

Chapter 4

Hostería Ballardo

To attract custom, my grandfather bought whatever periodicals in English or Spanish found their way to Béxar. He would then lay them out on tables in the *taberna* for anyone to read. And so it was that Hostería Ballardo gradually evolved into one of the centers of intellectual life in Béxar. Poets and philosophers gathered here for discussion and debate; likewise, patriots and politicians, and eventually, firebrand revolutionaries. Erastus Smith (related to me through marriage) and Juan Seguín were regular patrons of ours; Ben Milam and David Burnet were known to stop by from time to time. Stephen F Austin and a young lawyer, William Barret Travis, put in appearances whenever the two of them managed to be in town at the same time.

I cared not for the endless arguments. I could not begin to appreciate how anyone could be so certain that one position is right and all others are wrong. Still, I read and reread every magazine, newspaper, pamphlet, and broadside that came our way. *The Saturday Evening Post* was a particular favorite of mine, though, of course, it typically arrived in Tejas weeks or even months after publication. The more I learned of the world, the hungrier I was to know more. When Úrsula heard of my eagerness to educate myself, she began surreptitiously loaning me rare volumes from her father's personal library.

She and her new husband were living with her parents, whose home, at least to my eyes, was as grand as King Arthur's castle. Colonel Bowie himself, I rarely saw, and when I did, it would usually be from a distance. He did not, in those days, frequent our *taberna*, for his varied business interests required him to travel much. He was constantly on the move between Saltillo, Mondova, New Orleans, Natchez, Nacogdoches, Galveston, and Velasco. Amongst other endeavors, he was engaged in land speculation, and according to rumor, the smuggling of slaves from Cuba. I believe, also, that he was part owner of a steam-powered sugar-cane press in Louisiana.

I never knew anyone more fascinated by wealth or more determined to become rich himself. This tendency toward avarice led him occasionally into

some pretty shady dealings. I had it from José Carbajal that James Bowie and two of his brothers had once been in partnership with the pirate Jean Lafitte. And yet, I was still enamored with the illustrious colonel. Mind you, I could not at this time have been enticed into an adulterous affair with him. My fondness and my respect for Úrsula were far too great. Even so, the very mention of Bowie's name would set my pulse to racing.

Imagine my great surprise one morning at breakfast to be told by *tía* Carmen that the famous Santiago Bowie—this is how he was known to the Tejano community—was in the *taberna* asking after me. And did I wish to see him? I left my breakfast unfinished and hurried out to where Colonel Bowie was waiting for me at a small table in the farthest corner.

“*Buenos días*, Manuela. You are looking much improved since the last time I saw you.” His Spanish was flawless. He could easily have passed for a native speaker.

“Thank you, sir. I was at your wedding, but it was impossible to get close enough to congratulate you.”

“I know. I know. What a circus that was! Úrsula tells me that you and she have become bosom friends.”

“Quite so,” I agreed. “Your wife is very sweet. I like her a lot.”

“She tells me also that you go by a different name now.”

“*Kóshkeya* is how I am usually called. But I still answer to *Manuela*; also to *Chaparita*, which was my nickname when I was younger. Of course, after I grew three or four inches practically overnight, people mostly quit calling me that. Then too, some of the Lipan children I grew up with used to call me *Niño*, because I dressed as a boy.”

“Your Lipan connection is what I am particularly interested in today. I need to pay a visit to the encampment of your father's people. I was hoping you could give me directions how to get there. I'm sure I could find it on my own, but a good map might save me days in the saddle.”

“You wouldn't be going there with hostile intentions, would you?”

“Certainly not. In fact, I’d be bearing gifts. I have acquired permission from the government to attempt to locate the abandoned Los Almagres Mine. I believe the Lipans might know the location.”