



GONE TO TEXAS

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Excerpt

McCain could never understand why the fever claimed both of his parents and sister but failed to take him. Grieving and exhausted, he didn't much care if the fever did consume him, but direly prayed to first finish the chore of burying his family.

The McCain family had come to these mountains seven years earlier after Thomas McCain heard about the federal government's new homesteading policy. Jericho had been only eight; Taylor, his older brother, fifteen. Their sister Sara was born three years later. Ruth McCain, a schoolteacher in Ireland before marrying Thomas, saw to it her family's education never suffered, although no school was within fifty miles of their new homestead. The nearest neighbor lived ten miles away; a strange bearded old man with a dozen dogs that shared his austere shack. He'd quickly let people know he wasn't friendly and didn't want company. Thomas McCain respected his privacy and went out of his way not to bother him. Their reclusive neighbor Hobbs was also dead of the fever.

Ruth McCain had proudly and repeatedly told her children that their father had been a minister before the family's long journey to the United States of America, and if they didn't desert God after coming to this new world, God wouldn't desert them either. Jericho had believed her then. He didn't now.

Though not overly strict with his children, Thomas had insisted they study the Bible and participate in the family's prayer sessions. He'd also taught his sons to shoot - and shoot well. Thomas McCain didn't hold with the taking of human life, but he'd been a soldier in his youth and had seen awful injustices done toward those who couldn't defend themselves.

He'd told his children, "Never back down from what you believe is right, even if you're outnumbered. It's true you may die, but if branded a coward, the many small deaths you'll suffer from not standing up for your beliefs will be your own personal Hell on earth."

Thomas had felt it was a parent's responsibility to teach their children right from wrong, but if they failed to abide by his teachings after leaving home, it'd be on their own shoulders. Taylor, who had always been a little rebellious and a lot more adventurous than Jericho, mostly just heard the part about "leaving home." He did just that on his nineteenth birthday, two years ago. His only letter mentioned he'd settled in a place far to the west. Someplace called Texas.

Although Jericho had desperately longed to go with him, he considered himself more levelheaded than his impulsive older brother, and also knew how much the others depended upon him to help keep meat on the family table.

Thomas McCain, as a soldier before becoming a man of the cloth, had been noted for his marksmanship in the Royal British Army, serving with distinction during his country's many conflicts. His skill was such that Regimental Commanders had vied vigorously for his assignment to their units. The casual, disinterested manner, in which he fired both pistol and rifle with unerring accuracy was well known.

Fed up with the death and destruction he'd witnessed, Thomas had finally packed up his family and their meager belongings and sailed for the new world in search of a better life. Thereafter, he'd hated the thought of killing any animal, but knew well the necessity of hunting game for the table. It was for that reason alone that he began to teach his sons to shoot at a very tender age.

Taylor had quickly become a crack shot, seldom needing more than one round to bring home their evening meals. Thomas readily admitted his eldest son was nearly as good as he, but young Jericho McCain showed prowess of an entirely different caliber. When it came to shooting contests between the three, there was never a doubt as to the outcome. Jericho was simply the best. The best Thomas McCain had ever seen. While as fast and accurate as his father with a pistol, with a rifle no one could out-do him. He'd proudly boast, "If Jericho can see it, he can hit it."

Occasionally, they'd travel long distance to engage in turkey shoots. Jericho never failed to bring home the prize, and had won both of the fine-blooded horses in the McCain's corral. With his skill with a firearm, and Thomas's distaste for taking life, it made Jericho the primary family member responsible for keeping meat on the table.

It'd been a rare event a week earlier, while Jericho had finished up weeding the potato patch, his father had taken the old flintlock rifle he called his squirrel gun and slipped silently down to the creek where he'd noticed deer tracks in the spring. After a few hours of no luck, he'd followed the creek downstream to another clearing he'd remembered from an earlier hunt.

That's where he'd found old man Hobbs lying on the creek bank, ashen, drenched with sweat, gasping for breath. Thomas had carried him nearly a mile to the old man's one room shack and placed him on the bed. At that instant, the old man had opened his eyes and said the only words he'd ever spoken to a member of the McCain family.

"Fever...in the well water...git away...quick."

He closed his eyes and never regained consciousness.

McCain had seen the fever during his European campaigns. The stacks of bodies, their blackened faces twisted and grotesque, would forever remain fresh in his memory. He backed away in horror, brushing at his clothing as if to dislodge any of the clinging invisible death. Outside, he'd paused only long enough to torch the old man's cabin, then stumbled to the stream and jumped in, fully clothed.

He'd frantically washed his face and hands, peeling away his clothing, scrubbing them until threadbare. Without lingering to allow his clothes to dry, McCain had hurried home. He'd ordered his family to stay away from him until he'd scrubbed down more with lye soap. Then he'd burned his clothing.

It was not enough. Within a week, baby Sara was dead and Ruth McCain mortally stricken. Jericho and his father had worked in vain to break the fever's hold on his mother and sister, and it looked miraculously as though the family's two males might be spared. But on the third day, while carrying water from the wellspring, Thomas McCain fell stricken to the ground, unconscious. Shortly afterward Jericho began digging the last two graves.

Jericho stood stiffly, ignoring his complaining joints and muscles, staring stoically at his raw, blistered hands as though noticing them for the first time. With dread, he walked slowly toward the house he'd called home. The blue-tick's eyes followed him as he entered briefly, then reemerged with a heavy, sheet wrapped bundle. Carrying his burden to the graves, he gently lowered it beside a hole and slowly rolled it in. His shoulders sagging, he paused briefly, returned to the cabin once more, reappeared with another bundle and repeated the process. When finished, he sagged to the ground, exhausted.

Thirty minutes passed before the youngster stirred again. Removing a red handkerchief from his pocket, he ripped it in half, wrapped each of his blistered hands, picked up his shovel and slowly began to fill the holes. His task finished, Jericho hammered wooden crosses into each of the fresh mounds. He'd constructed the crosses in the same precise manner as the dwellings had been, and as the one on his sister's grave, impeccably lettered:

BELOVED	BELOVED
Thomas McCain	Ruth McCain
1801 - 1845	1810 - 1845
Husband and Father	Wife and Mother

He lingered, his head bowed, then looked toward the smallest mound of fresh dirt and spoke, his voice soft, raspy.

“Sis, I’ll always remember your bubbly little laugh. Every time I see a firefly in the evening or a bright butterfly in the afternoon, I’ll see you chasing them through the grass. I’ll always love you, Sis.”

He stared at the middle grave for just a moment, then spoke again. “You were the best Mom any boy ever had. You taught me how to read and write, sang songs with Sis and me and even when things was scarce, managed to cook the best food any family ever had. For whatever good I process, I have you to thank. I promise each day to try and remember your bible teachings, never hurt another person, and always stride for what’s good inside me. Ma...I love you.”

His soft voice was beginning to crack noticeably as he finally addressed the last grave. “Pa...you probably never knew you were a teacher, too...but I watched everything you ever did, and from that I learned how to be a man. I don’t remember you ever raising your voice, you never broke your word, and never walked away from what you knew was the right thing to do. I’ll always try to be the man you’d want me to be. I know this is probably the...the...last time...we’ll ever be together as a family. If Taylor had known, I know he’d be here too. I promise you that I will find Taylor and let...him know...about this. I will. You have my word. I love you, Pa.”

He stood, sniffed a couple of times, and wiped his eyes with a dirty sleeve.

“Goodbye.”

Removing the family bible from a canvas knapsack on the ground, Jericho McCain softly recited the Lord’s Prayer and read a familiar passage of the Psalms, then replaced it and solemnly walked toward the barn. The two horses watched unmoving as he opened the gate, saddled the stallion and tossed a rope over the mare’s head. He effortlessly tossed another rope over the head of the mule. Tugging it outside, he heaved several canvas-wrapped bundles and canteens onto its back, securing them with hemp ties, then leading the animals to the front of the cabin, he entered for one last time.

Emerging quickly, his father’s long-barreled squirrel gun was tied over his shoulder with a leather strap, his cap-and-ball pistol stuffed into the waistband of his trousers. Jericho led the animals toward the three mounds and paused silently. Then mounting, he stared down at the panting dog.

“Well, bonehead - you going or not?”

The blue-tick eagerly bounded to his feet, barked once and followed the boy down the narrow trail. Jericho never looked back as the flames began to flicker through the cabin’s open doorway, nor did he notice the smoke lifting lazily into the afternoon sky. He knew where he was headed.