Her curls billowing behind her, she darted across the grass and ran down the lane to meet them. When he was young, his ma held the farm together while waiting for his father to come back from the war. After Zachariah returned—minus an arm and a foot—and withdrew into bitter silence, she still kept the farm running.

Today she was cooking his birthday breakfast and, unbeknownst to her, his last meal at home.

"I heard shots." Mary Martha plowed to a stop before them, her skirts swirling around her legs, a furrow separating her china blue eyes. "There's blood on your arm."

"Just a flesh wound." Zeb slid his foot from the stirrup and leaned forward to give her a hand up.

With a grace born of long practice, Mary Martha swung up behind him and settled her skirts over her knees. Immediately she began to inspect the wound. "What about Abe?"

"He weren't interested in talkin'."

The *clip-clop* of the horses' hooves sounded loud in the silence.

He shook his head when she started to say something. "Don't ask. What you don't know can't hurt you."

Jed held up two rabbits in his left hand. "Shame it took two shots to bag these. If'n anybody should happen to ask, I got the hides to prove it."

Mary Martha laid her forehead against her brother's back. "Yer leavin' then?" Her tone said she wasn't really asking a question.

Zeb nodded. "Soon's I can get some things together."

"Ma has breakfast ready."

"Good thing." He stopped the horse at the side of the barn. "I'll be up in a minute."

"You go on," Jed said. "I'll git yer horse ready. You want to take two?"

Zeb swung to the ground, his left arm burning as though someone had laid a fiery branding iron against it. "No sense in it. You need the horses here for fieldwork. Buster and me, we'll make out just fine."

Zeb walked toward the house, studying it as if he could commit to memory every leaf shadow, every grayed board and shingle to draw on in the days ahead. He inhaled, adding to his mental storehouse the smell of bacon frying and corn bread fresh from the oven, oak trees and bridal wreath, woodsmoke and new hay in the field. The dogs whined, their tails rattling the fence. A rooster crowed and a half-tailed cat chirped and wound itself around his ankles.

Mary Martha met him at the door with a basin of warm water, lye soap, and rags. "Set." She pointed at the rocker.

Zeb sat. He studied the sagging porch step and the splintered section in the porch rail. He'd been meaning to fix them, but fieldwork came first, and there were never enough hours in his day to even begin all he wanted to do, let alone finish. And now with the eldest, Eva Jane, married and in a home of her own, the burden fell back on Mary Martha and their mother. How would they manage without him?

His ma wasn't as young as she used to be and older than she should be. The war had been harder on the women than the men. Carrying on was tougher than dying.

How he knew all these things, Zeb couldn't say. He just knew it was so.

"There, you keep that clean, and healing should be no problem." Mary Martha got to her feet and, swishing the now pink water around in the basin, dumped it onto the bridal

wreath bush that sprawled to the right of the steps. As children, they'd made crowns of the white blossoms.

The memory stabbed him like a thorn from the red roses that arched over the entry. Once they'd tried weaving the two together. Only once.

"You go set now."

"And you?"

"I'll be gettin' your things together."

"It all has to fit in the bedroll and saddlebags. Buster can't carry much extra weight, not if we're to make some time."

"I know." She refused to look in his face but spun on her toes and headed for the dusky interior of the house.

Zeb paused in the doorway. The kitchen and living room shared the front of the house, since the family could no longer afford to hire help to cook out in the summer kitchen. An oval braided rug kept bare feet off the cold floorboards in the winter. The dogtrot between the house and the summer kitchen had become the storage shed for keeping wood dry in the winter.

"Set." His mother, hair dappled gray like the horse he rode and twisted into a knot at the base of her skull, pointed to the chair. She used words like pepper—only enough to season. Likewise her smile. But when it shone forth like now, the whole world felt the blessing.

As Zeb did. That lump returned to his throat.

She asked no questions but set the full plate before him and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Zeb bowed his head. *Lord God, bless ...* Even his thoughts could go no further, let alone his words.

"Bless this food to my son's body and keep him in your grace."

"Amen." He choked on the simple word.

So many things he wanted to say. So many he needed to hear. Like why the Galloways hated the MacCallisters to the point of murder.

He cleaned his plate, using the last of the corn bread to sop up the egg yolks.

Mary Martha picked up his bedroll, wrapped in a piece of canvas, and set it down on the chair beside him. His mother handed him a Bible, the leather cover worn from hands searching for truth and comfort.

"But, Ma, this is your own—"

She stopped him with a look.

"Thank you, Ma. It will never leave my side."

"Nor will the good Lord." She handed him his hat off the rack by the door. "Go with God." Her hand found his and clenched it once, then again.

The last he saw of her, she and Mary Martha were standing on the top step between the porch posts, the red rambler rose vine arching over them, as if promising to keep them safe. He lifted his hand in farewell and kicked his horse into a lope. They had miles to cover, and only God himself knew what lay ahead.

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