

THE
RUNAWAY
SCRAPE

A Novel

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Prologue

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Texas was part of the Spanish colony that included Mexico. In 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain, and its territory included Texas. The Mexicans welcomed settlers from the United States, and by 1830, there were four times as many Anglos as people of Mexican origin living in the territory. When Santa Anna, the Mexican president, suspended the Mexican constitution and began to restrict the rights of people living in Mexico, the Anglos resisted and moved to establish an independent Texas in 1835. In 1836, Santa Anna led the Mexican army into Texas to put down the rebellion.

In early March, Santa Anna's army killed the entire force of Texans who were defending the Alamo in San Antonio. Texas's largest army, under the command of Colonel James Fannin, surrendered at Coleto Creek and in late March was executed *en masse* outside of Goliad. Smaller forces were wiped out at Refugio and San Patricio. Santa Anna had thousands of troops crossing Texas faced by nothing but a shadow of an army that Sam Houston was desperately trying to recruit and organize as a fighting force.

Santa Anna vowed to destroy every person in Texas, and he sent his armies ravaging across the state to make good on that threat. Texans fled toward safety in the United States. Many of those fleeing were women and children whose husbands and fathers had died in earlier debacles in the war or who were off trying to help Sam Houston form an army.

During this time, heartless criminals roamed the country, looting and killing under the cover of the war. Even nature

seemed against the Texans: the skies dumped daily deluges that turned the roads and trails—which were terrible in the best of times—into quagmires. Swollen rivers swept away ferries and flooded far out of their banks, creating perilous obstacles for the frantic settlers who were trying to get across the wild land.

This pell-mell, mass, desperate attempt at escape became known as “the Runaway Scrape.” It was the worst time in Texas history.

Chapter One

April 4, 1836

Beeson's Ferry, Along the Colorado River in Texas

I've heard white folks say that black folks can start a fire with two wet corn cobs and a fresh cow chip. I couldn't have started a fire in this wet, and folks don't come any blacker than me.

But those Mexican soldiers at the edge of the live oaks a couple hundred yards away were hugging up to real fire. I don't know how they did it. The rain was a real toad frog strangler, pouring so hard you couldn't hardly see even their bright red jackets. And the rain didn't just start; everything's been soaked in this part of Texas for days. Pa says there's something to respect about every person. Right then I sure admired those Mexican soldiers' ability to start a fire in this mess.

Movement around the point of woods from the soldiers caught my eye. A rider with a string of four horses on a lead line was easing down the tree line. The point of live oaks kept the soldiers and the rider from seeing one another. The smoke from the fire was settling downhill away from the sight and smell of the rider.

Something about the rider was familiar. The rain and distance blurred his features, but I never forget the way a man sits a horse. The man looked comfortable in the saddle, although he held his left leg stiffly out at an odd angle. His horse was at least sixteen hands high and coal black.

Brady McCarthy! It was our nearest neighbor, Brady McCarthy, on his big black stallion Satan. His wooden leg caused him to ride with his leg stuck out like that. The wooden leg didn't hinder him as a rider, though. My pa thinks he's the finest rider in Texas, despite the wooden leg, and most people in Texas live at least half their lives on a horse. His place was six miles down the Colorado River from our homestead. I looked back toward the Mexican soldiers. They would surely see Mr. McCarthy any moment.

I don't know why I did it. I don't care for Brady McCarthy as much as my pa does. The way the old Scotsman looks and growls at me, it's obvious he doesn't care for the color of my skin, even though my folks and I are free. Before I thought out what I was gonna do, I was on Dap, my long-legged roan, the fastest horse I ever rode in my life. Dap and I burst out of the live oak thicket we had hidden in and headed full speed toward those Mexicans just like we didn't know they were there. A hundred feet from them, I pulled up hard on Dap's reins and stood him nearly on his head, we stopped so short. I stared at those soldiers like they were the biggest surprise in the world. When I whirled Dap and put the spurs to him, he took off like he'd left something mighty important down the river.

Mr. McCarthy stared at me for a moment, then melted into the trees before those Mexicans could get into their saddles and take out after Dap and me. I don't much like Brady McCarthy, but he's canny—mighty canny.

Those Mexican soldiers were soon on my tail. They weren't just any soldiers, either; they were lancers, the cream of Santa Anna's army. They were armed with long, razor

sharp lances and could use them like Comanches, which is to say they were good.

But they were after me on my own home ground. Two years earlier, when I was just a twelve-year-old kid, Comanches had been on my neck on this same stretch of prairie, and I'm still around. My pa talks about how good Mr. McCarthy can ride, but I'm not any slouch myself.

Before those lancers got started good, I had a quarter-mile lead. I turned back and shot at them with the short shotgun I carried. Of course, I couldn't hit anything beyond a hundred feet with it, but I wanted to keep their attention on me and away from Mr. McCarthy. Besides, they'd think they were chasing some scared kid.

A couple of miles down river, I topped a good hill and stopped Dap in standing water in a hollow out of sight of the soldiers. I looked back to make sure the soldiers weren't in sight yet, then turned Dap down the hollow into the trees and doubled back the way we'd come. Just before the soldiers hove into sight, Dap and I ducked behind the roots of a big pecan tree that had blown down in a storm. It made a shelter bigger than a man, and I fit under it, even on a tall horse like Dap.

If those Comanches hadn't caught on, I figured those soldiers wouldn't, but I caught myself holding my breath until I heard them charge on past us. Soon as they had passed by, I skinned it back toward where I'd come from, but I stayed in the woods in case someone had been left behind.

I returned to the spot where I'd seen Mr. McCarthy and started looking for him. After a minute, he stepped his

black stallion out of the thicket where I'd been watching the soldiers and him.

"It's more sand than brains ye have, laddie," he said. "I owe ye my hide. I'd have stumbled right amongst them." That was the longest speech he'd ever made to me. He's as stingy with his words as they say Scotsmen are with their money. He still talks with a Scottish burr that I can't imitate very well.

Brady McCarthy is a well-known man around here. He settled here from Florida—a place he called Eucheanna—several years ago. His wife died from childbed fever. Comanches took his two sons. Cholera got the daughter that his wife died birthing. And then he lost his leg. He and some of his nearest neighbors, including my family, had been helping put up a barn for the Quinns, who had settled about ten miles down the Colorado River from him. Mr. McCarthy was chopping down a big white oak tree for one of the bottom logs when the tree started to fall, twisted, and turned toward him. He yelled at Josh Quinn and then tried to sprint out of the way. Folks say Mr. McCarthy was uncommon quick for such a big man, but he caught his foot in a root and fell. The butt of the big oak dropped directly on his left leg just below the knee and crushed it. Before he passed out, he asked Pa to remove the leg. Pa did it right on the ground rather than try to get the tree off and then do it. Mr. McCarthy woke up before he was through and bit a lead ball plumb flat while Pa cut the flesh and sawed through the bone.

"Where's your family, boy?"

That flew all over me. I didn't fancy myself a boy, and I didn't like Brady McCarthy anyhow. I knew better than to talk sassy to him, though. He and my pa both would have whaled the tar out of me for back-talking an adult.

"'Bout four miles northeast." I tried to keep a polite tone of voice but probably looked at him right hard. "Harness on one of our mules broke. Pa was fixing it while I rode back to look around."

Mr. McCarthy looked back and forth down the tree line. "Ye seen any more Mexican soldiers, laddie?"

Somehow "laddie" didn't sound as bad as "boy."

"No sir. Those were the onliest ones. Only ones," I corrected myself. Ma set store on my speaking well, and Mr. McCarthy knew it.

Mr. McCarthy took off his floppy black hat and shook rain off of it. His felt hat had once been fine, but now it had little shape left. His clothes were wool or linsey-woolsey. Most folks along the edge of the settlements made do with a good bit of buckskin.

Mr. McCarthy's clothes had been finely made but were showing the wear of age and living in rough conditions. His wife had made the clothes before her death, and she had been gone for more than three years. The once-green-and-blue jacket was now colorless gray, the pants butternut. Both the waist of his pants and his coat fit real loose. He hadn't bothered overly much with fixing meals since the loss of his wife. Mr. McCarthy stood well over six feet tall, but he looked like Mother Nature hadn't wanted to waste any skin or meat in covering his big frame.

His long, sharp nose, thin lips, and hatchet-like cheeks reminded me of a golden eagle with a broken wing I'd come upon one time. It had flopped around on the ground for a minute, then turned and faced me, its eyes black as coal, staring as it dared me to come toward it. I wouldn't have touched that eagle with a ten foot stick, nor would I Mr. McCarthy. His hair was solid white, although I heard Pa tell Ma that he's only thirty-seven years old. Even after years in the Texas sun, his skin stays way too white. I bet even his ma, if he ever had one, would describe his appearance as strong rather than handsome. His accent made him sound as fierce as he looked.

"There'll be more soon. Santa Anna has most of his army massed at Beeson's Crossing," Mr. McCarthy told me. His eyes never stopped sweeping the countryside to look directly at me. "How about leading the way to your family, laddie?"

I turned to scan the open spaces once more but didn't see any red jackets, although the rain was still so hard I might not have been able to spot a whole horde of soldiers through it. The sound of the downpour could have muffled the steps of five thousand Mex soldiers, but I didn't think the lancers would figure one scared black kid was worth chasing around in this rain.

Mr. McCarthy had four of his clean-limbed, high-blooded mares on lines behind him, all chestnuts, looking as much alike as peas in a pod, and he handled them with one hand and his stallion Satan with the other. I appreciated Satan's power and speed and good looks as much as anybody, but I knew to keep my distance from him. He could kick faster than the eye can follow. And bite! I once heard Mr. McCarthy tell a traveling surveyor that Satan was half horse, a quarter

alligator, a quarter curly wolf, a quarter catamount, and a tetch of snapping turtle. The surveyor laughed. I didn't.

It was only in the last year that I had outgrown the leather britches that my ma had to patch when I turned my back on the big devil. There was still a scar on my butt from his teeth. When Pa and I swam in the Colorado, he always told me I looked like one of those slaves that somebody had branded for running away. I didn't think that was nearly as funny as Pa did. People who never watched horses fight don't realize how they bite. I'd rather be dog-bit than horse-bit any day.

We stayed to the low ground and close to the tree line. About a half mile from our camp, I noticed that Mr. McCarthy had his head tilted up, sniffing the wind like Luke, Pa's old setter bird dog.

"We close to your camp, Simon? I smell smoke."

I sniffed the air but couldn't catch a hint of anything but wet earth, wet wool, wet man, and wet horse. "Yes sir. Maybe a quarter to half a mile."

I turned Dap into the standing water in the bottom of the hollow and rode about a half mile to where we could turn sharp right and come out of the water directly under live oaks. We climbed the hill and veered slightly to our right until we were on a gradually sloping bench on the side of the hill. Pa could always find good sites to camp. The big oaks gave some shelter from the weather and good cover from sight. The tree canopy was so thick that there was little underbrush. The thick cover of wet oak leaves muffled sound and blotted tracks. Before we could see the camp, Luke, Pa's black-and-white spotted setter, came racing up, wagging his tail so hard he shook all over. He pulled his lips

up so that he looked like he was smiling real big. He was so busy being happy that he barely missed getting his head bit off by Satan. Brady McCarthy was one of the few people Luke didn't growl at when he came near our cabin. That had always seemed a little disloyal of Luke to me. The old rascal even acted like he liked for Mr. McCarthy to scratch behind his ears.

Sure enough, there was a fire under a big canvas tarp stretched between four trees and a center pole. The smoke scared me a little bit with Mexican lancers in the neighborhood, but the flames looked mighty comforting. And I couldn't miss the smell of corn pone and fried pork. My stomach felt like I hadn't eaten in days, although it had actually only been a few hours.

I could see both mules harnessed and hitched, so I knew Pa was finished mending the harness. Mr. McCarthy and I halted our horses and looked around for someone. I heard a click and turned to find my ma letting the hammers down on Pa's big old double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. The shotgun looked big against my mother's slight frame. Her smile seemed out of place next to it. I knew from the past that she could use both barrels. So did at least two bands of Comanches.

Pa stepped out from behind one of the big oak trees and slipped one of his big double-barreled horse pistols under his belt. Mr. McCarthy tipped his hat to Ma. I didn't want to like the man, but I couldn't help but notice how mannerly he always treated Ma. "Your lad saved me, Mrs. Foster. I was about to ride up on a patrol of Mexican lancers. The laddie led them on a merry chase before he ditched them." The

Scotsman leaned forward to shake hands with my pa. “The boy’s canny, Jerico.”

Brady McCarthy and my pa looked about as opposite as two humans must be able to look. My pa is not real tall—at least a half foot shorter than Mr. McCarthy—but probably outweighs him by thirty or forty pounds. Pa is ten years older but doesn’t have even one gray hair to show up against his coal black skin. Even with his leather clothes, you can almost always see the muscles ripple when Pa moves. I don’t know how strong he is, but everything I’ve ever seen him lay hold to moved. Pa smiles in the hardest of times and jokes at even the toughest situations.

Mr. McCarthy raised cattle up and down the Colorado River, driving herds down to Indianola on the Gulf once or twice a year to sell the animals for their hides and tallow. Several times he had ventured onto the plains killing buffalo for their hides and made good money selling them to leather merchants. Pa and he had gone partners on his latest hunt. The trouble was that neither he nor my pa could stand the waste of stripping the hide and leaving all that meat to rot or feed coyotes and buzzards. They had insisted on trying to cure the rear quarters and tongues at least. That kept them in one spot too long and raised a smoke, besides. A mixed party of Comanches and Kiowas nearly got them. The hide hunting was abandoned. Pa and I made most of our money now mustanging. We’d catch wild horses out on the edge of the plains, tame them enough to handle, and sell them back in the U.S.

“Light a spell, Mr. McCarthy.” Pa spoke to him as if he’d just dropped by the cabin for a neighborly visit.

Mr. McCarthy came right to the point. “We best be heading out if your harness is fixed, Jericho. Santa Anna has patrols on this side of the Colorado and is massed at Beeson’s Ferry. I figure he’ll cross his army over tomorrow, even with all this water.”

“Where’s General Houston?” Pa asked.

Ma handed Mr. McCarthy and me both a trencher with fried pork, steaming black-eyed peas, and a chunk of cornbread right out of the skillet. She came back with wooden noggins of steaming sassafras tea. “We’re out of coffee, Mr. McCarthy,” she apologized.

“Aye, madam. ’Tis a feast fit for the gods. I admire anyone who can fix hot vittles in this weather.”

Ma bustled off happy at the compliment. I didn’t like her liking this man. Mr. McCarthy turned back to Pa, who was also sipping from a wooden noggin of steaming tea sweetened with honey. Mr. McCarthy stopped eating long enough to answer.

“Iran into a scout earlier today. One of Sam McCullough’s boys.” Mr. McCarthy inclined his head toward Ma. “One of thy cousins, I believe, ma’am. Big strapping lad.”

He turned back to Pa. “General Houston’s in trouble. He’s a general without an army. The fall of the Alamo took all his artillery, as well as those men’s lives. And Colonel Fannin managed to fritter away his army at Coleto Creek and Goliad.”

He paused to see if Pa knew about the massacre of prisoners at Goliad. Pa nodded, and Mr. McCarthy continued. “General Houston’s retreating, trying to put together an

army, train it, supply it. Two days ago, he and his army were at Jared Groce's plantation near San Felipe. Houston's trying to organize and train what he has. Isn't much."

Pa sat thoughtfully silent for a long minute. Mr. McCarthy ate silently. He wasn't a person who was frightened of silent spaces. Pa looked at Ma and spoke quietly. "Ruth."

The two walked away to talk. Like so many times before, I looked at Pa's thick muscles and wondered if I would ever grow up or fill out. I looked more like Ma's thin shape than Pa, except that I'm still a couple of inches shorter than Ma. I'm half a foot shorter than Pa and way more than a hundred pounds lighter. The buckskin pants and blue linsey-woolsey shirt I was wearing had fit me for a year. I couldn't tell that I'd grown a whit. People usually think I'm just a kid because I'm so small. Ma says I'll grow up like Pa. I'm not sure.

People always say how quiet my ma is. She is quiet, but that doesn't mean that she doesn't speak up on her opinions. Mr. McCarthy and I ate silently. He seemed deep in thought. I watched Ma and Pa. As Pa talked, Ma reached up and took him by the arm. I knew that meant she was surprised. After Pa finished, Ma talked. I could tell by the way she leaned forward and tilted her head backward and moved stiffly that she was disagreeing. After Pa answered, I saw Ma's hands go limp and the look on her face soften. That meant she had given in.

She gave him a long hug. I didn't like that. She usually did that when he was about to go away, and we certainly didn't need to separate now, not even for a few hours.

Pa finally came back to where Mr. McCarthy and I had finished our food but were still drinking our tea. It takes hot

tea a long time to cool in thick wooden noggins. Rain still drummed on the canvas. Thunder rolled not so far away. I wished we were back in our cabin with a warm fire.

Mr. McCarthy looked up at Pa in a way that meant he was expecting some news. I hadn't realized that he had been watching them, but I could tell he figured that something important had taken place. Pa stood by and laid one of his big thick hands on my shoulder. "Mr. McCarthy, I have to ask you a favor...."

Mr. McCarthy interrupted. "I told you when you got me out from under that white oak that I owed you a big favor. Just speak it."

Pa didn't say anything for what seemed a long time. Mr. McCarthy waited patiently. The bottom of my stomach felt empty. I didn't know what to expect, but I didn't think I was going to like whatever it was. The afternoon seemed even darker. The thunder was nearer. "Mr. McCarthy, I would like you to take my family east before Santa Anna gets here."

Mr. McCarthy looked stunned. I didn't know what to think, either. I felt empty. Rather than answer, Mr. McCarthy looked his question at Pa. Finally, Pa spoke again. "I'm going to join up with General Houston. Simon here is a good boy, but he and his mother need a grown man with them." Pa stopped and fidgeted a moment before going on. "I know they didn't keep you in the army last December because of your leg. I'll be there for both of us."

"Bedammed and begorrah!" Mr. McCarthy snapped. He stood up abruptly and started to stomp away until he remembered the rain pouring outside the sheltering canvas

fly; then he whirled back toward Pa. “I can still out-ride, out-shoot, and—”

“Outfight me or anyone else I know,” Pa finished for him. “Otherwise I wouldn’t trust my family to you. But the army people said in December that a man had to have both of his legs and both of his arms.”

Mr. McCarthy turned around and sat down on the same stump he had set on before. Ma came back and lifted the pot of hot tea off the fire and refilled Mr. McCarthy’s noggin. She stood and stared into the Scotsman’s eyes as if silently imploring him. Her looks must have melted the old Scotsman. “Aye, Jericho. ’Tis true they don’t want me,” he said. He looked up at Pa, fire flashing in his eyes, his accent thicker than ever. “Be ye sure you can trust the laddie and the lady with this decrepit old cripple?”

Pa spoke softly. “I don’t know anyone else I *would* trust them with.”

Mr. McCarthy didn’t say anything else. He just slapped his floppy old hat back onto his head and stomped away to Satan and the mares, fussing with their riggings. I could see that he was talking to the animals, although the rain drowned out the sound. Pa watched him a moment and then turned to me and squeezed my shoulder. “I’ve got to go, son. Texas is going to survive or die in the next few days. It’s especially important that I be there. People will need to know that we free black folks did our part of the fighting.”

That didn’t matter to me. “But Pa, don’t leave me with that man! I can take care of us.”

Pa turned to face me and put his other hand on my other shoulder. “I trust you, Simon. You know that, but you’re young. And two men are better than one.”

“But not him, Pa,” I argued. “He hates me! Because of my color.”

Pa looked surprised. “Brady McCarthy? No, son.”

“You don’t see the way he looks at me. Or hear the way he talks to me.”

Pa listened to me until I finished. “Simon, you’re wrong about him.”

He held his hand up to silence me when I started to argue some more. “But now’s not the time to discuss that. We need to travel while we can. We may not be able to before long if this rain keeps up.”

Ma spoke up. “Simon, your father’s doing what he must. Our job is to go on away from here so he can do his.”

“But Mr. McCarthy....”

Pa stopped me again. “Simon, we don’t have time to discuss it. All of our lives, including your mother’s, may depend on getting away from here now. I need to be able to depend on you.”

I knew he was wrong, but he was my pa. Ma gave me a hug. Pa squeezed my shoulder again. Mr. McCarthy walked back up. He looked as unhappy as I felt. His tone of voice showed the unhappiness that his words didn’t speak. “Be ye ready, Jericho?”

Ma turned and began untying the corners of the canvas cover. I took the center pole down and helped her. Pa stuck the few loose items into the back of the wagon and tied the

cover down. Ma placed the leftover food in a wooden bin on the side of the wagon. I started to scatter the fire.

“Leave it.” Mr. McCarthy spoke gruffly. “It smells stronger if it’s smothered.”

I took my old shotgun, slung the muzzle down to keep the rain out, and turned away toward Dap without speaking.

“I’ll stay with you until I have to turn north to San Felipe,” Pa told us. Mr. McCarthy nodded without speaking.

In the first half mile, it became obvious what kind of journey this was going to be. I signaled Ma that the wagon could cross the water-covered bottom of a hollow where I sat on Dap. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mr. McCarthy waving his arms, trying to get my attention. I pretended not to see him and felt good about ignoring him—until our wagon turned nearly on its side. The careening wagon yanked our mules around like toys. Ma had to drop the reins and grab hold to keep from being thrown out.

Water splattered everywhere as Mr. McCarthy came splashing up on Satan. “What the devil, boy? Ye be blind? You let her drive into the bed of Tonkawa Run Creek. Up there where I was, you skirt the whole thing.”

I cut my eyes up long enough to give him one glare.

“Well, blazes, boy!” he snapped. “Let’s get the wagon out.”

Mr. McCarthy was still getting stiffly off his horse as Ma scrambled off the high side of the wagon. I jumped off Dap and started to yell back at the Scotsman but felt Pa’s big hand on my arm. “Let’s get the wagon out, Simon.”

I couldn't fault Mr. McCarthy on work. He lifted and pushed like a madman, although his peg leg kept sinking into the mud. We were at least an hour getting the wagon out. When we started out again, Mr. McCarthy glared at me. "Keep your eyes and ears open, boy. We ought to have your mother several miles farther away from those soldiers by now."

I felt like a lowdown cur dog.

By the time it started turning darker than it already was, we weren't more than three miles from where we had begun. The rain had never stopped all day, only slacked to a heavy drizzle on several occasions. Pa signaled to pull under a large pair of live oaks about halfway up the side of a tall hill. It was getting dark enough that everything looked shades of black and gray. You couldn't see colors unless you were real close.

Ma pulled some dry limbs from the back of the wagon. Pa started to tell her not to make a fire lest we attract the attention of Mexican patrols or scouts.

"Hush, Jericho," Ma told him before he said the words. "We all need some warmth. I'll have it out in fifteen minutes."

I never saw a fire look any prettier than that one, even though I could have covered the whole thing with my old homemade hat. Ma boiled water and heated up black-eyed peas. In fifteen minutes, the fire had burned down to coals, which soon ashed over.