

Chapter 3

María Úrsula de Veramendi

I packed away my weaponry and my male clothing, and for the next few months I became a respectable young lady. I attended mass regularly, took communion, and went to confession. My first confession was the most awkward, not so much because I had to admit to having killed three men, but because I was loath to repent those killings, and without repentance, absolution is impossible. Eventually, I learned to equivocate, for I simply had to remain on good terms with the Church until after I had performed my duties as *madrina* at Agustina's wedding.

Whilst *don* Martín drove a great herd of longhorn cattle to market in New Orleans, *doña* Patricia and her three unmarried daughters passed the time at the De León town home in Béxar. Agustina and I were thus afforded the opportunity for a lovely reunion. We saw each other every day. Often we went riding in the city, as once we had done at Rancho Chiltipiquin. Whenever Plácido called upon Agustina, it was I, inevitably, who would be asked to oversee their meetings. And so I grew yet closer to them both. I met others of their friends and acquaintances as well, most notably María Úrsula de Veramendi, daughter of the former *alcalde* of San Antonio de Béxar, now vice governor of the Province of Coahuila y Tejas. My class-conscious grandfather was absolutely astonished at my circle of friends.

I became acquainted also with one José Carbajal, who was now paying suit to María del Refugio. Often Francisca and I together would chaperone the two courting couples. José, I learned, was a protégé of *Empresario* Stephen F Austin. A year or two earlier, on a business trip to the United States, José had converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, which fact earned him *doña* Patricia's strong disapproval. Still, she did not forbid him to call on her daughter, for to have done so might well have condemned Refugio to spinsterhood. Refugio was not, after all, a great beauty, as was each of her

sisters. Nor had she a particularly winsome personality. The fact is, José was the first young man ever to show any interest in Refugio.

I found José level-headed, practical, and down-to-earth. He was intelligent and ambitious. He seemed to have character and integrity, but he was no more attractive than was Refugio. He would never have got a second glance from me. I fall in love at the drop of a hat, but José would not have caused my heart even the least flutter. Still, I was happy to count him amongst my friends.

Eventually, *don* Martín's great trail drive came to an end, and Agustina and her mother and sisters returned to the *rancho* to welcome him home. Not long thereafter I received a letter from Agustina saying that a date had been set for her wedding to Plácido. She reminded me that I had promised to be one of her *madrinas*. Úrsula was to be another. My rôle was to carry the bouquet; Úrsula's was to carry a Bible and a rosary.