

Santa Anna

**Santa Anna:
In the General's Charge**

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Harvest Sun Press, LLC
Las Cruces, New Mexico

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Chapter One

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El Presidente is Dead

1876: Before the dry, yellow days would later settle permanently upon the valley of Mexico City, a warm yet benevolent ochre sun marched its gradual procession across the vaulted blue above in the mid-summer afternoon; while somewhere below a rusted spade, half-full, turned the dirt down on top of an austere pine coffin. A black-robed priest had just finished a brief prayer and closed his Bible. He nodded sympathetically to the two members of the family standing next to the grave—only five people had come to attend the burial, which had every semblance of a pauper's funeral. The priest had not personally known the deceased and was already thinking about his walk back to the church.

On the east coast of Mexico in the city of Veracruz the following day, Francisco Moya waved to Noriega and approached with his usual bright smile. Francisco still had lustrous teeth, the kind that truly merited the frequent observations made in silent wonder by his acquaintances. Unlike many of his peers of the same age, he took great pride in the condition of his teeth and had brushed them several times each day ever since he was a boy. While his teeth were well preserved, in all other aspects Moya was beginning to take on the look of a man his own age. His once handsome face had long ago given way to multiple wrinkles and folds. The glossy black hair of his youth had frosted over whitish gray, though it remained as thick as ever. Perhaps most regrettable was the slow demise of the firm and muscular body of which he had been largely oblivious during his youth, despite the admiring glances from a fair number of beautiful women. Much like the agile, flourishing figures of those vaguely recollected women and the inevitable succumbing of their mortal bodies to the elements, his own virile flesh had since finally gone to seed as well. The progression, or digression, continued from there. After he reached the age of fifty, Francisco had begun to notice how much his belly continued to expand, regardless of half-hearted efforts to reduce his consumption. The additional girth was not due simply to the vagaries of gravity and time. In recent years, with Moya's growing indulgences in eating and drinking, he had added several inches to his waistline.

By his present age of sixty-seven years old, Francisco Moya had become widely known amongst the precarious smuggling circles as a purchaser of the finest goods. Although dealing in smuggled cargo could be very lucrative, it was by design that no man in Mexico knew the precise magnitude of Moya's personal wealth. For many years now his clothing had been kept strictly nondescript, rarely varying from a clean but inexpensive white or blue short-sleeved, buttoned shirt, which he normally did not bother to tuck into his worn, brown corduroy pants, so as to partially conceal that excess of weight. He intentionally gave no outward signs of marked commercial success; and, while he said little to either affirm or deny that particular notion, his tattered sombrero gave the impression he was not a man of considerable means.

The afternoon was hot and humid in Veracruz when Moya entered the church with his old friend, Padre Marcelino Noriega. Once inside the padre's office, Moya loosened the drawstrings and reached into the canvas bag he had slung over his shoulder. Grinning, he produced two bottles of the Bordeaux he had saved from the day's most profitable transaction. The padre raised a knowing eyebrow and smiled as Moya removed the cork and filled two glasses that the padre had provided in anticipation of the pending refreshments.

Twelve years Francisco's senior, the padre was an exceptionally tall man for his age. Born in Xalapa, Mexico, in 1796 to a family of mixed racial heritage, Noriega still favored his European heritage over his one-fourth Aztec blood. His nose was set sharp and narrow under a pair of perceptive but squinty eyes, and his thin lips closed thoughtfully in the shape of a small and withered mouth. His

father had always insisted on good posture when Marcelino was a boy, and the padre's appearance projected that early instructed dignity and confidence.

Through more than fifty years of efforts to spread the gospel, the padre and his ministry often benefited from Moya's good fortune and business acumen. Francisco had always supplied the padre with resources when he sensed a need.

"Sit down, amigo," the padre spoke after tasting the wine. "I've received sad news today."

Moya nodded expressionlessly. "Sad news? Has the church finally come to its senses and excommunicated you?"

Father Noriega paused. "No, amigo, my news is truly sad."

Moya leisurely took another sip of the Bordeaux. By now he was accustomed with and even humored by the way in which Noriega drew out such moments. Moya sat down in an old chair and waited. "Well?"

"El Presidente is dead," the padre said at last.

"¿Verdad?" Moya said, now with sadness in his voice.

"Sí, he died two days ago in Mexico City."

Moya leaned back in his chair and stared at the solitary crucifix hung on one of the otherwise bare walls in the room. "El Presidente is dead," he muttered a couple of times to make the death real. Francisco focused again and looked to the padre, his oldest and dearest friend. "How old was he?"

"Just about thirteen years older than you, amigo. Actually, he was pretty close to my age—roughly eighty years old."

"El Presidente is dead," Moya said again, shaking his head in disbelief.

"They had the funeral yesterday. I was told that fewer than ten people were there."

Both men reflected for a few moments upon this oddly unsurprising fact.

"He was no longer someone considered important," Moya observed.

The padre stared into his glass. "No, not for a long time now," he agreed. "Most Mexicans old enough to remember him have despised him for a long time."

"And except for some Texans, few Americans even know enough about el Presidente to be able to despise him," Francisco said.

The padre did not seem surprised by this truth.

"I've learned in my travels that when Americans hear the name Santa Anna," Moya continued, "they know only of his time in Texas. In fact, they have a famous saying that's repeated all over the country that applies to Santa Anna."

"—Remember the Alamo," Father Noriega suspected.

Moya nodded before pausing to sip his wine again. "I remember when I saw him in his quarters there in Texas only a few days before he stormed the Alamo."



When Colonel Jaramillo escorted Francisco into Santa Anna's quarters in San Antonio in 1836, he motioned for the young Francisco to sit down in the front room. The colonel headed down the short hallway to Santa Anna's bedroom. Just a moment before the colonel called through the door, both he and Francisco detected a distinct rhythmic noise rocking in conjunction with muffled moans and creaking bed springs—all coming, of course, from behind Santa Anna's bedroom door. "Are you awake from your siesta, General?" Jaramillo asked while looking back down the hallway to Moya and beginning to discern the telltale sounds. Upon realizing the source and nature of the noise an instant too late, Jaramillo immediately regretted that he had just called to his superior. Francisco meanwhile managed to somehow conceal his amusement at the sudden development.

The carnal sounds from within the room quickly ceased. Seconds later, a forty-two-year-old General Antonio López de Santa Anna opened the door. He was naked from the waist down. “What is it Jaramillo?” he asked with more than a hint of irritation in his tone. “Can’t you hear that I’m busy in here?” He gestured over his shoulder to a shapely fifteen-year-old girl lying on the bed behind him. She was flat on her back, breasts heaving, and still panting heavily. She was completely unclothed and not the least bit modest as Jaramillo took in the scenery.

“Sorry, General.” Jaramillo’s gaze lingered on the girl for another second or two. “But you have a special visitor,” he explained, returning his eyes to the general.

An impatient fire lit Santa Anna’s dark eyes. His black hair uncharacteristically matted and disheveled above the broad forehead that glistened with slight perspiration, Santa Anna narrowed his gaze upon his aide. The general bore out his words through clenched teeth: “Tell him to come back later.”

“It is Francisco Moya, General,” Jaramillo said.

“Francisco Moya!”

Santa Anna hesitated, looking at the young girl on the bed, who was catching her breath by now and smiling at the men in the doorway. Santa Anna looked back to Jaramillo and shrugged. “Tell him to wait for me while I put my pants on,” he instructed.

Santa Anna closed the door and turned to the girl. “María, you can get dressed for a little while. We will finish this later,” he promised with a wink.

Soon after, the general came down the hallway. When he reached the sitting room, he warmly welcomed his guest. “Francisco! How are you my boy?” He moved to embrace Francisco, who rose from his chair.

“I am very well, General. Very well, gracias,” Moya smiled and produced a Cuban cigar from his shirt pocket. “I brought this for you, General.”

Santa Anna looked at Jaramillo and laughed loudly. “He’s a good boy, Colonel, no?”

Jaramillo nodded. “He gave me one, too.”

“You gave my other cigar to Jaramillo?” His feigned indignance quickly subsided, and all three men laughed.

After a pause, Santa Anna’s expression changed. “Now tell me, Francisco, what do you know about these traitors we are facing here in Texas?”

Francisco tried not to wince. “I don’t know much at all about the politics here,” he said. “I’m afraid I can’t give you much in the way of precise information, General. I’m sure you already know more about the situation than I do.”

The three men heard the light footsteps coming down the hall. María smiled sheepishly when she reached the room at the end of the hallway, and she slid past the men and into the kitchen area. She wore a diaphanous-thin white gown that the men could see straight through. She poured herself a glass of water from a pitcher and admired Francisco, who returned his attention to the general.

Eagerly relishing the scent of the token gift, the general then bit off the tip of the cigar and spit it on the floor. He lit the end and blew a large puff of smoke that temporarily hung and gradually dissipated in the air. Before the conversation resumed, the men paused a moment longer to watch as María’s faintly gauzed figure padded back down the hall and disappeared behind a gently closed bedroom door.

Santa Anna smiled appreciatively at the superbly crafted and cultivated taste of the tobacco. For a while they spoke some more—about family, their mutual friend, the padre, and what was going on in Texas as well—but the general could see that Francisco was uncomfortable with the questions about the rebels. “Well, it’s not critical that I have precise information on the traitors. I will simply annihilate them. These Texans are not very good fighters.”

Santa Anna enjoyed another thoughtful draw on his cigar. Then looking at Francisco and Jaramillo, Santa Anna exhaled and declared, “Recently, I was asked by some of the visiting ministers from

European nations what I would do if I discovered that men that were arriving here in Texas to fight us were brought here with the help of the government of los Estados Unidos.”

Jaramillo and Francisco remained silent.

“Do you know what I told them?”

Moya and Jaramillo shook their heads.

“I told them if I ever uncovered convincing, conclusive evidence that this was the case, I would not stop at Texas, but I would keep marching all the way to Washington, D.C., and plant the Mexican flag there,” the general boasted.

Francisco nodded when he saw out of the corner of his eye that Jaramillo was nodding with enthusiasm. He then straightened and prepared to depart. “I know you are busy, General, and I have to return to the hacienda now. But I just had to see you again. It’s been so long.”

Santa Anna again moved to embrace Francisco. “Be careful who you associate with here in Texas, Francisco. Now that you have been seen in my camp, the traitors may come to believe that you are spying for me.”

“I will be careful, General.”

Jaramillo shook Francisco’s hand and thanked him for the cigar.

“Are you still writing letters to Father Noriega often?” Santa Anna asked, as he readied to return down the hall to María.

“Sí, General. I sent him one in October. It’s probably just about time for a letter to arrive from the padre.”

The general waved his cigar confidently, leaving a trail of smoke in the air. “When you write to him again, tell him I’ll be back at Manga de Clavo before the end of spring.”

“I will tell him. Adios, General.”

Once Moya was gone, Santa Anna turned to Jaramillo. “In an hour or so, send for Almonte. I’ll want to discuss strategy with him later this afternoon.” With Jaramillo dismissed, the general walked back down the hall to the bedroom where his most recent conquest was waiting.

Santa Anna and his soldiers were outside the walls of the Alamo in San Antonio a few days later. The general was positioned beyond the range of the Texans’ weapons and shouting orders from the saddle of his striking white horse. His soldiers fired their cannons repeatedly at the fortress, and the heavy percussion of explosions was deafening. The thirteen-day siege was still in its relatively early stages. The cannons, the surrounding of the rebels by the Mexican soldados to cut off further reinforcements, and the nightly blaring of the brass bands and taunting sounds of *el Degüello*—a no-mercy refrain literally meaning “slit throat”—were only the beginning.

On the last day, after giving fair warning with his blood-red flag to surrender or die, Santa Anna looked on as in front of him another perilous rush of Mexican infantrymen finally succeeded against the thinly guarded structure of the Alamo Mission. Once a handful of soldiers successfully scaled the ladders repeatedly hoisted up against the fortress walls, the doors of the fort were soon pried open from the inside by the Mexicans.

No matter which direction one gazed, it was a grisly scene. Bodies of hundreds of dead Mexican soldiers were strewn around the area outside the mission that would become known all over America as “the Alamo.” Within an hour, bodies of both dead Texans and dead Mexicans would litter the interior of the fort as well.

Before the attack on the mission began, Santa Anna had ordered his officers to make sure that no quarter was given. Once the Mexicans finally breached the Texan defenses, the order was followed to its unseemly conclusion. Those Texans found still alive inside the Alamo were killed one by one by the Mexicans. Room to room searches preceded numerous summary executions, until all of the rebels were exterminated.



In the company of his old friend, Padre Noriega, Francisco continued to reflect on the recent passing of Antonio López de Santa Anna, 40 years after the brief meeting in San Antonio.

“I wonder if his wife was with him when he died?” the padre mused. “No. I doubt that she was.”

“Ah, María Dolores Tosta,” Moya acknowledged. “Now she was muy bonita.”

“Yes. Very pretty and pretty young.”

“How old was María when she married Santa Anna?” Moya asked.

“Quince.”

“Fifteen years old,” Moya sighed. “He always pursued girls that were about fifteen years old. You know, the girl he had with him at the Alamo was also named María. I think she couldn’t have been more than fifteen either.” Moya then recalled the memory of yet another María. “Perhaps he just had a thing for young girls named María.”

The padre nodded wordlessly.

“Anyway, what about him? How old was *he* when they married?” Moya asked.

The padre took a thoughtful sip of the French wine. “I believe el Presidente was about fifty when he married María Dolores.”

“As his spiritual advisor, what did you say to el Presidente when he told you his intentions of marrying a girl thirty-five years younger?”

“What could I say? I asked him, ‘When is the wedding?’”

“I think my first recollections of el Presidente come from my father,” Moya said. “He used to remind me how he brought el Presidente’s family their water every day. He first came to know Santa Anna when he was the aguadero for Santa Anna’s own father.”

“Your father was my father’s aguadero here in Veracruz, too,” the padre fondly recalled. “That was until el Presidente took you and your parents away to his hacienda near Xalapa to work for him.”

“My father talked a lot about those days,” Moya said. “He liked to reminisce. My father also spoke of how much trouble the family had with el Presidente as a boy.”

Chapter Two



Young Antonio

The sandy coastal plains of the city of Veracruz were warm with a dense and clinging air, even on an overcast autumn day. Unlike the region’s rainy jungle climates that hovered near the cooler bases of the mountains, Veracruz was set low and surrounded by dunes and sultry swamps. Yet colonial architecture, the streets and commissioned plazas, and civilization on the whole had managed a fine attempt at domestication by that time in 1806.

Women went with baskets to buy their fruit, young men gathered at the harbor for work and trade, and an older man with a small pushcart filled with several rows of neatly secured water jugs approached the school and yelled at two boys scuffling with one another in the dirt. One of them was the son of a favorite customer.

“Antonio, get off that boy and let him go!” Francisco’s father commanded.

Young Antonio López de Santa Anna looked up grudgingly at his father’s aguadero and complied with the request, after delivering one more blow to the jaw of his adversary. The other boy grimaced and dabbed a trickle of his blood from the corner of his mouth as he stood up. Defeated and on the verge of tears, he immediately ran away in the opposite direction from where the older man had come.

“Why are you always fighting, Antonio?” asked an exasperated Francisco Moya Sr. He looked with admonishment at young Antonio. “You’ll go to jail when you are grown if all you ever learn to do is fight! You should spend more time studying your lessons and reading the classics so you can be an important hombre some day. If you are to become a successful merchant, you’ll have to dedicate yourself to your studies and stop this fighting!”

Antonio looked down and rolled his eyes.

“Now brush yourself off and come with me. Your mother and father will be very disappointed if they discover the mischief you’ve gotten into today.”

“You won’t tell them?” asked Antonio, pleading for mercy.

Moya shook his head. His response quickly drew a magnetic smile from Antonio. “No, my little amigo,” he replied and rubbed the twelve-year-old’s head. “But they’ll find out soon enough how you are conducting yourself, if all you ever do is fight.”

After a pause, Moya added: “If they ask us, we’ll tell them you soiled your clothes when you were helping me with the water.”

Antonio was now paying little attention to the aguadero’s words of reassurance, since the boy had already obtained the promise of confidentiality. Instead, he was thinking how he was going to get another opportunity to administer a second beating to his opponent the next day.

When Antonio’s father finally came to terms with his son’s disinterest in education and in becoming a merchant, he settled for the discipline that he felt was ensured with the boy’s enrollment in a military academy. Antonio was mature for his age and told the admissions officer he was eighteen; in fact, he was only sixteen.

In the fall of 1810, Antonio was at attention and standing in the office of the commander. The commander wore a neatly trimmed mustache and was dressed in uniform. He walked in a circle around Antonio, suspiciously looking him up and down.

“Antonio,” Commander Julio García said with an accusatory tone, “some of your fellow cadets have told me that you are corrupt. They say you cheat on your exams and you cheat on your field training. How do you respond to these charges?”

“Who are my accusers?” Santa Anna asked. “Let them come forward and face me with these charges, sir.”

The commander paused a moment and then frowned. “Your point is well taken, Antonio. Your accusers seem to lack sufficient evidence against you. But I must warn you that we’ve our own way of administering justice in the military. When you return from leave, I’ll be watching you, López de Santa Anna. If you violate your oath of honor, you will be severely punished.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You are dismissed,” said the commander, returning to his desk.

Antonio saluted and left his commander’s office. As he left, the commander’s aide entered.

“Commander?” the aide asked.

“Nada,” García said and shook his head. “He’s much too clever to admit to any wrong-doing. We’ll have to catch him ourselves. He has manipulated, coerced, or intimidated any of his fellow cadets who might stand as witnesses against him. All we have against him is hearsay.”

Both officers looked out the window and watched Antonio laughing and joking with a couple of cadets in the dusty yard.

Antonio sat quietly on a chair on the front porch of his father’s home in Xalapa a few months later. He waited for his father’s response to the announcement of the recent military assignment.

“How long will you be home and away from your duties, my son?” his father asked.

“Just until a couple of days after Christmas,” Antonio answered.

“Oh. . . Do you want a cup of water, mi hijo? Moya brought fresh water just before you arrived.”

“Ah, my old amigo, Señor Moya. How is he?”

“He’s very happy: he has a son.”

Antonio smiled widely. “Our aguadero finally has a son? He must be nearly fifty by now.”

“Pretty close. I believe he’s forty-seven now, and his wife is not much younger. It’s very late in life for Señora Moya to be a new mother, but Francisco Junior was born almost four months ago. He is a handsome little baby boy, and his mother seems to be fine. I saw the boy just the other day with his mother. He will be a fine son, and his mother and father are very proud.”

“Maybe he’ll be a merchant someday, Father.”

“I’d always wanted you to become a merchant.”

Antonio shrugged. “I am doing what I want to do now.”

“Where will your first military duty be, son?”

“I believe we go north soon into Texas across the Rio Grande. There are insurgents who are making trouble for the Spanish Crown. General Arredondo has assured us that when we catch up with these renegades, he will show them no mercy.”

“And what’s your opinion of General Arredondo, Antonio?”

“I admire him greatly, Father. He is a man who commands the respect of the entire company.”

Antonio was soon at the end of his leave and saying goodbye to his mother and father, as the aguadero, Francisco Moya Sr., arrived in front of their home with another delivery of fresh water. Smiling, Francisco embraced Antonio. “¿Cómo estás, my little amigo?” asked the older Moya. Then, correcting himself, he said, “You are not little any longer.”

“I am muy bien, Señor Moya. I hear there is a new Francisco Moya in this world.”

“Sí, señor,” Moya said proudly. “I’m hoping he’ll become a successful merchant someday—now that you are going to become a general instead,” he added, glancing at Antonio’s father.

“I will become a general someday,” bragged Antonio. “And when I am a general, you will be my personal aguadero, Señor Moya.”

“That would be one fine day. It would be an honor to serve you, Antonio.”

As Antonio mounted the robust and young white horse he had recently won while gambling, his father spoke to him. “We’re hearing rumblings that there’s a padre planning a revolution against the Spanish Crown, my son. His name is Father Hidalgo.”

“He will fail,” Antonio said. “Those like him and his friend, Señor Morelos, who are disloyal to the crown deserve death.” He then waved to Moya and his parents and rode off without further delay.

“Vaya con Dios, my son,” Antonio’s father whispered as his son rode away.

“Vaya con Dios,” Moya agreed.

Not far from his prediction, an eighteen-year-old Antonio López de Santa Anna was traveling over the coastal terrain of eastern Mexico, across and past the state lines of Veracruz, and to the northern areas near the Rio Grande with troops under the command of General Arredondo.

Throughout the journey Antonio learned how greatly the landscapes and topography varied. General Arredondo and his troops climbed steep mountain passes and crossed vast stretches of desert on their way to battle Gutierrez and Magee, two men who were leading a group of Texan insurgents above the Rio Grande.

Gutierrez and Magee had been having some military success against relatively soft and ineffective Spanish Crown garrisons. However, matters changed when General Arredondo’s forces arrived in the area of San Antonio de Béxar in 1812. The Gutierrez-Magee rebellion was put down in short order and in brutal fashion by General Arredondo. The Texans were untrained and simply no match for Arredondo’s forces, and the victory was gained easily.

Under Arredondo, Santa Anna also participated in campaigns against the natives in Mexico—or what was then still referred to as New Spain. Similar to his treatment of the insurgents in Texas, Arredondo’s tactics with the indigenous tribes were savage and severe. It was General Arredondo’s philosophy to take no prisoners. Natives who demonstrated resentment of Spanish domination were often captured and swiftly executed during the campaigns. Arredondo also allowed his soldiers to rape, plunder, and pillage the villages after their victories. During one of these engagements against the natives in southwest Texas while on his first tour of duty, Antonio took an arrow in his left shoulder. He was decorated for his injuries and awarded medals for bravery. He would wear these medals from the Texas campaign on his uniforms for many years to come.

Decorated or not, Santa Anna always had an affinity for women—or, more precisely, adolescent girls whom he promised to usher into womanhood soon enough. He was a handsome man with a prominent chin, wavy hair, and a rich and resonant voice. Unlike many of his fellow officers, he preferred to charm members of the opposite sex rather than force himself on them after military victories. His good looks made seducing the teenaged girls of small villages rather easy, and he would continue to focus his efforts on girls of that young and gullible age for a long time.

While Santa Anna was always an active participant in the destructive and reprehensible plundering and pillaging, it was sometimes difficult for his associates to determine which diversionary activities Antonio actually enjoyed more. He was an enthusiastic participant in sexual conquests, cockfighting, and gambling during his time under the command of General Arredondo.

One night while Antonio was stationed in northern New Spain, he was gambling and losing badly for several hours. His losses for the evening had grown quite heavy by the end of the night when he finally pushed away from the table. Smiling weakly, he looked around the table and spoke to the other participants: “I’ll require just a day or so to gather the money to pay off my debts.” The other gamblers stared at him in disbelief, most thinking he would surely renege on his obligations.

As the night passed on and when the others in his company were asleep, Antonio snuck into the tent of the company treasurer and forged drafts to raise the money to pay his gambling debts. Not long afterwards, his crime was discovered, and Santa Anna faced a court martial.

According to the laws and privileges of the military, Santa Anna faced the mercy of his peers. To save his career, Antonio relied on his good relationship that had been fostered with the company surgeon during his time in the unit. Eventually, he talked the doctor into advancing him the funds to cover the deficit, and he was able narrowly to avoid complete disgrace.

Chapter Three

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The Blessed Roosters

While Santa Anna managed his gambling debts, in Washington, President James Madison was busy sifting through a pile of papers. A servant approached, and Madison looked up with a faintly rouged-over, pasty face and a regal gray mane of fine, combed-back hair. “Thank you,” he said as the servant poured a fresh glass of water. Madison then addressed the man across the table, Secretary of State Robert Smith: “What do you make of these reports on Napoleon and the effect he’s having on the monarchy in Spain?”

Smith tilted and scratched his head thoughtfully. His white wig moved slightly. “I think Spain’s influence in the Western Hemisphere has peaked and is on the verge of a great decline, Mr. President.”

“What do you think the implications are for our country?”

“I spoke with James Monroe about this, sir. He believes—and I agree—that eventually it will create an opportunity for the United States to fill the void left with the absence of Spanish influence on this

side of the ocean.”

“You mean we may be able to annex the Floridas someday?” Madison asked.

“Yes, Mr. President. The Floridas and millions of square miles in the west.”

“So you also agree with Monroe’s vision of what this trouble in Europe means to us?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“How much land are we talking about out west?”

“Texas alone covers more than three hundred sixty thousand square miles, Mr. President. That’s more land than the original thirteen colonies combined.”

“That is certainly a lot of land. What of the military situation in New Spain?”

“It’s a strange thing, Mr. President. The Spanish Crown is under the impression that there are many more royalist divisions than our agents have been able to identify down there.”

“Can you explain the discrepancies, Mr. Secretary?”

“I think I can. It would seem that one of the ways that the Spanish Crown has raised funds over the years has been by selling military commissions to generals, who then are paid small stipends to maintain their divisions loyal to the crown. Apparently, there are more than a few generals in New Spain billing the viceroy for expenses related to divisions which are nothing more than illusions.”

“So then Ferdinand the Seventh, or Joséph Bonaparte, or whoever in Europe might theoretically be in charge of New Spain believes that he has a lot more pro-monarchy military power to draw on than he actually has,” concluded the president.

“Precisely.”

“Interesting. James Monroe might just be right about what’s going on. Please keep me informed.”

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1876: Father Noriega was feeling the soft glowing warmth flowing through his blood, and he tried to attribute the sensation merely to the fine summer weather outside, rather than the first glass of wine that he had just finished. Immediately, and to little protest, Francisco Moya refilled the glass. “Padre,” Moya began once he turned and straightened the bottle without spilling a drop. “How did you first meet el Presidente?”

“Let me think, amigo,” the padre said and took another sip. “It was when he first returned to Veracruz from his campaigns in the north against the frontier insurgents and the Indios. He had been riding with General Arredondo and also in Iturbide’s cavalry for a time.”

“He rode with Iturbide?”

“Sí, he rode with Iturbide as a young soldier in the royal cavalry.”

Moya swore. “Oh, sorry, Father. I was just surprised to learn that he rode with Iturbide. I thought he hated Iturbide.”

“No, es nada,” replied the padre with a motion. “I’ve heard you use those words before. And I agree: it is pretty amazing that he supported Iturbide at first.” The padre thought back to the days when he was a young man. “I think el Presidente returned to Veracruz as a decorated soldier sometime around 1814 or 1815. By this time the rebels, Father Hidalgo and José Morelos, had been defeated, captured, and executed. There were simply no more well-organized rebels remaining in Mexico. The royalists had contained all of the rebellions in all the major cities, though the Spanish were never able to completely control the outlying areas after Hidalgo and Morelos.”

“So what was it like just before independence?” Moya asked, much like the eager and curious pupil he had been as a boy.

The padre smiled. “Our first president was Guadalupe Victoria—I remember when Victoria was hiding in a cave.”

“And where was el Presidente during the battle for independence?”

“—Fighting for the royalists. They were pretty much in control of what was then New Spain after Hidalgo and Morelos were executed.

“That was around the time I was serving in a small *puebla*; actually, it wasn’t very far from here,” Noriega continued. “El Presidente was about twenty-four years old when I met him on the street one day. I was leaving the produce market, and he stopped his wagon and introduced himself. He showed me his medals and explained how he got them, bragging about the way he and his men had put down the rebellions in Texas.”

“What did you say to him?” Moya asked.

“I think I was wondering why he was even speaking to me, but I was polite. I was also confused by his insistence on extending the conversation. It was Holy Week, and I had many things to do.” The padre stared into his glass with the red wine catching the seeping rays of the sun. He remembered that first conversation very well.



“One more thing, Father,” Santa Anna said. “I would like your blessing.” He stood proudly, grinning expectantly with his medals on his military uniform glinting in the sunny street.

“You have it, Captain Santa Anna. You have my full blessing,” responded young Padre Noriega, who then began to turn away.

“No, Padre. I don’t mean a blessing for me; but one for my fighting rooster,” Santa Anna explained and led the padre around to the back of the wagon. A restless rooster jumped and flapped its wings about inside a cage as Santa Anna fingered the small bars.

“Very well, Captain,” the padre said. He laid his hands on the top of the cage, mouthed a quick prayer, and then crossed himself. Santa Anna mimicked the sign of the cross, and he smiled and mightily embraced the padre.

“Thank you, Father. Thank you very much. Tonight, we will achieve a great victory with this bird, based on the strength of your blessing.” Santa Anna climbed back in his wagon with his attendant and waved at the padre. The wagon sped off, its wheels tossing a turbid profusion of dust and dirt behind it.

That evening Santa Anna bet heavily on his fighting cock. The bird continued to win fight after fight throughout the squawking din, the heavy, yellow mist of cigar smoke, and endless alcohol. When it was over, Santa Anna had taken the money of all of the other rooster owners in the arena, and his prize-winning bird had claimed the lives of many of their best birds.

Two months later Santa Anna stopped at the town where Padre Noriega served a very modest-sized flock of worshippers. For this visit Santa Anna had four additional fighting roosters in cages on his accompanying wagon. He explained that he had something for the contribution plate, and he told the padre of his magnificent victory during Holy Week. He placed the few pesos directly in the padre’s hand.

“My aides and I are making the trip from Veracruz to San Agustín de las Cuevas for the celebrations,” Santa Anna said. “We plan to attend the balls, enjoy some music, watch the fireworks, play a few games of Monte, drink a little pulque, and, of course, Father, win all the cockfights. Naturally, I had to stop by your parish again, since I now have a total of five fighting birds. If it’s not too much trouble, Father—”

“De nada,” Padre Noriega smiled. He walked over to the five cages and mouthed the same blessing five times, once for each bird. Santa Anna and his three aides all crossed themselves after the padre.

When Santa Anna arrived with his contingent in San Agustín de las Cuevas, the men were greeted with a colorful scene. The center of the festivities was the plaza, which was animated and full of life. Flags fluttered and flew in the breeze. Banners were strung from rooftops, the thrum of guitars and

sonorous brass filled the air, and rockets and fireworks lit the sky in constant undulations. Pulque, the alcoholic beverage of choice, was served liberally, and people wandered all over the plaza enjoying the celebration immensely. Persons of all levels of the social strata mingled freely; and for those with more resources, liquors, chocolates, coffees, and other assorted sweets were readily available.

Santa Anna and his aides directly dove into the middle of the three-day party and joined the fun. To accommodate them, gambling was rampant: dice were rolling freely on mats and rugs, and games of Monte were commonplace for small, medium, or high stakes. When the time came for the cockfights during the evening hours, Santa Anna's birds were superior. They won bout after bout until by the end of their stay the only remaining survivors were in Santa Anna's cages. The more unfortunate victims were already piled high, waiting for their feathers to be plucked and their freshly mauled pink corpses to soon be dispersed on damp, blood-slicked chopping boards in preparation for dinner. Conversely, the trip back to Veracruz for Antonio López de Santa Anna was one of triumph. He had conquered the fiesta at San Agustín de las Cuevas.

## Chapter Four

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### A Change of Philosophy

Francisco Moya refilled his wine glass and continued the conversation with curiosity: "I still wonder about el Presidente during independence. For instance, how did he survive the Plan de Iguala if he was fighting for the Spanish Crown?"

"Aye, the Plan de Iguala. That, too, is a good story. But you have to first understand the condition of the country under Spanish rule if you want to better understand el Presidente."

Francisco listened intently.

"The crown dominated New Spain for two hundred and fifty years before the Plan de Iguala," the padre said. "There was a racial and ethnic order within society that was supported by the Spanish Monarchy—and you still see remnants of that caste system in Mexico today.

"Those born in Spain were called Gachupines," the padre explained. "Gachupines were given almost all of the positions of political power in New Spain by the Spanish Monarchy. Anyone born in what is now Mexico was essentially a second-class colonial back then. Even those of pure Spanish blood but born in New Spain were second-class Spaniards. They were called Criollos and were considered inferior in the eyes of the crown and its officials.

"Advanced positions of power were almost always reserved for the Gachupines. Next in line were the Criollos. After the Criollos came the Mestizos: people like us, people with some Indio blood."

"—But many Mestizos still deny their Indio heritage."

"It's only natural, given the disadvantages," the padre said. "Then the Indios were next in the hierarchy; followed by the mulatos, who were mixed race with some African blood; and, finally, the pure-blooded Africans. The Africans were enslaved until almost 1830," he reminded, shaking his head.

"Do you think your career in the church was affected because you're Mestizo, Father?"

"If I had ambition to rise within the church, it would have affected me greatly, amigo. In the colonial days, the church was also a willing participant in the caste system. A priest's family had to have social status and money for him to get a position serving in the cathedrals or in the larger, better-maintained parishes. Since I'm Mestizo, I began my work in a little village. And though your father was a very wise man with abilities far above that of an ordinary aguadero, the rules of society also tended to keep him in a place far down the ladder of prosperity."

Moya had overheard vague accounts of this structure in society before and accepted the padre's explanation of the Mexican caste system without a trace of sadness or frustration.

“So in 1821,” the padre recalled, “Mexicans were led to believe that General Agustín Iturbide wanted to change the inequalities of this system for all Mexicans. They were easily convinced, since the Criollos, like Iturbide himself, objected the most—and the most vocally—to the caste system.”

Moya followed the train of thought. Though he had no formal education, he had become reasonably aware of the basic reasons why many Criollos led the rebellion.

“But most Criollos cared very little about the Mestizos, Indios, or mulatos. The Criollos were only concerned about that aspect of the system which diminished their own competitive position and place in line behind the Gachupines.

“That was how Agustín Iturbide first declared the Plan de Iguala in 1821 and called for Mexican independence from the Spanish Crown.”

“Where was el Presidente when news came of the Plan de Iguala?” Moya asked.

“It’s strange you should ask that, amigo. El Presidente came to see me in my parish not long after the Plan de Iguala was declared.”

“What did he want?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”



Antonio López de Santa Anna rode his favorite white horse up to the front of the parish just outside Veracruz and went inside to see Father Noriega. It was a mild but humid day in early March of 1821, and Santa Anna was by that time twenty-seven years old. He walked swiftly past the faded and scuffed wooden pews to the padre’s small, cloistered office. He entered without knocking and startled Father Noriega in the middle of his reading.

“Capitan! Why it’s so good to see you,” the padre greeted upon recognizing his visitor. “I hope you’ve been well and won many cockfights since we last spoke.”

“Father, my birds have been the champions of New Spain ever since you began to bless them a few years ago. In fact, I’m proud to tell you that my birds are the primary topic of conversation each year when I go to the fiesta at San Agustín de las Cuevas, and I owe it all to you and your good standing with God.”

“De nada. If your birds win their fights, it must be the Lord’s will, Capitan. Now what brings you to my humble parish this fine day?”

Santa Anna’s smile disappeared, and he sat in the nearest chair with a sense of anxiety in his demeanor. “Father, I need your blessing again, por favor.”

“What is it, Capitan?”

“It is the Plan de Iguala, Padre,” Santa Anna said with fear in his voice. “My former superior officer in the cavalry, General Agustín Iturbide, has committed treason against New Spain and the Spanish Crown. He and that vicious animal, Vicente Guerrero, must be stopped before they destroy our country.” Pausing to think of what to say next, Santa Anna finally concluded: “And with your blessing, Father, and with God’s will, we will defeat the Plan de Iguala and save our way of life and the way of life for the church.”

“I see, Capitan. So you wish for me to say a prayer to God and ask him to help you defeat the Plan de Iguala?” the padre asked, as he tried to clarify the captain’s political views and intentions.

“Sí, Father. I ask this of you because I know you stand well with our Lord.”

“Very well. I will ask that the Lord’s will be done in this matter.”

“Thank you, Father!” Santa Anna said with relief. “I knew I could count on you to help me earn God’s favor. Here, Father, please take these.” Santa Anna held out his hand with a few pesos in it. “A little something for your offering plate.”

Santa Anna rose from his chair with a renewed sense of confidence and walked briskly out the parish. He mounted his white horse and waved to his friend, the padre, before he rode back to his command post.

Santa Anna soon after led the royalist army against a wily and older revolutionary named José Miranda in the mountains at Orizaba, just in from the east coast of Mexico. The young captain achieved a great victory. As a reward the Spanish viceroy promoted Santa Anna to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. However, Santa Anna did not know that another very large revolutionary force led by a Colonel Herrera was already in the process of surrounding his position. Santa Anna had little time to appreciate his promotion—even less, once the head scout rushed into Santa Anna’s tent to deliver the bad news.

“Capitan,” the scout said as he burst in, “we’re surrounded!”

“Rodríguez,” Santa Anna said with a note of condescension, “I will advise you just this once to refer to me as Lieutenant Colonel from now on.”

Rodríguez paused momentarily and observed the new uniform markings. “Lieutenant Colonel, our position is completely surrounded by Colonel Herrera. Our prospects for victory or escape are quite grim, sir. Colonel Herrera has requested a meeting with you to discuss terms that could avert bloodshed and loss of life.”

Santa Anna’s eyes darted around the suddenly vulnerable and drafty quarters while a look of panic washed over his face. His thought processes accelerated quickly, but he regained eye contact with Rodríguez. “Arrange the meeting with Herrera at his earliest convenience.”

Rodríguez nodded. “Yes, Capi—er. . . . I mean, yes, Lieutenant Colonel. I’ll confer your message to Colonel Herrera right away.”

The cool, crisp mountain air filled the canvas tent during Santa Anna’s meeting with Colonel Herrera the next day. Unfortunately for Santa Anna, he felt with acute sensations the perspiring discomfort of his position on that particular afternoon. Herrera spoke on the authority of General Iturbide and spelled out the three guarantees required by the Plan de Iguala: the plan called for the Catholic Church to retain all of its privileges, an independent Mexico to be established as a constitutional monarchy, and equality to exist between Spaniards and Criollos.

Santa Anna listened carefully and contemplated his personal future, and Herrera presented him with a vision of the country’s future. As he listened, Santa Anna looked the colonel up and down. Herrera was about the same height as Santa Anna but was much heavier. His thick neck seemed to bulge out of his shirt collar. Gradually, Santa Anna realized that he would be able to negotiate his way out of certain death.

When Santa Anna later emerged from his meeting with Herrera and returned to his camp, he called his troops together for the first of many remarkable political speeches he would make.

“For the good of all the people of New Spain,” he began, “I have decided to support the Plan de Iguala.” There was an immediate rumble through the troops, which Santa Anna quickly silenced with his hands.

“Representatives of the Spanish Crown and Ferdinand the Seventh care nothing for their people on this side of the ocean,” he said accusingly. “And because of their prolonged indifference to our liberties, I can no longer support the subjugation of our people, our church, and our way of life. I ask for your loyalty and your courage as we join hands with our friends and fight for freedom!”

José Rodríguez watched in amazement. There was little debate or confusion. More than six hundred soldiers, most knowing nothing of the details or implications of the Plan de Iguala other than what they had just been told, immediately joined Santa Anna and switched sides in the fight for independence.

Santa Anna’s first political conversion amounted to, what was for many, a surprising revelation: subsequently, he was leading attacks against depleted royalist troops who, along with the Spanish

viceroys and his former fellow officers, were completely stunned by his duplicity and betrayal of the crown.

Following several military victories, mostly within the state of Veracruz, Santa Anna traveled to the city of Puebla, eighty miles southeast of Mexico City. The purpose of the visit to Puebla was a conference with the leader of the independence revolution—also Santa Anna’s former cavalry commander, General Agustín Iturbide.

Puebla was a city that was remarkably designed and beautiful by any standard in the world. The streets were wide and straight and edged with sidewalks of so much porphyry that those large, conspicuous crystals reflected the sun’s brilliant light with all the igneous capacity imaginable. Often crossing at perfect right angles, the streets were also paved with broad, thin stones forming diamond shaped patterns.

Magnificent houses positioned their stately structures and distinguished the city and much of the countryside around Puebla. Many were immense, elaborate constructions featuring two stories, barred windows, flat roofs, wrought-iron balconies, courtyards, and impressively carved wooden doors. Decorated with colorful tiles and cascading fountains, several of the residences even had water conveyed to them in earthen pipes.

When Santa Anna finally made his way through the city and entered General Iturbide’s meeting room at the hotel near the plaza, both men eyed each other warily at first. They then embraced like old friends.

Santa Anna had always thought of Iturbide as a bit of a peacock in his appearance. His narrow sideburns formed an “L” shape on his angular face, and his hair which combed straight back was wavy and profuse on the top of his head but cut short on the side, revealing his ears.

“It’s so good to see you, Colonel!” Iturbide declared.

“Gracias, Your Excellency. I am honored that you would take time to see me.”

“Let’s sit down and have some pulque,” Iturbide suggested. “Then we can discuss our plans for the defeat of the royalists.”

“Bueno. It’s been a long trip, and I am parched, General.”

Near the end of their meeting, Santa Anna and Iturbide agreed that it would be a wise military tactic to keep the troops away from Veracruz for the yellow fever season. The mosquito population in Veracruz was one of the most lethal on the globe, and hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths from yellow fever were commonplace each year during the season.

Santa Anna again crossed the Sierras—this time to concentrate his military efforts outside Veracruz. However, in early August of 1821, Santa Anna learned of the recent arrival in Veracruz of the Spanish viceroy, Lieutenant General Juan O’Donojú. Santa Anna discovered that O’Donojú had arranged a meeting with a group of colonials from Texas. It was reported by Santa Anna’s sources that in the meeting O’Donojú conveyed the continued support of the crown for the colonization of Texas by immigrants from the United States. After his conference with the colonial administrators from Texas, Viceroy O’Donojú also agreed to talk with Santa Anna and General Iturbide.

The meeting with O’Donojú was held in a government building in the plaza near the harbor. Prior to the encounter, Santa Anna and Iturbide met just outside the walls of Veracruz.

“I have men close to the viceroy who have been willing to share information,” Santa Anna said upon dismounting his horse.

“What do these men tell you?” Iturbide asked and glanced at his senior officers who had gathered to listen.

Santa Anna noted the presence of Iturbide’s assistants for a moment and then continued. “They believe it’s now become clear to the viceroy that the Spanish Crown can no longer hold New Spain. Apparently there’s significant unrest within liberal elements back in Spain, and the battles here are

consuming nearly all of King Ferdinand's resources. O'Donojú realizes that Spain is no longer in a position to make the commitment of resources necessary to hold on to New Spain from across the Atlantic Ocean." Iturbide nodded confidently, and the two generals soon entered the city to meet with the viceroy.

When Santa Anna was introduced to O'Donojú, he faced a green-eyed man with a soft expression and oily light brown hair. It was soon clear during the course of their discussion that Spain was dealing from a position of weakness.

Shortly after the brief exchange, Iturbide, Santa Anna, and their aides and armed escorts left Veracruz. Iturbide rode alongside Santa Anna and spoke: "Your information on the viceroy's position was correct. He will capitulate soon."

Santa Anna nodded but resisted smiling. He was pleased with his sources.

A month later, the Treaty of Córdoba was signed. In the treaty, which would eventually be repudiated by the Spanish Crown, the viceroy, on behalf of Ferdinand VII, essentially agreed to concede all three points of the Plan de Iguala.

The Treaty of Córdoba was enacted, and Santa Anna and Iturbide again departed from the plaza once the ceremony concluded. An aide later asked the viceroy of his impressions of the two Mexican revolutionaries. "It is difficult to know what to think of Iturbide," the viceroy said. "He's a hard man to read, and his motivations are unclear." Of Santa Anna, though, O'Donojú was unequivocal: "However, this other man? He will live to make his country weep."

## Chapter Five

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### The Monroe Doctrine

Inside the Executive Mansion in Washington, D.C., President James Monroe looked up from the documents he was reading and glanced out the immense bay window, taking note of the late spring weather and the crabapple blossoms in full bloom on the enclosed lawn. He looked at his papers again before returning to the man seated across from him.

"If these reports are accurate, Mr. Secretary, we'll be facing an independent New Spain in a matter of weeks," the president said.

John Quincy Adams pulled at his bushy sideburns. "These reports are accurate, sir," he asserted. "The Spanish Monarchy can't control interests so far away from Europe. The insurgency has gained significant strength; and according to our most reliable agents, there's not much of a chance that the royalists will prevail."

"And the leadership of the insurgents. What sort of intelligence reports do we have on them? Someday we'll have to recognize the new government in New Spain. It would be wise to understand whom we'll soon be dealing with."

Secretary Adams hesitated. "We don't have much in the way of authentic intelligence on the leaders of the insurgency, sir. There are overall impressions, but the bulk of the work by our agents in the field has been done to assess the military situation down there. The reports we get are dated, and the situation is constantly changing; new people seem to be in control. With what reports we do have, our sources indicate that this man, General Vicente Guerrero, cannot be vanquished by the royalist troops. Another interesting character is a new man on the scene. His name is Antonio López de Santa Anna.

"Apparently, he's the most treacherous of them all. A few months ago, he was a captain in the royalist army before he switched sides when surrounded by insurgents. Now he fights for the insurgent's main leader, a General Agustín Iturbide."

“This Santa Anna sounds like he’s one to watch for the long run,” Monroe agreed. “And I must tell you that my friends in the English embassy have encouraged me to stand against the re-conquest of the Western Hemisphere by any European nations once New Spain gains her independence. Based on the interests of the United States, I am inclined to declare that particular policy effective immediately.

“Going forward, we should also continue to increase our commitment to agents and resources in New Spain, so we can be aware of any changes taking place there. I want you to make a note as well for your department to constantly monitor the actions of this Santa Anna character. I don’t want to get caught trusting anyone like him. Anyone who would switch sides in the middle of a battle is someone to be careful with. Come to think of it, I doubt that any future president would care to make the mistake of trusting this general either. That could be you some day, Mr. Secretary,” he said with a smile.

“Perhaps. But there’s another development worthy of noting, Mr. President. It seems that the Spanish viceroy in New Spain is continuing to encourage our citizens to immigrate to Texas. In exchange for a sworn statement of loyalty to the Spanish Crown and the declaration of Catholic faith, it appears it’s now Spain’s policy to make land freely available to anyone willing to colonize the territory.”

“Are our people responding to these offers?”

“Yes, Mr. President. They are accepting the conditions, and I’m receiving reports that thousands of our citizens are now immigrating to Texas.”

“I wonder if this viceroy knows what he’s doing,” Monroe said. “Opening up his border above the Rio Grande to immigration may well backfire on New Spain someday.”

“I think so, too, sir. I do not see this as anything but a plus for the United States. Texas is a land rich in natural resources. Already we know that our people who cross into New Spain above the Rio Grande are earning profits and sending them back to their families in poorer states such as Tennessee and Kentucky.”

“Some day, the people of New Spain may well rue this decision by the Spanish Crown,” Monroe remarked. “Imagine: to allow uncontrolled immigration of their own country!”

## Chapter Six

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### The Padre and the General

Old Moya and the padre continued to imbibe on the back porch of the church in the summer heat of 1876. A cluster of palm trees provided some shade for a portion of the yard, but the humidity was oppressive even for the men who had spent countless summers there.

Francisco had been thinking about Santa Anna constantly since he learned of his death. “So what happened to el Presidente after the Treaty of Córdoba was signed?” Moya asked the padre, as he took another sip of wine.

Padre Noriega leaned back in his chair and reflected. “The next time I saw el Presidente was when he stopped by my parish during the summer of 1822.”

Moya grinned curiously. “How do you remember all of this from so many years ago?”

“Unlike you, amigo, I still have the mind and body of a young man.”

“Well maybe you can use your faculties to secure your own wine from now on,” Moya chided in good humor.

“I do use my faculties. I have this wine to drink, do I not?”

“That you do,” Moya admitted.

The padre paused to recall where he had left off. “The next time I saw el Presidente, Iturbide had already marched into Mexico City and declared himself Agustín the First, Emperor of Mexico. El Presidente meanwhile surrounded himself with his soldiers—though I think they were more like his

bodyguards. By this time he was becoming muy importante and was wearing the impressive uniform of a brigadier general. That uniform was very colorful . . . and it was quite an accomplishment for a man of just twenty-eight years of age to rise to brigadier general.”

“That was the uniform with the blue coat and all the gold and silver medals.”

“That’s the one,” Noriega confirmed.



The afternoon was sweltering and full of the sun’s harsh, yellow glare when Santa Anna sought the cover of the small parish with secret relief. He was wearing the proud but rather stifling uniform of a brigadier general in the Mexican army. Featuring a blue coat trimmed in scarlet, the collar, cuffs, turn-backs, and lapels were emblazoned and edged with a single strand of silver embroidery in the finest fashion. The waistcoat and breeches were white, as were his silk stockings, while his gold buttons were stamped with an imperial crown; and the tasseled epaulettes glittered with a similarly vibrant color. Honorably marked by a singular strap with an imprinted eagle, the uniform was finally accented with a green silk sash and yet more gold tassels. Few men could have worn such a uniform, and in spite of the heat Santa Anna looked magnificent.

“Padre Noriega,” he called. A young altar boy looked up from his broom and immediately stopped his sweeping of the dusty wood floor. The boy stared in awe at the splendor of the uniform. It was the first time he had seen an army general in the village. “¿Dónde está, Padre Noriega?” the general asked of the boy.

“He’s in the back. I—I will go for him,” the flustered boy answered.

The boy soon returned with Padre Noriega at his side. “Look at you!” the padre said upon seeing the newly adorned Santa Anna. “The entire country has heard of your victories on the battlefield. And now you are a general. Why don’t you come to my office?” he gestured. “You can tell me all about your success!”

Santa Anna beamed as the padre heaped the recognition on him. Together, the padre and the general walked to the back of the little parish where the padre’s office still was located. Tossing supplies aside from the only chair in the small office and dusting it off with a somewhat oily rag, the padre smiled at the general. “Siéntese, por favor, General. Please sit and tell me all about your exciting life since we last spoke.”

“There’s so much to tell, Padre. I wouldn’t know where to begin. I owe much of my success to you. Your blessings are what brought me my good fortune.”

Padre Noriega smiled again and leaned back against his desk. “I see, General. Let me try to remember when you were last here. You came to me and . . . oh, yes, I do remember. You asked me to bless your mission against the insurgency. You spoke to me of the importance of saving our country from those disloyal to the crown. Correct, no?”

Santa Anna was somewhat taken aback by the padre’s memory and also by the possibility of a vague implication.

“Well, um—yes,” the general stammered. “Father, your memory is remarkable, and again I can’t thank you enough for your blessings and your prayers.”

Father Noriega wondered about the direction of his relationship with the young general and the obvious power the young man now possessed as a rising red dwarf star on the military horizon of Mexico. Noriega tried to search for his next words, but he decided that he already had the respect and admiration of Antonio López de Santa Anna.

“Please, maybe you can help me understand what is happening with our country,” the padre began. “The viceroy for the crown has called you a traitor. He blamed you for thousands of deaths and for destroying our country. He said he counted on you to defend the crown and that you betrayed him.”

“The viceroy doesn’t understand what has happened here, Father,” Santa Anna said.

“I’m not sure I do either, General. You and I have known each other for years now. I blessed your fighting roosters many times, and you have contributed generously to the collection plate of this parish many times. I’ve never found you to be disloyal or destructive. Still I must confess that I am confused. When you left here the last time, you seemed intent on capturing the insurgents and executing them. What happened to change your heart and turn you against the Spanish Crown?”

Santa Anna weighed the padre’s words carefully. “Your questions are quite appropriate, Father, and deserving of truthful answers. But as you serve the Lord, I am merely a servant of my country; and my only concern is for the good of the people. As we fought the insurgents, I began to question the absolutism of the Spanish Crown and the way the monarchy has dominated the Mexican people, particularly Criollos.

“Slowly at first, but then more quickly at the end of this realization, I became convinced that it was very important to the Mexican people that I choose in their favor instead of the never-ending domination and tyranny of the Spanish Crown. Mexico is deserving of freedom from that tyranny, Padre, and this was foremost on my mind.”

“I see, General. So in the interests of the public good you switched allegiance to General Iturbide?”

Santa Anna nodded with a smile.

“Some of the people who attend my parish say you wrote him a letter pledging your unwavering support right after he marched into Mexico City and took the name Agustín the First along with his new title—Emperor of Mexico.”

Not sure if the contradiction of rejecting the concept of monarchy only to accept Iturbide’s self-appointment as the new monarch of Mexico was the point of the padre’s words, Santa Anna simply nodded again and changed the subject.

“Enough about politics for now, Father. I came here today because I want you to establish a parish near my hacienda in Xalapa. I’ve been in touch with the archbishop’s closest aides and have their permission. I am certain that the archbishop himself will support this idea. You see, I will marry someday and start a family. And I’d like you to not only serve the spiritual needs of my family, but I want you to also be the padre to teach the children of my aides and workers—to teach them about God’s love.”

The padre was taken completely off guard. “Your request is very generous, General, but what about my duties here? There’s so much work still to be done.” Knowing already that he would be moving to Xalapa soon, the padre gave the general the opportunity to explain how he had managed to gain permission from the church hierarchy.

“Don’t concern yourself with the details, Padre. The church has many other young priests who can take over here. I suggested and, er—well, I arranged with the archbishop’s aides for you to be reassigned to Xalapa, where I have committed to build a new parish for the church,” Santa Anna said with a sense of accomplishment and finality in his tone.

“I see, General,” the padre resigned himself to answer with a hopeful smile. “Then I had best begin to make the preparations for my move.” He stood up, and the general also rose to leave.

Satisfied that the padre was happy to be under his direct control, Santa Anna shook Father Noriega’s hand. “Thank you, Father, for all of your prayers and blessings. My aides will provide you with anything you need to make the move, and I’m sure you’ll be very impressed with my new estate. It’s not far—just southeast of Xalapa. Until your new parish is completed you’ll of course be provided with quarters there. I believe you will find it much more comfortable than this place,” he said with a sweeping, condescending move of his hand.

Considering the dilapidated state of the parish, Santa Anna perceived the arrangements he had made on Noriega’s behalf to be a rescue.

“Gracias, General. I do appreciate your concern for my well-being and comfort.”

The two men embraced, and Santa Anna opened the door to the office to find his aides waiting patiently outside. The general, followed by his aides, then climbed into a large, luxurious carriage drawn by a team of robust and towering white horses that were soon riding off in the distance and trailed by a small cloud of brown dust.

Padre Marcelino Noriega stood at the front entrance of the parish that he had served at for years and stared down the dirt road. He knew that his life was now intertwined with the fortunes of one of Mexico's most powerful young men. He wondered what was God's plan for him and for Antonio López de Santa Anna.

A week passed by and Father Noriega received the letter from the bishop advising him of his transfer to Xalapa to the hacienda of the general, where the padre would stay until the new parish could be built.



The elderly men continued to reminisce and sip their wine in the shade of the porch. A breeze kicked up, and the giant palm tree leaves swayed above them in the yard.

"I guess I always wondered where you were before you served the parish near Manga de Clavo," Francisco Moya said. "So el Presidente brought you to Xalapa from Veracruz after Iturbide promoted him to military commander for the state of Veracruz, eh?"

"Sí," the padre answered.

"Did you want to go to work for el Presidente?"

"Yes and no. El Presidente was a mass of contradictions, amigo. One moment he was an angel and the next moment el Diablo. He could change like the wind," he said, nodding towards the waving palm leaves. "But of course, I had no choice.

"To even attempt to reject el Presidente would have been the ultimate insult. And I didn't wish to explore my feelings about the turn of events. When the letter reassigning me came from the bishop, I accepted my fate of working in such proximity to el Presidente as God's will. I also assumed—and rightfully so—that as long as I remained loyal to the General, he would not betray me as he did so many others. After all, amigo, according to Santa Anna, I had good standing with the Lord."

## Chapter Seven



### The Fruits of Victory

Once Santa Anna had visited the padre to inform him of his new assignment, the general and an entourage of soldiers arrived a few days later at the customs collection house on the harbor at Veracruz.

Accompanied by aides wielding both swords and guns in proud display, Santa Anna strode into the office of the head of tariff collections without knocking on the door. As expected, Santa Anna was in full uniform when he signaled to his aides to close and lock the door behind them.

"Señor Estrada, I am Brigadier General Antonio López de Santa Anna," he began. "I have been appointed military governor of Veracruz by Agustín the First, our glorious emperor. In the public interest, I am to inspect your books for the collection of tariffs on a regular basis from now on. It is also necessary for the good of the people that I collect twenty-five percent of the gross tariff revenue for expenses related to the performance of my duties. Your full cooperation is expected," Santa Anna said forcefully. "As a courtesy for your cooperation I authorize you to take five percent of the gross revenue for your own expenses. For this, I will expect your unwavering loyalty. Do we understand one another, Señor Estrada?"

“S—sí, General,” Estrada stood up and answered nervously but quickly. He was taller than the general but had a very narrow frame and a fastidious, almost effeminate mustache.

“There are many startup costs for my administration,” Santa Anna continued. “I shall require all but one-tenth of the currency in your vault today. Hereafter, I will expect you to every week deliver the twenty-five percent from your collections—to be escorted by armed courier to my estate, which will also serve as my command headquarters. My hacienda is north of Puente del Rey on the road to Xalapa.” Santa Anna stopped and surveyed the intimidated Estrada for another moment. “Your books will always be available to me, or any of my aides, for immediate inspection without notice. Is that clear?”

“Yes, General. And what is the name of your estate, General?”

“My hacienda is Manga de Clavo.”

Estrada’s eyebrows rose. “It was my understanding that Manga de Clavo belonged to—”

“Manga de Clavo is my property now, Señor Estrada. I am the new Jefe Politico.” Santa Anna paused before further raising his voice with impatience: “Quickly, señor, show me and my aides to your vault. I have much more business to attend to today.”

Estrada moved clumsily from his desk. There was a distinct sense of resignation in his demeanor. He reluctantly led Santa Anna and his aides to the vault.

## Chapter Eight

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### The Merchant and the General

“The first memory I have of el Presidente is a very grand image,” Moya told the padre. He had finished his second glass of wine and was idly examining the minute, mauve particles of sediment at the bottom of the glass. “I saw him when he was coming from Veracruz on his way back to the hacienda on the road to Xalapa,” Moya added.

The padre listened politely, though, he had heard the story recounted by Francisco’s own father a few times.

“When his carriage stopped in front of our little home, my father was still working as an aguadero. It was late afternoon, and my father was just coming to life again from his siesta inside that little shack. I was out front taking stock of my goods—more like a small gathering of cheap trinkets. I had an old blanket laid out on the dirt and was organizing items that I had traded for earlier in the day.” Francisco recalled. “I guess I started my career at a pretty young age.

“The next thing I knew, the general’s carriage had stopped right there, and el Presidente got out. I remember that all I could do was stare at him and his spectacular uniform. The carriage he rode in was drawn by two marvelous white horses—like the ones he often enjoyed riding.”

“He loved to ride white horses,” the padre confirmed.

“I remember how everything about him that day seemed to create a sense of awe.”

“What did he do when he arrived?”

“He walked right up to me and called me by name. I was astonished that someone dressed as wonderfully as el Presidente would even know who I was.”

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Santa Anna looked down at little Francisco Moya with a lighthearted expression. “Buenas tardes, Francisco. ¿Dónde está tu papá?”

Little Francisco was so surprised by the general’s appearance in front of his house that he simply stared. From behind the boy, out of the front entry of the humble adobe house with the thatched roof and

open shutters, the voice of Francisco's father called cheerfully to the visitor. "Antonio! Antonio! Look at you now, Antonio. You are a gran caudillo! How proud your parents must be."

Santa Anna moved past young Francisco after patting him on the head and approached the boy's father. The two men embraced as old friends, both smiling immensely.

"We hear so much about your conquests, General," the elder Moya continued. "You know we are all very proud of you here in Veracruz. But, Antonio—I mean, General—what brings an important man such as you to this simple place where we live?"

Santa Anna grinned. "I told you a long time ago, Francisco. Don't you remember the day I left with General Arredondo to go to Texas?"

Moya's father was puzzled. "That was some time ago," he confessed.

"It was then when I promised you that someday I would become a general, and you would be my own personal aguadero," Santa Anna said with another full smile.

"What are you saying Anton—I mean, General?"

"I want to hire you to work and live at Manga de Clavo, my new hacienda. It's on the road to Xalapa. I'll pay you twice the income that you earn here in Veracruz."

Moya smiled and gestured to his house. "And leave this magnificent hacienda of my own, General?"

Both men laughed loudly. "I promise you'll prefer the accommodations I have reserved for you and your wife and son at Manga de Clavo. My good friend Padre Noriega from the pueblito nearby is already at the estate, and we will be building a new parish near the hacienda very soon. Your son will receive a quality education from Noriega; while you, my friend, will be rewarded for all the good advice and assistance you provided me during my reckless youth."

The older Moya was speechless.

"I must go now," the general continued. "You and your esposa must begin to prepare for the move. In a day or so, my aides will return here with a couple of wagons to bring anything you have of value."

"Thank you, General," the elder Moya finally managed and embraced Santa Anna again. "You have my unending gratitude and loyalty."

"You've always been loyal, Francisco," Santa Anna said, as he also patted little Francisco on the head again. The general climbed back into the majestic carriage. "And for this loyalty you deserve reward. Adios," he said through the window and signaled to the driver with his hands to take him to the hacienda.

Chapter Nine

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Manga de Clavo

"If I remember my history, Father, the alliance between Santa Anna and Iturbide did not last long," Moya remarked.

"I'm surprised you can remember anything I taught you from that long ago, amigo," Father Noriega said.

"My memory is not so bad as you may think, old man."

"No? Maybe not. Well, when Iturbide suspected that Santa Anna had used his authority as military commander of Veracruz to steal tariff revenues from the customs house, he called el Presidente to Mexico City for a conference. By this time, your family had already moved to el Presidente's hacienda."

"What did Iturbide do when el Presidente went to Mexico City?"

"What did *Iturbide* do? It would be better to ask what el Presidente did, my friend. Colonel Jaramillo told me this story," the padre explained. "It seems that when Santa Anna entered the new emperor's palace, he had all of his 'aides' with him. The guards instructed a servant to notify Iturbide of

Santa Anna's arrival. Before Iturbide could attend, though, his older sister, a somewhat attractive but clearly aging woman, came into the room and introduced herself to a very young el Presidente.

"According to Jaramillo, the general was always looking for any opportunity to use his charm for political advantage, so he promptly feigned romantic interest and flattered the older woman with compliments on her clothing, shoes, and overwhelming beauty."

"Did the general's flattery work in his favor?"

"According to Jaramillo, it did. Apparently, the emperor's sister had not learned of Santa Anna's preference for much younger females."

Moya laughed out loud.

"In just a few brief moments, amigo, Iturbide's older sister was completely smitten with el Presidente, and she spent a great deal of her time from that moment forward working on his behalf with her brother, the emperor."

"So Iturbide's plan to recall Santa Anna didn't work," concluded Moya.

"Not exactly. Naturally, Iturbide accused Santa Anna of making a grab for the custom tariff revenue. But that was about it. Santa Anna denied the charges and blamed poor Estrada down at the custom's house, who was then removed and jailed. And despite the fact that tariff revenues had fallen since Santa Anna took control of the port, the emperor had no proof of involvement in the theft."

"I guess Iturbide desperately needed the tariff revenue," Moya said.

The padre nodded. "Things were already getting messy for Iturbide by then. Commerce had slowed considerably after the Gachupines began to flee the country. Iturbide's attempt to recall Santa Anna was reduced to a mild slap of the general's hand.

"You see, there was already trouble brewing for Iturbide in Mexico, and he needed all the friends he could get, especially the friendship and loyalty of a rising military commander. So el Presidente calmly returned to Manga de Clavo with his confidence, position, and ill-gotten finances all well intact. . . . And I suppose that was about the same time when our lives began to intersect, amigo."



The city of Xalapa was a strategically significant place on the Mexican landscape during the early stages of the 19th century. Located 35 miles northwest of Veracruz and 250 miles east of Mexico City, Xalapa was along the Royal Road that led from the primary gulf port city of Veracruz to the nation's capital. When Iturbide declared himself emperor, the road was renamed the National Road. Both Santa Anna and Iturbide knew that direct management of the customs house at Veracruz, as well as the road to the Mexico City, essentially controlled the purse strings of the nation.

Managing transportation and movement from Veracruz to Mexico City was also critical to security. Since Xalapa loomed in the mountains just above the coastal plain, it was an ideal location. From mid-May through mid-September each year, the yellow fever season could paralyze the area in and around Veracruz. Known as "Black Vomit," yellow fever annually killed hundreds of people. It was a good idea for all but the most immune natives to retreat from the coastal plain for those four months.

As soon as Santa Anna became military commander of the state of Veracruz, he forced loans from wealthy merchants and even from the church. Santa Anna routinely confiscated anything he felt that he needed. Using the same techniques he employed at the customs house, Santa Anna began to increase his wealth dramatically in a very short period of time. By taking property from citizens all over the state of Veracruz, Santa Anna became a wealthy and powerful man. According to Santa Anna, at the time of the various confiscations, the items were taken in the name of "the public interest." (The victims of the general's countless confiscations knew the true interest.) Santa Anna controlled the army in Veracruz, and anyone who had something the general wanted was soon made aware that Santa Anna was, by virtue of the troops he commanded, the man who had the last word on what was in the public's wellbeing.

Santa Anna's lately requisitioned carriage rolled through the entrance to his new hacienda with ease and only a mild disturbance of dusty road. In front of the sprawling estate, the wide private thoroughfare looped around a stone fountain before continuing on around back to the stables. Though presently malfunctioning and dried out since the departure of the property's previous owner, the fountain was surrounded by a small, circular flowerbed that was still vibrant and thriving, thanks to the new resident aguadero. White wings with covered porticoes stretched from the main hacienda to the north and south, and the palatial red roof tiles frequently participated in a sumptuous scene of warm pastels at sunset. And everything, every block of stone framing every window, each slab of marble flooring in the foyer, and every spanning league of land, indeed even that approaching carriage drawn with its white horses softly trotting—all of it had newly and swiftly been appropriated by the general. Of course the grand thefts of the estate's new owner were not completely lost upon the many servants of Manga de Clavo. However, there were still some naïve and younger residents, including twelve-year-old Francisco Moya, who was playing with his wooden sword near the courtyard when the general climbed out of his carriage and patted the boy on the head.

“Run get me some agua, Francisco,” the general commanded of the boy.

When Francisco returned, walking as swiftly as he could without spilling the water from the large clay mug, he was hardly able to suppress his enormous smile. He was thrilled to be called to service and returned before the general had finished giving instructions to his short and timid livery man, Ángel Telles. Taking note of Moya's alacrity, the general was impressed.

“Good boy, Francisco,” Santa Anna said. “Your father used to bring agua for my father when I was a boy,” Santa Anna said after a vigorous drink. “Tell me, my little amigo, what will you be when you grow up? A soldier like me?”

“No, sir. I'm going to be a merchant in Veracruz so I can trade in the finest goods and earn profits. And you'll be my best customer, General.

Santa Anna roared with laughter at the boy's ambition and again mussed the hair on the child's head. “My father wanted me to be a merchant. I think I will be a general instead, but I promise I will be your best customer some day. Maybe you'll change your mind about being a soldier, though, if I give you this, Francisco,” the general said, as he took off the sheath attached to his belt and withdrew his sword.

Francisco's eyes opened wide with amazement as he took the general's sword. He turned it over and over in his hand. He could hardly believe his good fortune.

“Do not play with this sword like you do with your wooden one, Francisco,” the general cautioned. “Give it to your father to put somewhere safe until you are a man. It may come in handy some day.”

“Gracias, General!” Francisco said with a tone of utmost appreciation. He stared up admiringly at Santa Anna. Then carefully he replaced the general's sword in its sheath and ran off to find his father to show him the gift he had just received.

Santa Anna grinned for a moment longer at the boy's utter delight before his mind then quickly shifted to the subject that had occupied his thoughts on the long trip back to the hacienda. The general had begun to anticipate a rendezvous with the fifteen-year-old girl he had recently “rescued” from a merchant in the commercial district of Xalapa.

María Chávez was another one of his recent sexual conquests. As he entered the main house of Manga de Clavo, Santa Anna felt as if he needed three things before he retired for rest after the long trip from Mexico City: a hot bath, a tall glass of pulque, and the intimate services of this new señorita.

The lovely, dark-eyed and bronze-skinned María Chávez did not keep him waiting long. She came around the corner of the partition separating the sitting room from the formal dining room just as Santa Anna came through the front door. He looked with joyful lust when he saw his newest servant, and he wasted no time in giving orders. “María, will you draw and heat water for my bath.”

María smiled and knew that she was back on active call with the general's return to the hacienda. She nodded and went to heat the water. María enjoyed the sum of her duties, including sharing the general's bed.

The next morning, Santa Anna awoke with the lithe and sylphlike body of María still in his bed. He nudged her gently, and she slowly opened her delicately slanted eyes.

"María," the general said, "does Father Noriega know about us?"

"I don't think so."

"I think it is best if the padre doesn't know," the general said, making it a point to raise a serious eyebrow as he held his gaze with his fifteen-year-old concubine.

"Yes, General. I had not intended to tell him."

"And be careful how you behave around me when the padre is near. . . . Now you may please get dressed, María, and go tell the padre that I'd like to speak to him after breakfast."

"Sí, General," she replied and climbed naked out of the canopy bed.

Santa Anna admired her silky black hair which fell to just above the dimpled base of her spine. His eyes lowered a little and lingered on the curve of her backside before she pulled her plain white servant's dress over her head. Just as she was leaving his bedroom, the general called after her. "María!"

"Yes, General?" she replied, stopping in the doorway.

"María, you have a body that would cause any bishop in Mexico who looked upon it to kick out a stained-glass window."

María smiled as she backed out of the room and closed the door.

Santa Anna leaned back, clasped both hands behind his head, and sighed: "It's nice to be home!"

Father Noriega appeared after breakfast on the veranda while Santa Anna was taking in the magnificence of Manga de Clavo from the upstairs balcony.

"Siéntese, Padre," the general said and gestured to a chair at the table.

"You asked to see me, General?" Father Noriega said once seated.

"You are happy here at the hacienda?"

"Sí, General. The hacienda is very nice, and my accommodations are very comfortable compared to what I had back at my parish on the coast."

"Bueno. I'm happy that you're pleased with Manga de Clavo."

"How is the construction planning of the chapel going?" Noriega asked.

"To be honest, it's going a bit slowly. I'm also told that building materials are not as easy to come by here in Xalapa as they are at Veracruz."

"I suppose you're right. Maybe you can use your influence to speed things up, eh? I am sure your words would carry great weight with the builders in this area, General."

"Hmm. I'll see what I can do. But in the meantime, Padre, I have a small mission for you."

"A mission, General?"

"That's correct—a mission. I have a sizeable donation to make to the archbishop in Mexico City, and I want you to be the courier to deliver the funds."

"Courier, General? Why . . . naturally, I would be happy to take on this mission, sir, but I have no experience as a courier," Noriega said in a puzzled tone.

"There's more to the mission than the delivery of the donation, Father."

"More?"

"Sí, Father. I want you to ask questions amongst those in power within the church hierarchy. Of course, you are to be discreet in the way you conduct yourself, but any information you could obtain for me regarding the intentions of our illustrious emperor would be very helpful to me at this stage of my career."

“You should stop in Puebla first, Father,” Santa Anna continued after some thought. “Stay a few days and visit with church officials there in town before going on to Mexico City. Then do the same and stay a few days in Mexico City after you deliver my offering to the archbishop. When you return here to the hacienda you can inform me of everything you’ve learned, and you can let me know of the archbishop’s reaction to my gift.”

“This is about Iturbide, General?” the padre asked. “You wish for me to obtain information from church officials concerning the intentions of our new emperor towards you?”

“Sí, Father. It’s my suspicion that the emperor may not be serving the public interests. If this is true, I will need to know the details of the possible treacheries against our people.”

After pausing to light a cigar, Santa Anna continued. “Father, I am hearing rumors from people working for Vicente Guerrero and Guadalupe Victoria that Iturbide might suspect me of disloyalty, despite my pledges of allegiance to him. I must know if these rumors are true.”

The padre was not surprised that the general was suspected of changing allegiances. The padre remembered that Santa Anna had once referred to Vicente Guerrero as a “vicious animal” when the general was serving in the royal army. “You, General, disloyal?” the padre remarked.

“Yes, my friend. I hate to tell you these things, Father, but not all Mexicans in positions of leadership are patriots. It’s possible that the emperor plans to act against me. If this is true, I will need any reliable information that is related to this conspiracy.”

“But why me, General? How can I obtain this type of information for you?”

“Trust me, Father, and let me explain. You will be a courier on my behalf and carry a significant donation to the archbishop. I will also give you a small contribution to make to church officials in Puebla; however, based on what I have seen of the cathedral there, they are hardly in need of funds. Still, it will not hurt to make contributions to the church in both Puebla and the capital city.” Santa Anna paused to draw on his cigar and emitted a long, cumulus-shaped cloud of smoke that wafted over and out past the veranda’s balustrade. “And please understand this part clearly: When you make the offering to church officials in Puebla and Mexico City, you will have the opportunity to convey just how loyal and committed I am to the preservation of the status of the church as a primary source of authority in Mexico.

“You must realize now that we Mexicans have won our independence from Spain, the church might feel somewhat vulnerable to the winds of change, amigo.”

“Winds of change?” the padre repeated.

“Sí. There are anti-clerical movements all over Europe. I wish to allay fears in church officials that I might support such movements here. And despite his claims to the contrary, it is entirely possible that our new emperor is not so loyal to the clergy since we have defeated the crown. For this reason, I want your superiors to know exactly how loyal I am to the church and all of its privileges.

“Once this point is established and the contributions to the church are made, you should be able to follow up in a subtle way with a request that if they come across information from the capital city that reveals any danger to me, then they would do well by the church to willingly share this information with you—so that you, of course, might convey it to me.

“Now do you fully understand this little mission, Father?”

Father Noriega’s eyebrows involuntarily lifted high on his forehead. He realized that he had just become a spy for Santa Anna. Noriega searched every crevice of his mind looking for the words to say that might convince the general that he had selected the wrong man. A failing moment passed—and with it the opportunity. Father Noriega soon recognized that the general’s decision was made. “Yes, General, I understand,” Noriega managed to whisper. Noriega then offered a hesitant question. “But, General, what about my new parish here in Xalapa?”

“Don’t worry, my friend,” Santa Anna said with reassurance. “Construction will begin shortly, and I will do all that I can to accelerate the process. This mission of yours is only temporary, Padre. I promise: you’ll be saving souls again in no time.

“And one more thing, Father. I want you to talk to the aguadero, Moya, and tell him that I’ve asked you to take little Francisco with you on your trip to the capital.”

“Take the boy?”

Santa Anna nodded. “He will be a man soon, and I have come to like him. He needs a better awareness of the country in which he lives. It will be good for him to see our capital and meet the church officials there.”

“Yes, General,” Noriega replied with more than a little apprehension. He was suddenly conscious that not only was he headed for Mexico City as a spy for Santa Anna, but now he would be responsible for a twelve-year-old boy. The padre loved Francisco as much as any of the other children at the hacienda, but Noriega was still continuously shaking his head when he returned to his quarters. He was not looking forward to being a full-time babysitter.

Chapter Ten

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Serving the Lord in Puebla

The following morning, with a worn second-hand trunk packed for the trip to Mexico City, Father Noriega left the hacienda with little Francisco riding next to him in the mule-drawn wagon.

“I should have put a curse on that first rooster,” Noriega muttered to himself, as he headed away from Manga de Clavo for the National Road. He had no idea how to care for a child twenty-four hours a day, let alone how to act as an emissary.

Just west of Santa Anna’s hacienda, the city of Xalapa sat on the eastern edge of the Eastern Sierras, or Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range. The road from Xalapa to Puebla involved mostly mountain travel on steep ascending and descending mountain paths. The old aboriginal trails in the mountains above the coastal plains had been widened into rough but passable roads during the colonial period by the Spanish Crown. However, the condition of the road quickly began to deteriorate soon after independence.

The trip was tedious, bumpy, and rugged. It rained frequently on Father Noriega and young Moya. When the rain was particularly hard, they would pull off the side of the road and stop under the trees, but the rain was often so heavy that it poured straight off the branches and leaves. On a couple of occasions, the padre was forced to use the tarp in the wagon to keep the heavy downpour off himself and his younger companion.

Huge rocks appeared repeatedly in the middle of the National Road on which they traveled. Having rolled off higher ground during the process of natural erosion, these rocks were dangerous to travelers. Noriega had to ease the wheels of the wagon past huge boulders by slowing the mule or walking the almost somnolent, weary creature around the boulders by hand. Sometimes both the priest and the boy had to get out of the wagon and roll the boulders out of the way.

The passing was so narrow at one point on the winding cliff route that they had to push an impeding boulder over the edge. The two travelers watched and listened to the rock fall and shatter below into surprisingly brittle shards. An eerie but natural silence ensued, broken only by the boy’s rather routine question: “Padre, are we almost there?”

Eventually, the road left the mountains and turned to the foothills, and this change near the end of the journey made the balance of the travel a bit easier. During the trip, young Francisco Moya had quickly learned that the defining characteristic of Mexico’s geography was mountainous.

The money Father Noriega took to Puebla and Mexico City to donate to the church was hidden in two different boxes that were nailed to the underside of the wagon. The money was hidden because there were often banditos along the road from Xalapa to Mexico City. The route from Mexico City through Puebla, Xalapa, and on to the coast of Veracruz was heavily traveled. With the money carefully stashed underneath the buckboard, any highwaymen who might intercept the priest and the boy on their journey would come away with only a few pesos from the padre's personal trunk. Santa Anna had thought about sending Father Noriega with bodyguards on the journey, but he felt that the presence of guards would compromise the padre's ability to gather information. Though anything was possible, it was unlikely that bandits would tip over the wagon or hurt a padre traveling with a young boy.

Almost a week later Father Noriega and the twelve-year-old Moya finally arrived in Puebla. When they entered the city, they encountered a place that looked more European than any other Mexican city.

The church community in Puebla was quite large during the colonial period, and Puebla had in fact been described by some observers as a city of mostly priests, monks, and nuns. While that description might have been a slight exaggeration, the number of those men and women working for the church in Puebla represented easily the highest ratio of clergy-affiliated to non-clergy-affiliated workers in all of Mexico. Even to the casual observer it was obvious that no expense was spared for church facilities in Puebla.

The cathedral in Puebla was chiefly spectacular. Built high on a stone platform, the designers wanted to project the awesome status and authority of the Catholic institution; clearly, they desired such impressions to be felt far below, at street level. Accordingly, the towers of the cathedral soared about two hundred feet in the air. The cathedral reflected an intimidation-oriented approach to ecclesiastic architecture. The interior of the Puebla cathedral was extravagant beyond anything little Francisco Moya had ever seen, surpassing even the ornate cathedral at Veracruz. When Francisco first entered the structure, he was slack-jawed and dumbfounded by the absolute beauty of the interior, which was comprised of the finest quality materials of stained glass, intricately arrayed stones and tiles, immense glossy murals, and sleek, lacquered pews.

Even Father Noriega was amazed. He had visited the cathedral briefly during the period when he received his seminary training. However, now that he had spent a few years in abject poverty in one of the many humble parishes to which many of the Mestizo priests were assigned, he was astonished at the contrast in living standards among the servants of the Lord in the villages versus their well-connected brethren in places like the cathedral in Puebla.

At his leisure, Bishop Martínez eventually greeted Noriega and young Moya after one of his aides had screened the two visitors from Xalapa. The son of Gachupín parents, the bishop was a bald, short, and paunchy man in his late fifties and had the look of one who had never worked a hard day in his life. His plump hands were well-oiled and manicured, and he wore a gem-studded cross around his neck. Considering his age, his face was remarkably firm and devoid of weathering or signs of sun damage.

Once inside Bishop Martínez's private office, Noriega presented the bishop with the general's offering. After reaching the outskirts of Puebla, Noriega had removed the box containing Santa Anna's gift from underneath the wagon.

"General Santa Anna told me to send his regards along with this small token of his appreciation for everything the church has done here in Puebla, Your Grace," Noriega said and tendered the gift.

The bishop accepted the offering with little expression and made a quick note of the approximate amount enclosed when he lifted the lid of the box. The amount was not exceedingly significant, particularly in light of the wealth possessed by the church leader in Puebla. However, offerings were always welcome.

"Please give our thanks to the general," the bishop managed with a polite smile.

Noriega nodded.

“I’m curious, Father,” the bishop said, as he placed the offering on his desk, “we hear that Santa Anna is quite fond of you—that he’s even arranged with the archbishop to fund the building of a new parish for you near his new hacienda outside Xalapa. Is this true?”

“Sí, Your Grace,” Noriega answered with as much humility as he could muster, though his eyes were searching Martínez’s overall demeanor for clues about the bishop’s attitude concerning his close relationship with Santa Anna.

“Such news is always good to hear, Father. The church hierarchy has been very concerned with the implications of the revolution and Mexican independence. We were not nearly as enthusiastic about the actions against the viceroy and the crown as some of our priests serving in the smaller towns and villages.”

Noriega nodded spontaneously again. As he did, Noriega began to realize that the more and more he found himself in the presence of such authoritative figures as Santa Anna and his formerly, rarely seen superiors in the church, the more practiced he became at this compulsive nodding.

He quickly caught himself in the midst of this mechanical response, though, and saw that the bishop was now eyeing Father Noriega carefully and waiting for him to reply.

“Your Grace, I do acknowledge that some of the padres in the poorer parishes had sympathies for independence,” he began. “But, Your Grace, please understand that I have no political views whatsoever. My only interest is in doing God’s work,” the padre said honestly.

“That’s a very good attitude to have, Father, and pleasing for me to hear. As you know, the political views of the church are developed far away from the rural areas. Frankly, priests have no business originating any sort of political views. Our only mission is to spread the gospel and tend to our flocks. But it’s still important for the church to protect its interests.

“And the news you bring is good, Father. I’ve spoken with the archbishop several times since the coronation of our new emperor. It appears that the standing of the church in newly independent Mexico has emerged intact from the specter of political revolution. In fact, perhaps the church is stronger than ever, though we are naturally concerned with the stability of the new government. Should a vicious rebel such as Vicente Guerrero assume a leadership position in Mexico, we have a sense that he would not hesitate to strip the church to the bone,” he concluded, shaking his head.

Noriega weighed the bishop’s words with care. He was surprised at the outspoken and blunt explanations provided by the bishop. Father Noriega then spoke but made sure that he looked the bishop in the eyes. “I believe this offering from the general is intended to provide assurance that the church has nothing to fear from Antonio López de Santa Anna.”

“That may be, Father,” the bishop said and glanced down at the general’s modest offering. “But I would remind you that Santa Anna appeared to be a loyal general in the royal army not long ago. We hear that when he was cornered by the revolutionaries at Orizaba, the general seemed to experience a convenient philosophical conversion towards the views of his opponents. Maybe your good friend, the general, might have another such experience if he was faced with a similar situation that made loyalty to the church—how shall we say this delicately, Father—*inconvenient*?”

“Perhaps,” Noriega conceded, not wanting to debate with his superior on this point.

“Tell me, Father,” the bishop said, as he rose and indicated the meeting was coming to an end. “How do you feel about this ambitious general, Antonio López de Santa Anna?”

“I can’t help but like him, Your Grace.”

“Really? Even with his penchant for blowing with each political gust of wind and putting his own ambitions and personal interests above all else?”

“Sí, Your Grace, but I still like him,” Noriega confirmed and felt an inexplicable and strange sense of loyalty to Santa Anna coming over him.

“Can you say why you are so fond of this man?”

“Well, Your Grace, . . . during the course of my service as a priest, I’ve grown older and had experiences with many different people in Mexico City, Xalapa, Veracruz, and now even here in Puebla.” Noriega glanced around the walls and at the opulent and ornate decorations of the cathedral. “I suppose I’ve come to the conclusion that maybe there is a little bit of Santa Anna in all of us.”

The bishop was a very perceptive man and twitched involuntarily at the implications of the padre’s words.

“Perhaps, Father,” Bishop Martínez spoke rather stiffly.

Noriega instantly realized he should have held his tongue. He knew that he could not take back what he had said, but he was relieved when the bishop did not seem mortally offended by the vague insinuation.

Waving at his aide, who quickly came to the bishop’s service, the bishop spoke authoritatively: “Father Sánchez, this is Father Noriega from Veracruz. Please see to it that he is provided shelter at the monastery for as long as he stays. Father Noriega has served the church well in his modest parish at Veracruz; so well, in fact, that General Santa Anna is building a new parish for him near his new hacienda at Xalapa.”

“Impressive, Padre,” responded Father Sánchez, a middle-aged priest who also looked remarkably soft and well-fed in his current position.

“Please make sure that Father Noriega and his young friend are comfortable during their stay.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Father Sánchez replied, leading Noriega to the rear of the cathedral, where Francisco was found eating a fruit-filled pastry.

The monastery where Noriega and Francisco were taken for their stay in Puebla was luxurious. The monks there enjoyed the unpaid services of local indigenous servants who seemed to take care of the clergy’s every want and need. Both Francisco and Noriega were given their own rooms. Unlike some of the rural homes where they stayed on the way to Puebla and slept in beds made of nothing more than boards or sticks tied together, their beds at the monastery had comfortable mattresses and soft linens.

The Indian servants drew hot baths for both Noriega and young Moya soon after their arrival. Francisco’s interest in soaking in the heated water was limited; and after a quick bath, he put on a fresh change of clothes and left with a nun to the kitchen.

Father Noriega remained in his tub in the large, empty bathing hall until the water cooled to room temperature and his skin had shriveled on his fingers and toes. As the padre was about to get out of the tub and dry off, he heard the echo of the door opening and the ensuing footsteps before Father Sánchez spoke. “Hello, Father Noriega. I hope you are enjoying your bath.”

“Sí, Padre.”

“Good. . . . Eh, I wanted to ask you something. I was wondering about your little friend. What is the story behind the boy?”

“Oh? Well he has no brothers or sisters, and his father is Santa Anna’s aguadero from many years ago,” Noriega said, as he dried himself off with a towel that Sánchez offered him. “General Santa Anna hired the boy’s father not long after he acquired his new hacienda. The boy and his mother and father live at the hacienda, and the boy’s father takes care of the water and the gardens for the general. Little Francisco came along late, and his mother and father are relatively old. By the time Francisco was born, they were an aging and childless couple who had given up on their own fertility. Their health is already beginning to fail.”

“I see. Then you and the boy do not have a special relationship?”

“No—I would say that we do. I’m also very fond of the boy’s father and mother. General Santa Anna has gown fond of the boy, too.”

Father Sánchez smiled.

“But it was the general’s request that he make this trip with me. The general treats the boy like a nephew. Santa Anna wanted me to begin the process of Francisco’s education about things outside Veracruz and Xalapa. So I guess that is sort of special,” Noriega said before pausing. Finally, the meaning in Father Sánchez’s question struck him. Noriega hesitated and scrutinized Sánchez. “You are not asking me what I think you are asking me, Father Sánchez,” Noriega said with more than a wisp of offense.

“Father, I assure you I meant no offense whatsoever. Let me try to explain.”

Father Noriega calmed a bit and waited.

“Umm, you see,” Father Sánchez flustered, “Bishop Martínez told me to make sure that you want for nothing during your stay here in Puebla, Father. My job is to determine—well, to determine your preferences, whatever they may be. And you are traveling with a young boy, and I didn’t know the story behind the boy—”

“—There is no story behind the boy, Father Sánchez; no story other than what I’ve told you. Now this conversation is beginning to offend me, Father. I think it would be best that we change the subject.”

“I understand. Well then, let us see now. In that case, you should know that we do have a number of señoritas available for you. Do you prefer an older or younger one?” Sánchez asked with a smile.

“Father Sánchez!” Noriega exploded. “Have you no honor? What in heaven and earth is the matter with you? I do not prefer either! Years ago when I made my vows of celibacy, I weighed the demands of the sacrifice carefully. When I took those vows, Father, I took them seriously.” Noriega shook his head in disbelief while Sánchez stared on in dumb silence. “Having been in conversation with you for the last few minutes, I now have some serious doubts about the church commitment to keeping the sacred vows, at least here in Puebla.”

Sánchez remained silent.

Noriega shrugged. “Perhaps the problem is mine. I’m just a simple village cura, Father. While personally I am stunned that you would offer to assist me in the process of breaking of my vows, perhaps I should not be.”

Sánchez hung his head and looked at the floor instead of at Father Noriega.

“However, from this moment forward,” Noriega continued, “I will thank you to terminate discussion of any arrangements you might make on my behalf.

Sánchez looked up and nodded.

“My *preference* is to not break my vows. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Sánchez said with a stunned look on his face. “Of course, Father, you are right, and I apologize. And, um, if you’ll excuse me, Padre, I have a few matters to attend to. If you want—er, um—I mean if you need. . . . Well, if I can do anything to make the balance of your stay more comfortable, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

Noriega nodded silently.

Hurriedly, Father Sánchez left the bathing room of the monastery. Still shaking his head in dismay, Noriega finished drying himself off.

Father Noriega met with several of the monks and nuns at the monastery during his stay in Puebla. Next door to his room lived a Brother Domínguez, who struck Noriega as a very friendly, handsome man with his strong square jaw, pale blue eyes, and full head of dark blond hair. The first night Noriega was at the monastery, he met Domínguez in the wide hallway at close to midnight. Looking for a late night drink of water, Noriega was wandering around the quiet monastery when Domínguez returned from somewhere outside the building. After a brief exchange of whispers, Domínguez led him to a large pitcher of fresh water.

Once Noriega had quenched his thirst, he looked in on Francisco’s room and found the boy sleeping soundly. He then returned to his room. Moments later he heard a door open and close far down the

hallway, followed by what he thought was the sound of the door opening and closing to Brother Domínguez's room.

Noriega had drifted off to sleep for a few minutes when he suddenly woke up to hear an intermittent pounding emanating from Brother Domínguez's room. Noriega soon heard the muffled sounds of a woman crying—in ecstasy.

A moment or so later, the padre next discerned Brother Domínguez's audible voice cry, "Sí, Hermana! Sí!" A few seconds later, the noises subsided and stopped. Some minutes passed before the door to Brother Domínguez's room opened and closed, and the door far down the hallway again opened and closed as well, finally bringing the reverberant, monastic night to an end.

Father Noriega lay wide awake in bed. He realized it was going to be difficult to get any sleep in this monastery.

Noriega dined with Francisco the following morning. He saw Brother Domínguez seated with a nun at a table nearby. When Noriega and Francisco approached Brother Domínguez and the nun, they were asked to join them.

"This is Sister Marta," Brother Domínguez said. "Sister, this is Father Noriega from Veracruz."

Father Noriega introduced Francisco, and they ate their breakfast.

Sister Marta turned out to be an attractive Gachupín nun from a wealthy family in Puebla. Noriega estimated that she was about thirty years old. She had dark brown hair that showed in perfect tufts at the front of her habit, which framed her fine, smooth features as her strange, green eyes shone like polished jade.

"I'd be interested to learn about some of your experiences here at the monastery in Puebla," Father Noriega asked near the end of his meal.

"Only if you will tell us what it's like to be with General Santa Anna," Sister Marta countered with her eyes smiling.

Noriega nodded. "I'd be happy to do so."

After Francisco ate his breakfast, he requested to be excused so he could explore the grounds.

"Don't go far from the monastery," Noriega warned.

During their conversation, Noriega learned that both Brother Domínguez and Sister Marta had arrived at the monastery soon after it had been built several years ago.

Noriega listened carefully while Sister Marta expressed pleasure with the amenities in the monastery. "Where do all of these servants in the monastery come from?" Noriega finally asked.

The sister was quick to explain: "The church does not actually pay any of the servants. But sometimes the priests perform funerals or weddings for the servants' families at a reduced price as a courtesy."

Noriega nodded as a servant removed his plate and the one left by Francisco. He watched as the servant ate a few scraps from the plate on the way back to the kitchen.

"And if you don't mind my asking, Brother Domínguez, how did you wind up serving in this particular monastery?"

Domínguez smiled. "I credit my parents for my good fortune. Apparently, they were required to pay the church a handsome fee for my position here in this prestigious monastery."

Noriega assumed from the response that Domínguez came either from a wealthy Gachupín family or at least from an equally wealthy and well-connected Criollo family.

When the morning ended, Father Noriega told Brother Domínguez and Sister Marta that he would have to be leaving for Mexico City the next day. Upon making this statement, Noriega later wondered if he had only imagined the black flecks darkening with a dim hint in the sheen of Sister Marta's green eyes.

After again checking on Francisco in the evening and discovering that he was asleep in his room just down the hall, Noriega once more retired to his own room. Less than fifteen minutes later, he was also asleep.

The moon waned through one more of its gradual stages above, and some time transpired before an unexpected knock at the door woke the padre. When he cracked open the door he saw that it was Sister Marta. “Buenas noches, Father,” she said as her green eyes darted. “I am sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“Well, yes, you did, Sister,” he admitted. “But that’s alright. What can I do for you? Is there a problem?”

“I was visiting with Brother Domínguez after you went to bed, and we were considering reading the Scriptures in his room again tonight, as we did last night.” With these words her smile was subtle but apparent enough. “But he decided he was too tired. So I thought you might care for me to come to your room and read some with you, Father?” Little restraint was displayed in her tone and expression upon the last suggestion, and her meaning was all too obvious to the padre.

Based on the audible evidence he had heard the night before, Father Noriega doubted that Brother Domínguez and Sister Marta were reading the Bible.

Noriega looked carefully at Sister Marta and searched for the right response. “Which book in the Bible were you reading last night, Sister?”

“The Songs of Solomon.”

The padre shook his head, knowing that Songs of Solomon was the most erotic book in the Bible. He maintained the mere couple of inches in the doorway’s narrow opening with renewed effort. “Reading the Scriptures is always a wonderful undertaking, Sister. I’m so happy that you and Brother Domínguez have been so successful at understanding the Scriptures and serving our Lord here. Normally, I’d like nothing better than to study the Bible with a fellow servant of God, but instead I’ve been reviewing my celibacy vows this evening.”

Sister Marta’s smile contorted itself.

“I review those vows often just to keep them fresh in my mind,” the padre continued, “and I must confess the process of the review has made me very sleepy.” The padre’s own expression abruptly transformed into one of disappointment, and he did not know whether it was aimed at Sister Marta or more inwardly instead. “Perhaps we can read scriptures together some other time, Sister—maybe in the dining room before breakfast?”

Still stunned by Father Noriega’s response, the sister’s face seem to fall to the cold floor. “Very well, Father,” she said curtly. “Good night.”

“Buenas noches, Sister,” Noriega said and gently closed the door.

Noriega quickly went to the water bowl on the table in the corner of his room. With both hands trembling, he scooped some water and splashed it on his face. He reached for a piece of folded linen and—taking some deep breaths—slowly dried his face and returned to bed.

Father Noriega tossed and turned and drifted off into a restless sleep several times during the night. He found himself wide-awake two hours later, unable to purge the beautiful, haunting face of Sister Marta out of his mind. Just as he was about to drift off to sleep again, he heard the door to Brother Domínguez’s room open and close. A few minutes later and he was listening to the same stifled sounds from the previous night. Eventually, the desperate rapture subsided and gave way to silence; the pattern would repeat itself one more time that same evening.

All the while and with concentrated effort, Noriega continued his reflections on the differences between life in the monastery and his time spent in the village parishes; he could also not help but wonder if Brother Domínguez was “studying” that night with Sister Marta again or with someone else.

When Noriega and Francisco climbed into their wagon for the trip to Mexico City, they were both better prepared for the shorter journey than they were for the first leg to Puebla, the distance from Puebla to

Mexico City being only seventy miles. Noriega better understood the requirements of traveling with a twelve-year-old boy, and Francisco was glad that, unlike the portion of the National Road from Xalapa to Puebla, the trip to Mexico City did not begin with the dangerous inclines of the mountains.

The road to the capital city instead descended gently out of the foothills of the Sierras. By no means flat, the terrain was still far more easily navigable than most portions of the previous part of the journey. The priest and the boy did have to ascend one more mountain range before arriving in the capital. However, the road was an improvement by other comparisons, since it carved through a relatively small saddle between the much higher mountain peaks.

As the mule tugged the wagon down the road towards Mexico City, Father Noriega thought about his visit with Bishop Martínez in Puebla. He thought about the lifestyles of the nuns, the monks, and church dignitaries in that spectacular city. He also considered the beauty of Sister Marta. He tried to convince himself to be thankful that he had not given in to what he felt were the darker passions of his heart during that difficult night. Gradually he decided it would be wise to recite the Lord's Prayer while he and Francisco rattled down the road. He then silently repeated the portion of the prayer regarding temptation.

Chapter Eleven

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The Archbishop and the Poinsettias

On the second day after leaving Puebla, Noriega and Francisco came to the outskirts of Mexico City from the east.

The valley of Anahuac was a magnificent sight when they descended in their wagon. Surrounded by mountains on three sides, only the north was free of the enormous geological barriers while entering the capital city. To his right, Noriega saw the smoky Popocatepetl deep in slumber, and to the left was the snow-covered Ixtaccíhuatl. Among the lakes and meadows spread all over the valley, these two mountain peaks were solid reference points for the area. Below, church spires could be seen marking much of the 19th-century Mexico City skyline. To the west of the capital was the hill of Chapultepec, which once served as the recreation area for Moctezuma and more recently contained the resident Spanish viceroys; east of the capital was Lake Texcoco; and leading out through the city gates were the roads pointing in numerous directions to all of the most important cities in the country.

When their wagon entered the capital, they encountered wide, cobbled streets and crowded but orderly intersections. Flat-roofed dwellings proliferated the reticulate avenues and occasional slopes with their clustered but brightly colored boroughs. Often the second-floor balconies were decorated with striped and elongated pieces of cloth or simply large blankets put out to dry, which were either way striking with their handmade patterns. The padre was welcomed by all of this and with the fond reminder of the comfortable, warm weather in Mexico City: it was just another stunning and beautiful day in the capital.

Of course, Noriega did not venture to the far north end of the city; for if he had done so, he would have encountered the poorest neighborhoods, the dirty and vermin-infested barrios, and commonplace crime of those outlying areas.

As the padre made his way just beyond the Plaza Mayor, the vast public square with the cathedral, Francisco's wide eyes soaked up the atmosphere and characteristics of the place. He observed the many houses with their hanging gardens and nearby churches and public buildings that featured proud domes and towers. The boy then listened as the cathedral and those same church bells began to toll their singular, concomitant melody through the resonant air as signal for the noonday hour. Just as soon as the song had started, it quickly ceased; and observers again took up the sights for the abandoned sounds.

Still closer to the plaza, Francisco saw the main boulevards containing the rows of small shops and stalls where merchants made markets in all types of goods.

The plaza itself was completely paved and bestowed with fountains that stood in all four corners and tall street lamps to light the active square at night. In the center was a bronze equestrian statue of Carlos IV created by the Spanish sculptor, Manuel Tolsa, after viceroy Marqués de Branciforte commissioned the piece at his own expense. As their wagon rolled past the statue, the padre wondered how long such a stark reminder of Spanish domination would be tolerated by Mexico's self-appointed emperor, Agustín Iturbide.

Francisco was meanwhile astonished by the plaza's massive cathedral. It extended across the entire northern side of the expansive square. The baroque architectural style was further complimented with a local flavor when the Sagario was added to create a more native influence and design.

Archbishop Pedro José de Fonte y Hernández Miravete was already expecting the former cura from Veracruz. Bishop Martínez had decided to send a message by courier to the archbishop after Father Noriega informed him of his plans to continue to the capital city from Puebla.

Father Noriega and Francisco arrived at the cathedral and were thus warmly greeted by Father Jorge Mendoza, one of the archbishop's aides. Father Mendoza was a handsome man, a few inches shorter than Father Noriega, and had a clean-shaven, amiable face. Father Noriega was soon led to the archbishop's office, and Father Mendoza arranged for Francisco to be taken away to another area of the cathedral for refreshments.

When Father Noriega walked past the magnificent altar he noted the gold and silver on the railing that encircled the lofty, draped table. Overall, the embellishments and furnishings in the broad and vaulted cathedral surpassed even the ornate trimmings witnessed in Puebla.

At just forty-four years of age and born in Spain, Archbishop de Fonte y Hernández Miravete was a rising power in the Catholic Church. He was an average and unimposing looking man but possessed clever personal stratagems and enormous wealth. Revenue at his disposal as the archbishop of Mexico was roughly 100,000 pesos per year, and Hernández Miravete spared no expense making sure he enjoyed all of the comforts available with the position. He lived in his own palace not far from the cathedral; and with an army of servants at his disposal, he wanted for nothing—his cushioned carriage and well-conditioned horses being as fine as any in the country.

Noriega surveyed the accommodations of the church hierarchy and found great irony in the fact that part of his mission involved presenting the archbishop with still more funds, while he and other priests like him worked in village parishes all over Mexico and managed to exist on about ten pesos a month.

Nonetheless, when Noriega was introduced to the archbishop, he deferred and kissed his superior's hand. Both Archbishop de Fonte y Hernández Miravete and Noriega smiled politely at each other as their meeting began. Father Noriega had actually met the archbishop earlier in his career, but he was sure that he was not recognized by Hernández Miravete, who could hardly be expected to remember the names and faces of the hundreds of priests throughout the country.

"I received a letter from Bishop Martínez advising of your visit, Father," the archbishop said. "We are pleased you've arrived safely. I trust your journey was not too difficult?"

"Not at all, Your Grace. Compared with the trip from Xalapa to Puebla, it was quite enjoyable."

The archbishop nodded and smiled. "Bishop Martínez reminded me that General Santa Anna has grown fond of you, and that he sent you with a gift for the church in Puebla."

"Sí, Your Grace. It was a modest offering from the general for the church."

"How thoughtful of the general to think of those doing God's work."

"The general also sent an offering for the church here in Mexico City, Your Grace," Noriega replied and held out the box that Santa Anna had provided.

"He did!" the archbishop said, feigning surprise.

The archbishop graciously set the box to the left on his desk, resisting the initial urge to look inside, and returned his gaze to the padre.

“What about this General Santa Anna, Father. We hear so much here in the capital that it’s difficult to separate fact from rumors. What sort of man is he?”

“I suppose, Your Grace, he’s the sort of man who sent me here on his behalf to try to convey his loyalty to you and to the church.”

Now the archbishop was unable to refuse the temptation to open the box, so that he could weigh the loyalties of this new political upstart. When he opened the box, he could not help but show some surprise. It appeared that Santa Anna had sent him somewhere between five and ten thousand pesos. Becoming just a little more impressed by the magnitude Santa Anna’s offering, the archbishop once again returned his gaze to Father Noriega and smiled. “Father, what more is there to know about General Santa Anna? Obviously from his gift we can see he’s a man loyal to the church, but I am curious. What is it that he requires from a humble servant of the Lord?”

Noriega shook his head. “Nada, Your Grace. I have no requests to make of you or the church on behalf of Santa Anna.”

The archbishop nodded but remained unconvinced. “I seem to also have some recollection of him providing funds for a new parish in Xalapa.”

“Your Grace,” the padre said wanting to avoid that subject, “General Santa Anna merely asked me to come here and present you with an offering for the church and to assure you that he supports the continued strength and authority of the church in Mexico.”

“Well, Father, it’s refreshing to know that the general is so loyal to the church. As you well know, with independence from Spain came new dangers for us. Despite the fact that there may be some naïve curas serving in the towns and villages who are sympathetic to the liberals, who themselves are against the church and many of its most important teachings, it is church policy that the specific guarantee of the Plan de Iguala concerning the recognition of the church be maintained. For it’s absolutely critical to the balance of power in our new country.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Noriega nodded diminutively. He wanted nothing less than for this particular conversation to descend into a discussion of national or church politics.

“When will you begin your journey back to Xalapa, Father?” the archbishop asked and stood up.

“Not for a few days, Your Grace. I’m traveling with a young boy of whom Santa Anna is very fond. The general wanted me to show the boy some of the sights of the capital before we return.”

“Very well, Father. We have a social function at my palace for the envoy from los Estados Unidos tomorrow night. My palace is very comfortable, and we have many empty rooms. I am sure that you and the boy will be more than comfortable there. Maybe you’d like to join us for the function and get to know this man, Mr. Poinsett, from los Estados Unidos?”

“Perhaps, Your Grace, but I’m sure I haven’t any clothing suitable for such an event. Even laundered, I suspect the best of what I have to wear might be an embarrassment to you.”

“Nonsense, Father. I will ask Father Mendoza to see to it that one of my aides finds a new robe for you. It will be one that is fitting for a priest in attendance of a major social function here in the capital.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Noriega said and glanced one last time about the gilded walls and moldings in the lavishly carpeted room, pausing again at the sight of the box that contained Santa Anna’s rather redundant gift.

Noriega and Francisco wandered off a couple of blocks from the archbishop’s palace the next day to see some of the sights in the capital. Across from the cathedral on the eastern side of the plaza was the Palacio Nacional, a long government building two stories high with a large balcony running the length of the building. Its uneven assortment of windows and doors gave a sense of imbalance, but it had once been the property of Hernán Cortés, the great Spanish explorer. In recent years the Palacio had become

home to the viceroys who represented the Spanish Crown, and somewhere behind those awkward windows and doors that Noriega and Francisco passed on the way to the shops was Agustín Iturbide, Mexico's new emperor, who had so modestly taken the name "Agustín I" for himself.

A few blocks from the plaza, Noriega and Francisco walked among the small shops noting the various goods offered by merchants. Noriega had just enough funds for the trip back to Xalapa, so he and Francisco were simply looking at various items rather than weighing the possibility of a purchase. Francisco already knew not to ask the Padre to buy anything for him. As with his own family, he sensed that the priest had no extra money for the items on sale in the market. Francisco was all too aware of the fact that until the recent move to Manga de Clavo, both the padre and Francisco's own parents had lived a hard life, struggling with the process of obtaining even the most basic necessities for living.

As the padre and the boy left yet another shop and crossed a busy street, Francisco pointed at a nearby window display. "Look, Father, a soldier's sword!"

"Well, mi hijo, I suppose we better go take a look, eh?" the padre responded in good humor.

While they examined the sword, the merchant approached and began his sales pitch. "You should look closely at this sword, Father. It would make a fine addition to any collection."

"Señor, who did this sword belong to?" Francisco asked.

"I'm not sure of his name," the stocky merchant replied and played thoughtfully with his small mustache. "A soldier in our great new emperor's cavalry unit, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"Because I have a soldier's sword, too!" Francisco exclaimed with a large smile.

"Really," the merchant said and glanced at Noriega, who confirmed with a nod.

"Sí, señor. General Antonio López de Santa Anna gave it to me."

"Really? Would you like to sell it to me, amigo?"

"I don't have it here, señor. It's back at Manga de Clavo. My father is General Santa Anna's aguadero, and we live on the hacienda there."

The merchant smiled at Francisco and leaned forward to offer the young boy some advice. "Hang on to that sword for awhile, my little amigo. Someday, if things keep changing in Mexico, it might be worth a fortune to a collector."

"I will hold on to it, señor," Francisco promised. "Perhaps if you're near Xalapa someday, you can come to Manga de Clavo, and I will show it to you."

"Perhaps," responded the merchant, who then introduced himself. "My name is Juan Trujillo," he said and offered his hand to the padre.

"I'm Father Noriega, and this is Francisco Moya."

Francisco also shook Trujillo's hand before they left the shop and headed back to the archbishop's palace.

Francisco grinned widely as they walked away. Having traded fruits and other items for miniscule profits on the outskirts of Veracruz, the precocious boy now realized the sword the general had given him might provide the stake he needed to expand his trading hobby into a career someday.

Early that evening, one of the archbishop's aides knocked on Noriega's door. A priest who introduced himself as Father Roberto Tornillo presented Father Noriega with a brand new priest's robe made of the finest cloth.

"Gracias, Father," Noriega said and handled the robe carefully.

Father Tornillo lingered at the doorway. "Is there anything you require?" Noriega asked.

"No, Father. I was going to ask you the same question. The archbishop gave me instructions to make sure you had anything you needed during your stay here. Do you have any special requests?" the aide asked with slightly raised eyebrows.

"No, Father. No special requests whatsoever. This is by far the finest cloth I've ever possessed."

"Well, Father, actually the robe is nothing special," the overweight Father Tornillo explained and

rubbed his bald head. “It’s pretty much standard church issue here. All of our parish priests wear these robes to social functions in the capital.”

“Still it is much nicer than what we curas usually see in the small parishes. Please express my gratitude to the archbishop,” Noriega said appreciatively.

“You will have the opportunity to thank him yourself tonight, Father. Also, you should know that Mr. Poinsett, the special envoy from los Estados Unidos, will be here. When he learned of your close relationship with General Santa Anna, he expressed an interest in visiting with you,” Tornillo said and backed out of the doorway.

“I look forward to thanking the archbishop and having a nice discussion with Señor Poinsett,” Noriega said before he closed the door behind the aide.

Noriega sipped a glass of expensive claret at the event that evening; it was easily the finest wine he had ever tasted. He had just been introduced to Mr. Joel Poinsett by Father Mendoza. Poinsett, an American, appeared to be in his forties and had a long nose, large ears, and short, curly hair. Father Noriega listened to Poinsett talk and noted that the man spoke Spanish with a very strange accent.

Despite the fact that Noriega had originally despised the mission on which Santa Anna had sent him, by now he had discovered the surprising natural talent he had for gathering information. For example, he was an excellent listener and very skilled at asking open-ended questions where “yes” or “no” answers would not suffice.

Noriega quickly learned that Poinsett was an avid botanist, as well as a member of the United States House of Representatives from the state of South Carolina. Apparently Poinsett had spent some time in Mexico before independence and had gained a good understanding of the situation in New Spain on the behalf of President James Madison.

“But listen to me go on, Father,” Poinsett said with embarrassment at dominating the conversation. “Tell me about General Santa Anna.”

“What would you like to know, Señor Poinsett?”

“What kind of man is he, Father? What are his strengths, his weaknesses, and interests?”

“Well. . . . He likes cockfighting more than anything else,” Noriega finally volunteered.

Poinsett shook with laughter. “That’s a start—and a high compliment from where I come. We do love our cockfighting in South Carolina.”

The padre smiled, and both men paused.

“What else should the President of the United States know about one of Mexico’s most famous generals?”

“I know that the general is very committed to the church. In fact, the only reason I am here is because the general asked me to deliver a message to church officials in Puebla and the capital in order to express his loyalty.”

“That is interesting, Father. So the general supports the church, huh? Well, isn’t that admirable!” Poinsett said and raised his glass to signal a toast.

Noriega and Father Mendoza, who had just rejoined the conversation, raised their glasses in unison, and the three men took a brief sip.

“I’ve been wondering, Mr. Poinsett,” Noriega said: “How does the United States government feel about the independence of Mexico?”

Poinsett smiled upon realizing that Noriega was most likely attempting to gather information for Santa Anna. “President Monroe opposes the re-conquest of your country—or any other newly independent colony—by Spain or any European nation, Father.”

Father Mendoza interrupted the discussion. “Gentlemen, may I refill your glasses?”

“Yes, please!” Noriega and the U.S. envoy responded at the same time. Mendoza smiled before taking both empty glasses and wandering off to look for one of the many servants.

“And can you say, Señor Poinsett,” Noriega continued, “how your president feels about our new monarchy here in Mexico?”

“I’m not sure I can speak for the president on that question, Father. It’s an unusual concept in the United States: a self-appointed monarch.”

“Fair enough, sir. How do you personally feel about the monarchy?”

“That is a delicate question, Father. May I speak to you frankly and off the record?”

Noriega spread his arms with his palms turned upward. “Señor Poinsett, I am merely a humble priest from Xalapa; I’m not an employee of one of the newspapers or of the monarchy. Nobody would listen to me even if you did tell me something and I tried to pass it on.”

“Very well.” Poinsett leaned closer and looked Noriega in the eye. “I am not sure your emperor, Agustín the First, is going to last long, Father.”

“Really? Why are you unsure of Agustín’s future, sir?”

Poinsett looked around and further lowered his voice. “Iturbide is having trouble consolidating his political position, Father. The liberals who opposed Spain and the church already regret their alliance with Iturbide during the struggle for independence. I hear they’re plotting his downfall as we speak.”

“They, Mr. Poinsett? Who are they?”

“You did not hear this from me, Padre. If confronted, I would deny any knowledge of this information, since it is all based on hearsay. However, I must tell you I think the information is reliable.”

Again Noriega shrugged and feigned insignificance on his part. “Please continue, Señor Poinsett,” he urged.

“I am told that General Guadalupe Victoria and General Vicente Guerrero would prefer a republic here in Mexico rather than a monarchy. Ever since Iturbide declared himself emperor, all of the key appointments in Mexico have gone to his fellow conservatives. It’s my understanding that the liberals have been left out of power by Agustín, and they feel that they deserve more power, given that they did most of the fighting during the revolution.”

“I see,” Noriega said, noting that across the room Father Mendoza had just sent a servant to the wine cellar for another bottle of wine.

Poinsett continued to convey information, and Noriega listened carefully. “And there’s more to my view of the peril to the monarchy than simply the opposition from liberals.

“You see, Father, the emperor is already financially compromised, and he is borrowing heavily. I’m told that he emptied the treasury long ago, mostly because the only people who live more extravagantly than Iturbide are the members of the church hierarchy,” Poinsett said and gestured with his hand slowly around the room.

Father Noriega did not disagree.

“The truth is, your country’s treasury has been empty since the early days of the monarchy, and Iturbide is living off forced loans and confiscations. He’s printing paper money over there in the Palacio Nacional every day. Prices are rising rapidly, and the wealthy men I speak with are completely disgusted with Iturbide’s policies.”

The padre was nodding mechanically but making mental notes of everything Poinsett said.

“Even the poor are indignant, as they see the purchasing power of their currency disintegrating,” Poinsett finished.

“You seem to be forecasting a grim future for our emperor, Señor Poinsett.”

“Yes. And there is still one more thing the emperor is neglecting, which will certainly bring him down in my opinion.”

“What is that, Mr. Poinsett?”

“He’s not paying his troops, Father.”

“He isn’t?” Noriega asked in disbelief.

“No. And that will surely lead to his downfall faster than any other mistake.”

Noriega was about to respond when Father Mendoza returned with their wine glasses full. “Gracias,” both men said and sipped their drinks with Father Mendoza.

“Are you interested in horticulture, Father Mendoza?” Poinsett asked.
“Somewhat.”

Looking at both of the priests, Poinsett declared: “Gentlemen, I have found a plant near Taxco del Alarcón that is very interesting. I already have samples in my residence here in the capital, and they are remarkable. The leaves of this plant are bright red in the winter, and I suspect this species might become very popular back in the United States around the holidays.”

“What’s the name of this plant?” Noriega asked.

“The name is of some indigenous derivation, which I cannot seem to pronounce correctly. But I plan to send samples back to the U.S.”

Both priests nodded and drank their wine again.

“Gentlemen, I am a humble man,” the congressman continued with a wide grin, “but when I return, I think I’ll see to it that the plant is called the Poinsettia.”

“Perhaps with that wonderful name, the plant will catch on in your country Mr. Poinsett,” Noriega said with an increasingly lopsided smile. (The padre had already forgotten how many glasses of wine he had consumed.)

“I hope so,” Poinsett said and shook Noriega’s hand. “I’ve enjoyed our conversation very much, Father; but due to your skill as a listener and my willingness to ramble, I have learned very little about your friend, the general. Is there anything else you might tell me about him? I heard when he was surrounded by enemies of the crown and facing certain death during the war for independence, he switched sides.”

The padre smiled without comment.

“I also hear he’s now become military commander for the state of Veracruz and has made himself wealthy at the expense of others. What could you say about these reports, Father?”

Noriega looked at Poinsett carefully, then to Father Mendoza, and back again to the U.S. envoy before answering. “Gentlemen, I think there’s at least a little bit of Santa Anna in all of us,” Noriega said, much to the acknowledgment and humor of both men.

Chapter Twelve

~ The Emperor

The old padre savored what was left in his glass and thought it every bit as divine and complex as that other French vintage from the sociable night in the capital so many decades ago. He turned and considered with equal reflection and sentiment the aging merchant who had brought him the wine earlier that afternoon; how this now silver-haired man, his one-time pupil and lifelong friend, had changed so much from his boyhood appearance yet remained so affable and exemplary despite time and its otherwise corrupting influences.

“What is it, Father?” Moya asked. “Would you like some more wine?”

“No, my friend. I think it would be a waste to drink any more at this point. Can we save the rest for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? What makes you think I’m coming back here tomorrow, Father?” Moya tried his best to convey a sense of indignation.

“You’ll be back. Or else I will simply have to drink the rest of this bottle myself—and I know from experience that you couldn’t stand that.”

Moya laughed.

“Let’s smoke a cigar instead,” the padre suggested.

“I’m out of cigars, Padre, but I expect to have some more next week.”

“Do you think all I ever do is sit around and wait for you to bring me wine and cigars, muchacho? Actually, I still have two cigars, amigo,” the padre said with a grin. “One of my friends who is said to deal in contraband gave me a dozen beautiful cigars a few weeks ago, and I saved two for an occasion just like this.”

“And what sort of occasion is this, Father?”

“El Presidente is dead, amigo.”

Moya shook his head sadly as he accepted one of the familiar cigars that the padre gave him.

The padre sighed: “When I think of el Presidente, my old mind is flooded with so many other faces and names—most of them eventually betrayed in one way or another by our mutual friend. . . . Do you remember when President Victoria visited the hacienda?”

“President Victoria was there at the hacienda?”

“Sí,” the padre said and recalled the strange occasion, which had coincided with their return from the trip to Puebla and the capital.



When Noriega and young Francisco rolled through the entry and past the main house at Manga de Clavo late in the afternoon, the padre instantly knew that something serious was transpiring. Several wagons and about thirty horses were either tethered or hobbled all along the private drive that encircled the stone fountain in front and led on to the stables in back. Francisco looked at the horses and wagons but was too excited to give more than a cursory glance before jumping out of the wagon with his trunk; he wanted to find his mother and father so he could tell them all about his adventures.

Noriega climbed down from his seat as Ángel Telles came from the stable to take care of the mule and wagon. Telles was a small, slender man with graying hair and a stoic look to his thin, weathered face, which often contrasted with his generally cheerful personality.

“Welcome home, Father. Did you and Francisco have a good trip?” Telles asked as he hopped up into the wagon.

“Sí,” the padre answered, distracted. He was still trying to get a better look at the tethered horses.

“It was a very good trip, Ángel.”

“And Francisco? Did he enjoy the travel?”

“Francisco? Oh, yes, he’s fine. But, Ángel,” the padre asked and finally turned to address the general’s livery man. “These horses and wagons—who’s here at Manga de Clavo today?”

“It’s General Victoria, Father,” said Telles. “He arrived here with some of his men early this morning.”

“Was our general expecting Victoria’s arrival?”

“Now that you mention it, Father, I think he was. He told me to prepare to feed and care for a couple dozen extra horses a few days ago. I thought he might be bringing new horses to the hacienda himself, but then this morning General Victoria arrived with his men.

“Why do you ask, Father?”

“No reason, amigo. I was just a little surprised with all the new horses here. I’m tired, though, now. I think I’m going to bed. The journey was a long one, and those last days were difficult with the rains in the mountains. And can you give this mule an extra ration? He earned his feed the past few days.”

“Yes, Father. He’ll have plenty of grain tonight.”

Noriega woke the next morning and strolled around the buildings near the main grounds of the hacienda. It was cool and damp, and the ground was moist with signs that it had rained frequently in recent days. However, all of the horses from the previous night were gone from the front of the main house. Noriega

knew it could not be long before Santa Anna would expect the report on his trip to Puebla and Mexico City.

As the general hungrily dispatched his breakfast, he sent one of his servants to summon Noriega. “So, Padre,” the general began when the priest arrived on the balcony and sat by the table. “What information did you obtain during your visit to the cathedrals in Puebla and the capital? Surely, you’ve returned with more than a few new prayers and blessings,” Santa Anna said with a smile.

“Well, sir, I think your offerings to the church officials were well received.”

Santa Anna nodded. “That’s good,” he said and motioned with his hands for the padre to continue.

“Though skeptical that you might have a hidden motive, the church never rejects anything that winds up in the offering plate.”

“I would think not, Padre. Surely, you must have noticed how your brethren in God’s service in Puebla and the capital seem to live just a bit better than you did when you were in the rural parishes in Veracruz.”

“Sí, I noticed,” he admitted.

“Father, you know I am anxious to hear about what you have learned from the church officials concerning Iturbide.”

“Yes. Bishop Martínez and Archbishop de Fonte did not have much to say about Iturbide. And it was not—how can I say this?” he hesitated. “It was not easy to find appropriate moments or appropriate words to use with church officials to help me gather information from them. After all, they are my superiors.”

Santa Anna fought back the urge to correct the padre. The general had lately been thinking that *he* was now Noriega’s superior. “Are you saying you have nothing for me, Father; after being gone several weeks and giving away my money?”

“No, General, I do have information, but it comes from the envoy of the President of the United States.”

“Oh?” the general remarked with greater curiosity. “Tell me about this envoy from los Estados Unidos.”

“Señor Poinsett, with whom I spoke at length during a social event in the archbishop’s palace in Mexico City, had many interesting things to say.”

“Envoy to the President of the United States,” Santa Anna said with an impressed tone. “What was the name of this man again, Father?”

“Señor Joel Poinsett—and I must say that once he began to talk, he provided me with a very interesting view of Iturbide and some of his problems in Mexico City.”

“Were you able to determine the emperor’s intentions towards me, Father?” Santa Anna asked impatiently.

“I am not sure our emperor has time to be concerned with you, General.”

“No? Why do you say this?”

“It seems that Iturbide has more pressing problems. It seems, according to Poinsett, that he has bankrupted the national treasury; that he’s been engaging in extensive confiscation and forced loans mostly from the Spaniards in order to support his extravagant lifestyle.”

“Forced loans and confiscations?” Santa Anna said with a pretense of disdain. “That’s a rather unfair tactic. Well, Father, that is very interesting. Is there more?”

“Sí, General. The emperor now has a number of powerful enemies within the more liberal elements of Mexico. Señor Poinsett believes conspiracies are developing that might soon topple Iturbide.”

“So our liberal-thinking countrymen are conspiring against our glorious emperor,” Santa Anna repeated with a great deal of surprise. The general paused and took a sip of his coffee. “Did this Poinsett man provide any names, Father?”

“A few.” The padre hesitated, enjoying delaying the general.

“Well, priest? Are you going to give the names to me? Must I pry everything out of you today, Father?”

“He thinks that Vicente Guerrero might be planning a rebellion, General.”

“Guerrero, eh,” Santa Anna mumbled. “That old renegade is always planning a rebellion. Anyone else?”

“Sí, General, there was one other name that came up.”

“Well?” Santa Anna asked with a slight note of irritation.

“General Guadalupe Victoria. Poinsett said that there were credible sources all over the capital telling him that Victoria was in this area planning a rebellion, perhaps with Guerrero.”

The padre watched Santa Anna closely to try to determine if the general might realize that Noriega knew General Victoria had been at Manga de Clavo just yesterday.

“Victoria?” the general replied. His mind was working rapidly, and he drifted off momentarily. Just as quickly, though, the general brought himself back to the present conversation. “Is there anything else, Father?”

“That’s all, General. Señor Poinsett did seem to have access to a lot of information and rumors, and after a glass or two of wine he freely shared what he knew with me.”

“What was his motivation, Father? Why would this ‘yanqui’ share such information with you?”

“I am merely a humble village cura, General,” Noriega said, spreading his arms with his hands turned upward. “What harm would it do to exchange interesting conversation at a social event with a harmless priest?”

“You told him this?” Santa Anna laughed.

“Sí, General, I did. I had to disarm him when I saw he was thinking of curtailing our discussion.”

The general was very pleased with the report he had received from the padre and began thinking more about the implications of what he now knew.

After a moment, the padre added: “Oh, yes, General, I almost forgot. There’s one more thing, and I believe it could be critical.”

The general leaned forward.

“Señor Poinsett said that the emperor’s troops in the capital are very unhappy. Apparently, our emperor is not paying his soldiers.”

“—Now that is the one thing a successful leader in Mexico cannot do,” Santa Anna said. “I think your friend Señor Poinsett is correct. If he’s not paying his soldiers, Agustín the First is indeed in trouble.”

After waiting while Santa Anna again thought in silence, Noriega asked if there was anything else.

“No. You performed your mission magnificently, Father. If you were a scout in my army, I would give you a medal and a promotion.”

“Thank you, General,” Noriega said gratefully as he rose from the table. Then, casually, he asked: “General, may I ask how construction has been coming along since my departure?”

“Construction?” Santa Anna said, momentarily confused. “Oh, yes, of course, Father—the new parish. Please remind me to check on that first thing tomorrow, Father. I’m going to be very busy for the rest of today.”

“Yes, General,” Noriega said.

“Oh, General,” Noriega spoke just before he reached the door. “There were a number of horses here at the hacienda when Francisco and I returned yesterday.”

“Did you retire early last night, Father? I didn’t see you arrive.”

“Yes, I did, General.”

Santa Anna bit his lip and lied: “They were just friends from a nearby hacienda. They had a good time and left late last night.” The general paused. “I didn’t know you arrived yesterday until María told me early this morning.” Santa Anna quickly offered a sheepish smile.

The padre ignored the hint that the general was bedding down with the fifteen-year-old, which he already knew. “Yes, General. I went to bed immediately; it was a long journey.”

“It is a very long trip,” he agreed.

When the padre left the main house of the hacienda, he was somewhat disappointed that the general did not trust him enough to admit General Victoria had been at Manga de Clavo only the day before.



“So, el Presidente wouldn’t tell you General Victoria was at the hacienda the day we returned from Mexico City?” old Moya said after drawing heavily on the cigar Noriega had given him.

“No. I don’t think he wanted me to know he was already actively working towards the overthrow of Iturbide. Actually, el Presidente had two different schemes going at the same time. He was manipulating a Mexican general and a Spanish general.”

“What was el Presidente doing to manipulate them?”

“He had apparently coaxed a Spanish brigadier general, named Francisco Lemaur, to attempt to recapture the port of Veracruz from his fortress out in the harbor. As part of that plan, el Presidente was also trying to trick one General José Antonio Echávarri and his contingent, whom Santa Anna hoped would wind up getting killed in the process by the Spanish troops—all to facilitate el Presidente’s larger plot so that he could later claim how he scored a great victory over the rest of the Spanish at Veracruz.”

“Dios mío,” Moya said and rubbed his left temple, yet knowing this was only the beginning of an endless string of complex deceptions. “Oh—sorry, Father.”

Noriega dismissed the irreverent but unintended phrase with a wave of his hand. “I know, but it’s true. Well, both generals fell for Santa Anna’s deception. Echávarri, who was el Presidente’s superior officer at the time, narrowly escaped capture by the Spaniards who were tipped off in advance as to Echávarri’s location by Santa Anna.”

“Why would el Presidente work with the Spanish to hurt a Mexican general?”

“Like so many of el Presidente’s victims, I imagine that Echávarri was just another rooster in the henhouse who needed to be eliminated. But don’t forget that Santa Anna also double-crossed the Spanish general; as a result of which, Santa Anna captured nearly three hundred of General Lemaur’s Spanish soldiers when they landed at Veracruz.”

“Did el Presidente capture Lemaur, too?”

“No. When General Lemaur sensed that all was not right with the previously arranged scheme, he quickly became suspicious and retreated back to the island fortress in the harbor. But it was already too late from a military standpoint. Santa Anna was able to claim a great victory over the attempted attack by the Spanish troops; and with nearly three hundred Spanish prisoners as proof of his great victory, his popularity rose significantly among the people. He had saved Veracruz.”

“What did General Echávarri do after he escaped capture?”

Noriega laughed loudly. “When General Echávarri finally realized that part of Santa Anna’s plan was for him to be taken prisoner by the Spaniards, he was quite furious at the betrayal. He sent a scathing letter to Iturbide immediately after the incident in an effort to expose Santa Anna’s boundless ambition.”

“I don’t remember any of this,” Moya said, shaking his head.

“You were only a boy, and it was thankfully all going on while you and I were in Puebla and the capital, amigo. Anyway, despite all of Iturbide’s other problems, the emperor now felt that Santa Anna was a major threat, so he marched on Xalapa shortly after we had also left to return to Manga de Clavo.” Noriega concluded.



Self-declared Emperor Agustín Iturbide was mounted on a impressive black horse whose coat gleamed in the sun of the late morning when he and his troops appeared outside of Santa Anna's hacienda.

María Chávez saw the emperor and his men from the balcony adjacent to Santa Anna's bedroom, and she called to the gently snoring general, who was inside taking an early nap after having just enjoyed the pleasures of María's young body.

"General!" she called and rushed back inside the bedroom. "Soldiers are entering the gates of the hacienda!"

Santa Anna rose quickly and peeked through the shutters. "It's the emperor," he said with a touch of fear.

Dressing with haste, Santa Anna met Iturbide in front of the main house a few minutes later.

"This is an unusual surprise, My Emperor," Santa Anna said respectfully as both men moved indoors to the sunlit sitting room in the front of the house. "To what circumstance do we owe the honor of your visit to this humble hacienda?"

"I received a disturbing report from your superior, General Echávarri," Iturbide said with fast-growing anger. "He provided details of the fiasco at Veracruz in October."

"He called it a fiasco? For the Spaniards it was a fiasco. My brave men were able to capture nearly three hundred of the best Spanish soldiers from the fortress in the harbor. I am sure you received my reports," Santa Anna responded, posturing.

"General Echávarri tells a different version, General."

"A different version," Santa Anna repeated with an utterly bewildered and counterfeit expression.

"Sí. He says you betrayed him and engaged in a conspiracy with General Lemaur. He says he narrowly escaped capture at the hands of the Spanish troops, who somehow seemed to know exactly where he was, while the support troops you promised him never showed up at the pre-determined location. I have all the details in the letter he sent me after he escaped capture by the Spaniards."

"My Emperor, I cannot even find words to respond to these absurd charges. General Echávarri is someone I've always admired greatly, sir. He's a fine military commander, and I have been honored to serve under him as commander of the State of Veracruz. However, sir, I must say that for whatever reason, General Echávarri does not have command of the facts on this particular incident. We captured nearly three hundred Spanish soldiers, sir."

"I am aware of that fact, General," the emperor said sternly.

Santa Anna continued, undeterred. "I think that it is entirely possible there was some miscommunication on the timing and location of the troops who were to support General Echávarri. But, sir, it was my contingent that forced General Lemaur to retreat to the harbor fortress of San Juan de Ulua."

"I told you, General, that I am already aware of that," Iturbide growled.

"My Emperor," said Santa Anna, pleading for reason to prevail in the discussion, "perhaps General Echávarri was jealous of our success and ashamed of his performance during the raid by the Spaniards. Far be it for me to accuse my superior of such weaknesses, Your Highness, but the events in October at Veracruz were a great success in the defense of your empire. While General Echávarri himself may not have experienced success on his mission, it was a great day for you, sir, and it was a great day for our country."

Iturbide weighed Santa Anna's words. "General, I have decided to reassign you to a new post effective immediately. You are to report to Mexico City at once," the emperor commanded.

"Yes, sir, Your Highness," Santa Anna replied obediently. "I'll leave for the capital city within a matter of days, if that is acceptable?"

"That will be fine, General," Iturbide answered, taken a bit by surprise at Santa Anna's obedience. "When you arrive in the capital, you will wait for me to return. Then we can discuss your next

assignment. In the meantime, I will remain in this area and go on to Veracruz, so I can evaluate the Spanish strength at the harbor fortress.”

“—It might not be necessary for you to go to that trouble, Your Highness. I’d be happy to brief you on that question,” Santa Anna offered. “We thoroughly interrogated all of the prisoners we captured during General Lemaur’s failed attack on Veracruz. I’m happy to report that Lemaur’s strength at San Juan de Ulua has been greatly diminished,” Santa Anna added with satisfaction.

Thus apprised of the situation in Veracruz, Iturbide left Manga de Clavo for the capital city under the assumption that Santa Anna would quickly settle his affairs as military commander of the state of Veracruz and then report promptly to Mexico City as ordered. Yet Iturbide’s surprising faith in what he had found to be a strangely compliant Santa Anna would soon prove to be a catastrophically poor judgment call on the part of the doomed emperor.

Indeed, even as Iturbide departed Santa Anna’s hacienda for his return trip to the capital, he began to regret the day he had made Santa Anna the military commander of Veracruz. While the state of Veracruz still held the lucrative customs house in the port city of the same name, Iturbide seriously suspected that Santa Anna had been treating his military and political position as an open invitation to avail himself of a significant percentage of the tariffs collected. The impressive amenities just witnessed at Manga de Clavo only heightened the emperor’s suspicions that Santa Anna was stealing from the tariff revenues.

With the Spanish garrison at San Juan de Ulua continuously harassing shipping in the harbor, the depleted yet persistent and effective royal forces were able to reduce to a trickle the legal imports brought into the city of Veracruz. In ceding a portion of the already shrunken tariff revenue to the corruption of Santa Anna, Iturbide had also severely compromised his government’s treasury coffers. Iturbide further began to speculate that Juan Estrada, the man in charge of day-to-day operations at the customs house, was likely a willing co-conspirator in the graft ever since Santa Anna’s appointment. Iturbide knew it was quite probable that there were two sets of transaction records kept at the port and guessed that one set was kept for Santa Anna and Estrada—and another to show to any of Iturbide’s men who might audit the tariff revenue. The emperor lastly understood how both of these men could simply blame the Spanish garrison’s control of the harbor for the diminished revenue.

Iturbide hoped that all of these problems would change for the better when Santa Anna reported to the capital for “reassignment.” Iturbide planned to assign a more trustworthy general, perhaps José Antonio de Echávarri, to personally ensure that all the tariff revenue made its way into the emperor’s treasury in the capital.

However, Santa Anna was already reconsidering his recall to the capital, as he gathered a few soldiers for his sudden trip to Veracruz the next day. Apart from the men he took with him to Veracruz, the general also decided to bring Father Noriega. No explanation was offered other than the simple request for the padre to pack some bags for a short trip to Veracruz. Noriega joined the general in the carriage, and Santa Anna next ordered the drivers to speed towards Veracruz.



Francisco Moya squinted and took another long drag on his cigar. The breeze had picked up, and it swiftly carried Moya’s playful smoke rings out past the porch where they instantly dissolved in the cooling air. “I don’t mean to interrupt, Father, but if you could backtrack for a moment, please: how did you know what transpired during the meeting between Iturbide and el Presidente?”

The padre smiled and tapped the ashes off of his own cigar. “I could say it was my overwhelming curiosity to discover how the meeting might relate to the recent mission I had been sent on to Puebla and the capital; just as truthful, though, is the little-known fact that having to almost daily listen to and

witness countless personal confessions creates some unhealthy tendencies, such as habitual eavesdropping. It's an occupational hazard—for some priests more than others," Noriega said and grinned at his own awkward confession. "I was standing by the door just outside the sitting room," he explained, "and I cracked the door so I could hear just about every word.

"The most interesting bits of conversation I already mentioned. The rest of the meeting was spent with Santa Anna giving the emperor detailed information on what was left of the Spanish garrison at San Juan de Ulua, but of course the whole talk was a two-way ruse."

"A two-way ruse?" Moya asked.

"Sí. Iturbide was there at the hacienda under the guise of concern for the strength of the Spanish at San Juan de Ulua and the safety of Veracruz. But the emperor's real desire at that time was to transfer Santa Anna to the capital, so he could neutralize him as a political threat.

"El Presidente was meanwhile exhibiting extraordinary cooperation for the benefit of the emperor so that he would be allowed time to go to the customs office at Veracruz to clean up his arrangements with the tariff collections. I also suspected Santa Anna himself had not yet decided if he would accept recall to the capital. And I was right; because it wasn't long before I was riding on that next trip to Veracruz with el Presidente and he finally began to trust me and tell me everything—most of which, though he was unaware, I already knew."



As the carriage bounced along the bumpy and poorly maintained road to Veracruz that December in 1822, Padre Noriega looked at Santa Anna for several seconds after the general gave him full disclosure of his conversation with Iturbide. Noriega considered with some astonishment the general's dull, dimly lit eyes and how they seemed to ooze from their small, coal-black pockets the cold sense of trepidation. The effect was slight, the moment ever so brief; indeed, well before the ensuing discussion had ceased, the sun was pouring through the carriage window once more, and again the priest was only able to see his own lustrous reflection in the general's proud, youthful eyes. Still the glimpse had been enough for the padre to continue with his advice and maintain the oddly fond relationship he had with this endlessly fascinating and vexing man.

The carriage continued to bounce gently down the road to Veracruz, and the padre hesitated an instant longer with his response.

"You want my opinion, General," the padre finally said.

"Sí, Marcelino." It was the first time he had called the padre by his first name.

"Well, General, I think the emperor does not trust you any longer, and that it's going to be extremely dangerous for you when you go to the capital."

"But, Marcelino, I told you the emperor said he has a new assignment for me," the General responded, wanting to test the padre's reasoning.

"That is what the emperor says, General, but, I believe your original suspicions of the emperor have now been confirmed."

"Why do you now think this, Padre?"

"Why? Because he arrived unannounced at your hacienda with a large contingent of armed troops and ordered you to return to the capital."

"Please continue, Padre."

"There's a chance I am wrong, General, and the emperor was simply going to reassign you to another command, sir, but I think it's more likely that he half-expected a fight from you when he arrived here in the state of Veracruz. I think when you return to the capital, you may well be jailed and put on trial. It would not be hard for him to develop charges against you there.

“And as you know, General, once he has possession of you with the full force of the monarchy in the capital, he would be in control. With what we already know about the emperor, he’s not in a good position right now. This is possibly an early sign that he intends to eliminate those whom he considers political or military threats.”

“That’s possible,” the general replied with a nod.

The two men rode along in the luxurious carriage in silence for a couple of miles. The padre pushed down with his hands on the plush seat cushions and looked at the soft-textured fabrics lining the walls and even the ceiling in crimson. Noriega found himself wishing he had been in such a comfortable carriage on his trip to Puebla and the capital. The difference between the carriage and his mule-drawn wagon was remarkable. The carriage seemed to handle the bumps in the road incredibly smoothly compared to the stiff buckboard on which he and Francisco had been riding.

“I have an assignment for you, Padre,” the general finally spoke again.

“Yes, General.”

“I want you to discuss politics with the church officials in Veracruz when we arrive.” Reaching into his pocket, Santa Anna gave Father Noriega a handful of pesos. “I know this isn’t much, Father, but it is a start. When you arrive, I want you to offer this to the church dignitaries in Veracruz on my behalf and measure their reaction.

“I would also like to know what the church hierarchy thinks of this monarchy as a form of government. I must tell you, Padre, that General Guadalupe Victoria was at the hacienda when you returned from the capital a few days ago,” he admitted. “He called on me to help him mount an insurgency against Iturbide. Victoria believes it is in Mexico’s long-term interests to terminate this monarchy and instead form a republic. I would like to know what the church thinks about this idea.”

“I’ll do my best to gather information, General, but I don’t think the church would want to take sides in a rebellion or civil war.”

“Still, I want you to test the attitudes of the clergy in Veracruz.”

“As you wish. When we arrive in Veracruz, please take me to the Iglesia de San Francisco. My friend, Father Enrique Cervantes, is most likely at that church. Father Cervantes may well be the most educated and astute man I know in all of Mexico, General.”

Santa Anna listened attentively. “Have you known this Father Cervantes for long?”

“I’ve known him for many years. As I said, he is extremely well-educated and well-traveled. He has lived in Europe and has studied economics, politics, literature, and other disciplines under the guidance of business people and learned scholars.”

“You seem to have great confidence in this man’s intellect and training as a thinker.”

“His knowledge of commerce was fostered long before he decided to enter the seminary.”

“You believe I should assign great value to his opinions then,” Santa Anna observed.

“Beyond all else, General. Father Cervantes is an independent thinker. While this tendency has most likely curtailed any chance he might have for advancement in the church, he is perpetually curious and constantly aware. He’s also told me on many occasions how he has no interest in any ambitious plans for his ecclesiastic career. If anyone within the church community in Veracruz can give us an objective sense of the overall attitudes, it will be Father Cervantes.”

Santa Anna nodded. When the carriage stopped for a water break a few minutes later, the general instructed the drivers to stop first at the Iglesia de San Francisco near the harbor in Veracruz.

Chapter Thirteen

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The World According to Cervantes

The oldest and most historically significant seaport on the eastern coast of Mexico, the city of Veracruz enjoyed the enviable position of being the port with the exclusive right to foreign commerce during the colonial period, though this exclusive right was merely a legal distinction. Smuggling became perhaps Mexico's biggest industry in response to the crown's restrictions on commerce. Yet seventy-five percent of all silver bound for Spain during the colonial period still passed through Veracruz.

Items of trade arriving at Acapulco on Mexico's Pacific coast were even shipped across the country to Veracruz, if the final destination of the goods was Spain. Veracruz was the legal gateway into New Spain for all goods coming from the home country or from anywhere else in Europe.

The bird population of Veracruz also made an impression on anyone visiting. Zopilotes, great black vultures, dominated the rooftops and were likely to swoop down to street level at any time of day. In addition to prisoners from the jails who were occasionally released to clean the streets, the birds kept the streets free of garbage.

Originally the buildings in the city of Veracruz were made of wood. However, fires had burned all of the structures to the ground several times since the arrival of Hernán Cortés. Eventually, the coral-laden harbor was repeatedly scraped and mined for building materials, and so nearly all of the construction in the city was built with foundations of this coral base.

When the carriage arrived in Veracruz at the church of San Francisco, Father Noriega climbed down and took his battered trunk towards the church steps.

Santa Anna looked out the carriage window. "I don't know precisely when I'll return. Wait for me here at the church."

The padre agreed, and Santa Anna instructed the driver to continue to the waterfront. Santa Anna was unsure what he would do with the balance of the day, but he was certain that from the waterfront he would immediately send a messenger out in a boat to San Juan de Ulua to contact the Spanish general, Francisco Lemaur.

As the carriage rolled away, Father Noriega turned and went inside the church. The church was empty, and the day's occasionally clouded sun permitted only a darkly illuminated interior as it slowly seeped in through the deep green, red, and solemn blue hues of the stained glass windows. Noriega went to the altar and used the opportunity to pray and remained in prayer for several minutes before he sat down in one of the pews and began to read the Scriptures.

After about an hour of prayer and devotion to his Bible, Noriega finally heard noises coming from the back of the church. He closed his Bible and went to the office in the rear where his good friend, Father Enrique Cervantes, had just arrived and was preparing to work at his desk.

"Marcelino!" Father Cervantes cried when he saw Noriega appear in the doorway. "What an unexpected surprise! What brings you here today?" he asked, moving towards Noriega for a welcoming embrace.

A handsome man with expressive hazel eyes and short, light-brown hair, Father Cervantes stood firmly at nearly six feet tall and looked at a slightly downward angle at his old friend.

"It's good to see you again, Enrique," Noriega smiled. "General Santa Anna has business to attend to here in Veracruz, and he asked me to come along on the trip and speak with you."

"Santa Anna is here, eh? Well, my old amigo, how is life now that you're working for the general?"

"Oh, fine. As you may know, Father, the general is building a parish near Xalapa, where I can serve the Lord once it is completed."

"So, Marcelino, you're moving up in the church. Pretty good for a Mestizo cura who once seemed destined to languish in the villages," Cervantes joked. "Tell me, how is construction of your new parish coming along?"

"A bit slowly lately, Enrique. The general has been preoccupied with matters muy importantes."

"Important matters, eh?"

“Sí, Father. In fact, the emperor himself visited Manga de Clavo just the other day to recall Santa Anna to the capital for a new assignment.”

“Personally recalled by Agustín himself,” Father Cervantes said with concern. “What will Santa Anna’s next assignment be?”

“We don’t know,” Noriega said cautiously. He trusted Father Cervantes but did not wish to convey his suspicions that Santa Anna’s future might be tenuous if Iturbide’s orders were followed.

“*We?*” Cervantes repeated. “It would seem that you and Santa Anna have become rather close, Father.”

“Sí. The general appears to have some respect for my views,” Noriega said, finishing the point. “Enrique, would you mind if I asked a few questions of you, amigo?”

“Marcelino! You know you can ask me anything. You are my friend, and I love to lecture.” Cervantes paused. “You know, Marcelino, I’ve noticed for a long time that you’re a very rare priest.”

“Rare?”

“Yes. You are rare because you honor your sacred vows, and you understand your primary responsibilities as a man of God more than anyone I know.”

“You exaggerate almost everything about me, Enrique, but you know how to make me feel good about my walk with God.”

Noriega’s tone then changed. “Father, the questions I ask must be kept confidential. I wouldn’t want anyone to know that I have made these inquiries.”

“Of course, Marcelino. I’m not sure what you’re going to ask me, but whatever I can answer I will be happy to help; and this conversation will be kept confidential, as you wish. We’ll treat it as a confession, Father.”

“Qué bueno, Enrique,” Noriega said with a sense of relief. “First, Santa Anna is concerned with the structure of the government in Mexico since independence, Father. He and many others in the military are displeased with the way the emperor has taken power away from Congress and with the way he’s conducted the nation’s financial affairs. The general is wondering what the people here in Veracruz are saying about this concept of a native monarchy.”

“I suppose it depends on which people you ask about it.”

“—What about church officials?” Noriega asked and shifted his sitting position.

“You get right to the point, Father. Now it’s my turn to request confidentiality, Padre. I don’t wish for my responses today to be assigned to me. What I am willing to tell you, I tell you anonymously, amigo.”

“Agreed.”

Cervantes got up from behind his desk, looked out the door of his office in both directions, and closed the door behind him before returning to his seat. “Marcelino, the structure of the government of our country is not the church leadership’s primary concern. As you know, the church hierarchy was opposed to independence. It is critical to recognize that the church desires status quo most of all. You realize, amigo, the irony that despite opposition to independence, the church now holds more political and economic power in Mexico than it did prior to independence. Clearly the archbishop in the capital feels very fortunate with the way independence has evolved so far, and I suspect he’d like to keep things exactly as they are now.”

“But what about the views of the priests in outlying areas, Enrique?”

“You mean the views of people like you and me, Marcelino.” The two friends exchanged a smile. “By and large, I think the priests in the smaller parishes are not politically sensitive. They understand as you do so well, my friend, that our duty is to serve the Lord. Of course, there’s more to it than this. Those of us who do think for ourselves in a political sense also know very well that we aren’t the ones who make church policy. We all know that the Catholic Church is hardly a democracy, eh?”

“What about people outside the clergy here in Veracruz, Father? What is your sense of their attitude towards this new monarchy?”

“Again, Marcelino, it depends on their profession and their lot in life. The Indios and mulatos are mostly uneducated and illiterate. With their poor and rural existences, they’re not allowed the resources to form firm political opinions. I doubt that one-quarter of them even know that Mexico is now independent, and probably they didn’t even know precisely where political authority rested before independence.

“On the other hand, the Gachupines and wealthy Criollos around here tend to support the monarchy just as the church hierarchy does. These people want their special privileges to continue, and they’re suspicious of the liberalism sweeping over Europe and up north in the los Estados Unidos.”

“Yes, liberalism,” Noriega said with uncertainty, seeking clarification. “I must profess ignorance with regards to what people really mean when they mention this new liberalism.”

“Well, it’s a bit new here,” Father Cervantes smiled and poured a glass of water for himself and one for Noriega, “and also a little complex. In Europe, there are many intellectuals and merchants who are tired of being dominated by monarchs and church leadership.”

“There are not many intellectuals in Mexico,” observed Noriega.

“More intellectuals are here than you might think, Father—according to many of the visiting dignitaries, business people, and scholars with whom I’ve spoken. There have been massive political changes in England and France in recent years, and those changes are having an impact even here. While the Spanish Crown still desperately clings to the power that Ferdinand the Seventh finally regained when Napoleon was defeated, the Spanish Monarchy is rapidly making changes to accommodate these aggressive, reform-minded liberals in Spain.”

“What sort of reforms are you speaking about, Enrique?”

“Well, in Europe, the intellectuals who have been fighting for social equality and true fairness in commercial opportunities are now firmly backed by new wealth. All over Europe merchants are making new fortunes as trade is developed and enhanced and new goods and services are distributed. These new merchants have grown very tired of artificial social barriers—like birthrights—that separate many people from the most basic opportunities. They’re tired of barriers being erected by monarchies and church leadership that prevent the ability of the merchants to increase their prosperity. Sure, the liberal intellectuals philosophically lament the concentration of wealth in the hands of those born into privilege, but the poor continue to suffer, as they always do. So the aggressive new business community in Europe and los Estados Unidos is meanwhile seeking unregulated freedom to trade and prosper, and they are succeeding.”

“Is this the same basic attitude of the liberal minds and new wealth in Veracruz?”

“That’s probably an oversimplification, Father. It’s my sense that the intellectuals in Veracruz despise Emperor Iturbide as well as the idea of a monarchy, and the smaller merchants and the lawyers don’t like the idea of a monarchy either. On the other hand, many of the Criollo business merchants are satisfied enough with the current arrangements in Mexico.”

“What about the Gachupines?”

“Ah, the Gachupines,” Cervantes sighed. “This is a big part of our problem in Mexico, Father.”

“The Gachupines are still part of our problem? Even since independence?”

“Yes, Padre, but don’t forget: I, too, am a Gachupín,” Cervantes smiled.

“Sorry, Father. I didn’t mean to imply that you specifically were a problem.”

“No es nada. I’m not a typical Gachupín. Like you, Marcelino, I concluded a long time ago that it’s wasteful to have an interest in storing up earthly treasures, even though I could have leveraged my birthright. But let’s return to the first question you posed to me, amigo.”

Noriega nodded and took a drink of his water. “I think I forgot what it was,” he laughed with a little embarrassment.

“Look around you,” Cervantes said with new emphasis rising in his voice. “The Gachupines have been fleeing Mexico rapidly. They’re now a convenient political target for all other groups, since they have enjoyed birthright privileges under the crown for more than three hundred years. And since they’re despised for their current positions, it’s not at all unpopular when Iturbide and his generals seize the properties of these Gachupines. Of course through outright confiscation, they enrich themselves”.

“Sí, I’ve seen the confiscations.”

“In fact, I suspect your good friend Santa Anna has himself engaged in confiscation at the expense of Gachupines.”

Noriega nodded again. “But what does all this mean to the monarchy, Father? I don’t understand why the departure of the Gachupines and the mistreatment of the remaining Gachupines is such a serious problem for all of Mexico?”

“Mexico is not Europe, amigo. Mexico is not the los Estados Unidos, either.”

“What do you mean?”

“Europe has evolved towards liberalism through revolution. Unlike here in Mexico, the power of the Catholic Church has been curtailed in most of Western Europe. In Europe, the power of the monarchies was reduced sometimes peacefully but more often after significant bloodshed. And with los Estados Unidos, the English monarchy was also rejected nearly fifty years ago after several years of revolution. Actually, the men I speak with who are from the North tell me that los Estados Unidos was established, as much as anything else, as the result of a tax revolt against the English crown.”

“A tax revolt? Is that really true?”

“Yes, very much so. You see, Father, the English colonials in los Estados Unidos rejected the entire system of subjugation imposed on them by their monarch. The leadership in the independent United States briefly considered but quickly rejected the idea of creating a monarchy after they had just gained their independence from the English monarchy. But again: Mexico is not the United States. The crown in England was never like the crown of Spain.

“Commerce in New Spain was controlled by the crown in ways you can’t comprehend unless you examine and understand the existence of the far less encumbered systems of other colonial empires in the Western Hemisphere. Like with los Estados Unidos: commercial activities were not nearly as completely regulated and controlled by the English monarchy as those same activities were controlled here in New Spain under Spanish rule. The English never really controlled los Estados Unidos, because American merchants were allowed to do business based on their abilities and energies, rather than their political connections to the English monarch and his administrators.”

“And the church in los Estados Unidos?” Noriega asked.

“The church indeed!” answered Cervantes. “In los Estados Unidos the Catholic Church was never a truly powerful force. In Mexico, however, the church is not just a spiritual institution but also a political institution with enormous commercial power.

“In los Estados Unidos, the Catholic Church is mostly just one of many religious institutions. There the Catholic Church does not come even close to wielding the kind of overwhelming power as it does here.”

“How is it that the church is so different in los Estados Unidos?”

Cervantes smiled. “For one thing: there’s no such thing as mandatory tithes. Do you understand the enormous wealth and power that mandatory tithes create for the church in Mexico, Father?”

“I guess I never thought about such things until now, Father,” Noriega admitted.

“And another thing, Marcelino: there are Protestant churches everywhere beyond our northern borders—”

“—I’m sorry, but I’m still confused, Father. What does all of this discussion of Europe, los Estados Unidos, Protestant churches, and mandatory tithes mean for the monarchy here in Mexico?”

“In short? That it will fail,” Cervantes answered.

“How can you be so sure?”

“There are many things that make me sure, Father. The first is the spread of liberalism all over the world. Mexico has delayed this phenomenon temporarily, but liberalism is a modern philosophy,” he shrugged and then added as if it was already a forgone conclusion: “It will be tried here, too, before much longer.”

Chapter Fourteen

~ The Plan of Casa Mata

There was a pounding on the door of Father Cervantes’s office followed by a cry from another priest.

“Father Cervantes! Father Cervantes!” Padre Alba called with urgency. “Are you in there, Father?”

Cervantes leapt from his chair and quickly opened the door. “Yes, Father, what’s wrong?”

“It’s General Santa Anna!” Alba exclaimed, still breathing hard. “He’s declared a republic for Mexico!”

“He has?” Cervantes said stoically and glanced at Noriega.

“Father Alba, this is Father Noriega,” Cervantes introduced the two priests.

Noriega and Alba nodded at one another and shook hands.

“But how do you know of this news?” Cervantes asked Padre Alba.

“The general has troops with him in the plaza right now. He sent his soldiers into the city to gather a crowd. One of the soldiers spoke to me and told me to meet in the plaza to hear the general speak. Shortly after I got there, Santa Anna made the declaration in a speech. And he’s still speaking.”

Noriega and Cervantes looked at each other again.

“Let’s go hear the rest of this speech,” Cervantes said.

Once the priests waded through a buzzing swarm of spectators towards the center of the plaza, they saw that Santa Anna had assembled roughly four hundred troops with him. Word of his recall by Emperor Iturbide had not yet reached the ranks of the soldiers on the coast, though rumors were circulating amongst the officer corps that a new commander of the state of Veracruz would be named before long.

The speech had ended by the time the three padres arrived, but many of the citizens who had heard the general’s declaration were still nearby. The priests overheard some of the citizens discussing the speech. Some expressed open support for Santa Anna, while others said little and even showed skepticism or disinterest on their dubious faces.

Santa Anna saw Noriega and the fellow clergymen approaching and broke away from a group of officers. He approached Noriega with a grin on his face: “Father, we must speak privately.”

Noriega quickly introduced the general to Father Cervantes and Father Alba before he and Santa Anna stepped away far enough from the crowd.

Santa Anna looked at Noriega, and the priest looked back at him wordlessly. Noriega waited for the general to provide an explanation. Finally, the gregarious Santa Anna could not stand the silence.

“I thought about what you said, Father,” he volunteered.

“You did?” Noriega said with a puzzled look.

“With concerns to returning to the capital according to Iturbide’s orders—I decided you were right. It would be dangerous.”

“And this?” Noriega said, looking around.

“Well, Father, this is dangerous, too, but the country is ready for it.”

“Are you sure, General? Would you like to hear my report regarding the clergy?”

“Your report?”

“You asked me to report to you after visiting with Father Cervantes here in Veracruz.”

“Of course, Father,” the general nodded. “Well, as you can tell, things have moved quickly for me since my arrival. I’d really like to hear a report on your discussion with Father Cervantes, but I don’t have time for it now. There’s much to do for the new republic.”

Noriega conveyed neither agreement nor disappointment.

“Father, I have another mission for you.”

“Yes, General?” Noriega answered and realized he was still in no position to refuse service to the general.

“I want you to continue to gather information for me. However, this may be the last time we see one another for a few weeks.”

“Why?”

“Because, Padre, I don’t want you associated with me publicly right now. It will not be safe for you to take sides in the coming battles. You’ll have to remain neutral, at least on the surface for some time.”

Noriega could not help but grin. The confident charm of the general made it impossible for him to dislike the man.

“I gathered information for you today, General, but you don’t seem the least bit interested in it,” Noriega sparred.

“All right, Marcelino. What information do you have for me?”

“Nada,” Noriega shrugged. “Nothing that won’t keep now that you’ve declared a republic for Mexico. By the way, can you loan me a horse, General?”

“Sí, Father. In fact, I can do better than that. I’ll loan you a wagon.”

“How will we communicate when I have any useful information, General?”

“You can write to me. Try to code your letters somewhat if you can; but when you have something important to communicate, write a letter and send a messenger with the note tucked away in a Bible. Address the letters to Francisco Moya, in case your messenger is captured. I suspect our glorious emperor will eventually become desperate once this republic movement overwhelms him,” Santa Anna said.

“Do you have any support beyond the troops here in Veracruz?” Noriega asked.

“I expect Guadalupe Victoria to support the Plan of Casa Mata,” the general said with a trace of a smirk.

“What makes you so sure?”

“We wrote and signed the plan together at Manga de Clavo not long ago.”

“Will there be others who support you and General Victoria?”

“What do you think?” Santa Anna asked.

“I think—there will be others. Liberalism is spreading in this hemisphere.”

“Sí, liberalism. . . . Remind me to learn more about this philosophy someday. I like learning, Father, but only if I don’t have to read a book. I’ve only read one book in my entire life, Father.”

Noriega didn’t dare ask about the book the general had read. He decided to simply hope it was the Bible.

One of Santa Anna’s officers joined the two men. “I must go now, Father,” the general said. “Please pray for me as you prayed for my roosters.” He looked up with his ever-infectious smile. “What is it you always say: you pray for ‘God’s will?’ Let’s pray for that again, por favor.”

“Vaya con Dios, General,” Noriega said softly. He then smiled privately within himself, sighing at the general’s lack of understanding that God’s will always prevails; that most likely it lies, clandestine, in a dark alcove of the starry universe, far removed from the mere desires of men, no matter how passionate, striving, or ambitious. Still he managed to say as he always had: “Sí, General. I will pray for God’s will.”

Santa Anna had sent a message to the fort at San Juan de Ulua earlier that day seeking the support of the Spaniards. The response from Brigadier General Lemauro was immediate and positive.

Santa Anna followed up with an offer to also share the increases in tariff revenue if the Spanish General would allow ships to pass in and out of the harbor without harassment. Again, Lemauro quickly agreed.

Santa Anna sent a final note late in the day to General Lemauro indicating that they should have a meeting once Xalapa was captured. Again, Lemauro assented.

Noriega walked back to where Father Cervantes and Father Alba were standing after he finished his conversation with Santa Anna. The priests looked inquiringly but did not say a word.

“We should go to the church and pray for our country,” Noriega managed. Cervantes and Alba nodded, and the three padres began to walk across the plaza and back to the church of San Francisco.

Chapter Fifteen

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On the Road to Xalapa

The end of the remaining few inches of Moya’s still smoldering cigar punctuated the pause in the padre’s last recapitulated episode with an ochre glow. Moya looked thoughtfully at Noriega. “You know, Father, everyone at the hacienda wondered why you disappeared for so long after you and el Presidente went to Veracruz when he declared a republic. We wondered if you had defected from the general.”

Noriega smiled. “I had thought about that, amigo.”

“Why didn’t you leave? I guess you knew that el Presidente would prevail against Iturbide, right?”

“No. I didn’t know the general would prevail.”

“I’m curious then: what did you do after you left el Presidente in Veracruz?”

“The first thing I did was pray.”

“What did you pray—for Santa Anna to prevail?”

“No, amigo, I prayed for guidance from the Lord.”

“Guidance from the Lord? So you didn’t you pray for el Presidente’s victory?”

“Santa Anna’s victory or defeat was not foremost on my mind.”

“No?”

“—I serve the Lord, amigo, and the Scriptures teach me that the Lord has better things to do than get involved in the political battles of most human beings. No, my prayers sought God’s will for *myself* in the matter.”

“God’s will for you?” Moya asked, still confused.

“Yes, my friend. Each of us must regularly seek God’s will for our lives. By this I mean that each of us must seek understanding of what the Lord asks of us. I already knew that if it was God’s will, then Santa Anna would prevail against his political and military opponents. What I wanted to know from the Lord was what He wanted me to do to manage my own walk with Him, so to prevail against my enemy.”

“But you have no enemies, Father. Everyone I’ve ever met admires you.”

“You’re very good, Francisco, but a little naïve. I have the same enemy we all have: el Diablo. But this battle with evil has been going on throughout human history. Some people give different names to the evil: murder, greed, slavery, theft, gluttony—whatever. We in the church call it all the same. El Diablo. So I prayed to the Lord to guide me through this new situation in my life so I would continue to walk with the Lord in opposition to those forces.”

“Of course, Father,” Moya said with a feeble smile. “How foolish of me.”

“The simplest prayer is always the best prayer, my friend. We all have times where we forget to ask the Lord to lead us away from temptation, and my fear was that Santa Anna might be a temptation for me to avoid.

“After I prayed, though, I decided to assist el Presidente. I received a sense through my prayers that I would wind up in a better position to save more souls if I stayed on and continued to help el Presidente.”

“Did you stay long in Veracruz after you left the hacienda with el Presidente? It seemed that way; we didn’t celebrate mass at the hacienda for many months. I think you were even gone during Christmas that year.”

Noriega took a final drag on his cigar and stubbed it out on the porch. “I stayed in Veracruz two months, amigo, from early December of . . . what year was that? Oh, from December of 1822 until early February of 1823. I spent most of the time with Father Cervantes.”

“And did Santa Anna quickly defeat Iturbide, Father?”

“No, amigo—not right away. There were setbacks for el Presidente at first.”



“Do you have men selected to carry my message, Colonel?” Santa Anna spoke impatiently to Colonel Roberto Zamora. Zamora was at about eye level to the general and proudly stood his ground despite his rank and the severe acne scars on his face. The two men stood near the harbor in Veracruz, well within earshot of the frothing sea during the spring of 1823.

“Sí, General. I have selected the best horsemen in the division. They will change into civilian clothes, as you have requested, and each will carry a message to the military commander in every state. Within a short matter of weeks, all of Mexico will be aware of the Plan de Casa Mata.”

“Let’s hope that our brothers around the country are willing to take up the cause for liberty,” Santa Anna said.

Zamora was encouraging. “I think you will find, General, that there will be plenty of support for your declaration of a republic in our country. Many of the liberals were angry with Iturbide after he staged that charade in Mexico City where he made it appear as if the masses demanded that he become emperor. Now that he’s castrated Congress and made excuses for not paying his soldiers, I think you will find his support very shallow during our battle for a republic.”

“Perhaps, Colonel. Or maybe we are in for the fight of our lives.”

A few days later, Santa Anna was riding another one of his customary but nonetheless stunning white horses while he advanced with his soldiers, most of them recent conscripts whom he was able to amass into an army back in Veracruz. The general and his men headed towards Xalapa, where Santa Anna had made plans to storm the city that rested just west of his beloved hacienda.

When the general approached the area known as Plan del Río on the National Road, one of his scouts returned on foot. A junior officer led the scout to the general.

“This man has valuable information for you, sir,” Captain Jaramillo offered.

Santa Anna dismounted his white horse and looked the scout in the eye. “Agua,” the general ordered over his shoulder, “Pronto!”

One of the native conscripts brought along to take care of the drinking water appeared with a pottery cup for drinking. The native soon after scurried off with the water jug and empty cup, and Santa Anna wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“Well, señor,” the general returned his gaze to the scout, “what information do you have for me?”

The scout, also a native, was temporarily mesmerized by the presence and grandeur of Santa Anna’s uniform and medals. He also felt with some bitterness how he could have used some of the drinking

water as well. He then spoke with his parched throat through an interpreter: “There are soldiers up ahead at Plan del Río.”

“How many men?” the general asked.

The scout hesitated, and the interpreter improvised. “It sounds like a single detachment of Imperial Grenadiers, General.”

“Imperial Grenadiers, eh? Those are supposedly some of Iturbide’s most elite troops, Captain,” he said to Jaramillo.

Jaramillo nodded. He was a tall man with dark eyes and wavy black hair that glistened in the sun.

“Do you think if we surprised them they might consider joining us?” Santa Anna asked.

Jaramillo reflected on the question briefly. “It’s possible, General. If we are able to surprise them—and if they don’t join us—they’ll know that we are in a position to kill them.”

“—I don’t want to kill them, Captain. I want to create some initial success for the republic movement we have started. Dead bodies create enemies. But maybe like those in the capital, these soldiers have not been paid for some time and are looking for new amigos.”

“If we can catch them off guard, General, then I think we can create some incentives for them to join the republic movement.”

“Let’s wait until the siesta this afternoon, Captain. When these Imperial Grenadiers go to sleep, we’ll try to sneak up on them. I suspect they’ll understand the futility of their position. Also, I want all men to hold their fire unless I give the command to shoot,” Santa Anna ordered. “Let’s try to gather some strength for this fighting unit without spilling any blood, *entiende?*”