

THE SAN JACINTO CORN

by Diane Bailey

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“LOOK WHAT I FOUND.” Joseph grinned and held out his hand.

“Well, I'll be,” said Daniel, taking the egg. “Wherever did you get this?”

“Found a hen holed up in a tree hollow,” Joseph said. “Couldn't find her way down the river, I guess.”

“Or didn't want to,” rejoined his brother. “Must be half of Texas in Louisiana by now.”

“I guess it's getting mighty crowded,” agreed Joseph

It was the spring of 1836, and hundreds of Texas colonists had traveled down the Sabine River to Louisiana to escape the advancing Mexican troops. Ever since General Santa Anna had massacred the Texas army at the Alamo, the “Runaway Scrape” had raged through Texas like a human tornado, leaving a swath of abandoned farms as families fled Santa Anna's warpath.

Joseph and Daniel had left home, too, not for Louisiana, but to join the Texas army. They both wanted to continue the fight for the cause Pa had died for at the Alamo—Texas's independence from Mexico.

As the camp hummed with the noise of soldiers doing chores, Joseph prepared their morning meal. “Hand me some of that flour,” he said to Daniel. Joseph mixed the flour with the found egg and some water, then wrapped the dough around a stick and held it to the fire. As the bread cooked, the boys chewed on pieces of boiled beef. Food had been scarce among the Texas troops, and the fresh beef and bread—they'd confiscated the flour from a Mexican supply boat just yesterday morning—tasted especially good.

“Not bad,” pronounced Daniel. “Although if Pa was here...”

“...he'd bag us a rabbit,” Joseph finished. He smiled, remembering that past Christmas. Pa had promised a hare and come home with, of all things, an armadillo. “I am a farmer,” he'd said with a laugh, “not a hunter.”

Joseph was the same way. Like his father, he walked the fields, waiting for the corn to grow over his head and thumping the striped green watermelons he'd persuaded his father to plant, drawing incredulous looks from neighbors who'd never seen the "August hams." It had always been Joseph, not Daniel, who loved the farm, and it was Joseph who missed it.

Yet when they'd learned of Pa's death, and Daniel announced he was leaving to join the Texas army, Joseph knew he had to go, too.

"No. You're only thirteen," Daniel had countered, trying to infuse his own seventeen years with authority.

It was not only his age, Joseph knew. He was clumsy and uncomfortable with a gun, like Pa, no hunter of animals, much less of men.

"I want to be there," Joseph said.

"Who will tend the farm?" Daniel reasoned.

"Mr. Petersen will watch the stock," Joseph replied, naming one of their few neighbors who hadn't deserted for Louisiana. "The rest can wait. When we return, we'll work the farm together."

That was five weeks ago. Five weeks that Joseph had marched and shivered in the unending rain, gathering firewood and grinding corn until even his farm callused hands were sore.

On this morning of 21 April, watching officers scuttling between their tents, Joseph knew he would see a battle. The tension in camp was tightening. Two days ago Sam Houston, the Texas general, had warned the troops to be ready for action, and now Santa Anna and his army were encamped less than a mile away. Across a field of bluebonnets, Joseph listened to the Mexicans' bugles call into the morning air and watched their flags waving confidently over breastworks of baggage and packsaddles.

"*Now!*" Joseph snapped his head up as the sharp end of an order traversed the camp. He saw Houston standing imperiously over a junior officer, his burly six-two frame intimidating even from a distance. Like most of the Texas soldiers, Houston had no uniform, and his ragged beard and clothes gave him a slightly wild look. He did whatever he wanted, and it had earned him enemies in the army's upper ranks, but Joseph felt only admiration. Like most of the other common soldiers, he believed in Houston's unwavering desire to free Texas from Mexico.

The morning had dawned bright, and the Texians saw a good omen in the sun shining on the soaked prairie for the first time in days. A colonel made his way through camp, assessing the mood of the men. “Been ready to fight a month,” Daniel replied when the officer came to them. “We're waiting on nothing but the general's command.”

Finally, in the afternoon, a sentry, perched in a pecan tree, reported that the Mexican army was taking its afternoon siesta. Houston made his move. Riding confidently among the troops on his white stallion, Saracen, he said, “Now hold your fire, men, until you get the order.” Joseph guessed the general's thoughts: although the nine hundred Texians were outnumbered almost two to one, they possessed the advantage of surprise and, more importantly, the fuel of rage. Joseph reset his rifle on his shoulder for the hundredth time and fixed his gaze straight ahead, on Houston.

At last, at three-thirty, the moment came. “Trail arms. . . . Forward!” shouted Houston, galloping onto the field. Joseph charged with the other men. With Pa's memory choking his words, he shouted himself hoarse with the Texians' battle cry: “Remember the Alamo!”

Startled and terrified, the Mexican soldiers scrambled for their weapons. Instantly the field became a mire of smoke, mud, and men thrashing to the violent rhythms of gunfire.

Joseph could not say later whether it was the chaos of battle or his own conscience that stopped him. But to the sounds of war, he could add only the shouts of his anger and not the shots of his gun.

Then, eighteen minutes after it began, the Battle of San Jacinto was over. The Texians had won.

Through the night, the celebratory mood grew. Just nine Texas soldiers had died, and only twenty-five had even been injured, although those included Houston, who'd been shot in the ankle. But though the camp was swollen with hundreds of prisoners, the most important—Santa Anna—had escaped.

Next morning a search party returned with a stray prisoner. He was dressed shabbily, but as he was led through camp, an astonishing thing happened. A growing murmur from the other prisoners gelled into two words, uttered over and over: “*El Presidente.*”

Somebody touched Joseph on the shoulder. He turned to see Daniel. “It's him,” said Daniel. “It's Santa Anna.”

With curious Texas soldiers following, Santa Anna's captors escorted him to Houston. Under the headquarters tree, a stately live oak, Houston lay on a pallet. His shattered ankle was propped on his saddle, and his face was drawn tight with the persistent pain and the practiced control of ignoring it. But as his rival approached, Houston eased himself onto his elbow. He motioned for Santa Anna to sit on the only available seat, an ammunition box.

Joseph and Daniel joined the group of men assembled to witness the meeting between the two generals. After a few minutes of terse conversation, Houston pulled a dry, partly eaten ear of corn from his pocket.

“Sir,” Houston said, “do you ever expect to conquer men who fight for freedom, when their general can march four days with one ear of corn for his rations?”

His booming voice intact even if his body was not, Houston's words swelled in the silence. Santa Anna bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment.

“Give us that ear of corn,” called one Texas soldier. “We'll plant it and call it Houston corn.”

Houston smiled, surveying his men. “Oh yes, my brave fellows,” he agreed, and Joseph heard the gentle farewell in his voice as Houston issued a final order to his men. “Give each one a kernel as far as it will go and take it home to your own fields, where I hope you may long cultivate the arts of peace as nobly as you have shown yourselves masters of the art of war.”

At this, Joseph glanced at Daniel. His brother's attention was fixed grimly on the general, and Joseph knew he was thinking how Pa had been deprived of his chance to cultivate peace.

“You have achieved your independence,” Houston continued. “Now see if you cannot make as good farmers as you have proved yourselves gallant soldiers. You may not call it Houston corn, but call it San Jacinto corn, for then it will remind you of your own bravery.”

The ear of corn passed through the circle of men. When it reached Joseph, he hesitated. There was not enough for everyone.

“Go on,” urged Daniel.

“But I didn't even fight...,” Joseph protested, his thumb gently rubbing the kernels.

“You didn't *fire*,” Daniel corrected. “You did fight.”

“Still.”

“It may be a soldier's duty to win battles, but it's every man's duty to make them worthwhile,” Daniel said, and for the first time Joseph recognized Pa in Daniel, just as he was in himself.

“Come on,” said the man next to him. “Get your share and pass it on.”

“What kind of farmers will we make, anyhow, if you're turning away seed?” Daniel asked, grinning.

Joseph smiled back and plucked one of the kernels. “We'll plant them next to the house,” he said.

“That we will, then,” said Daniel.

Over the next few days, during his conversations with Houston, Santa Anna agreed to command his men to stop fighting, and eventually signed an order to evacuate all Mexican troops from Texas. His surrender would clear the way for a treaty establishing Texas as a free republic.

It would all take time, Joseph knew, but for now, he had more important things to do. He fingered the corn in his pocket and thought of home. It was planting time.