

Chapter 9

The Siege of Béxar

One evening as Henry Karnes and I exited the pecan grove in which we had enjoyed our nightly tryst, I was hailed by *tío* Erastus, who informed me that General Burleson had an important mission for me.

“Tonight?” I asked. “Or in the morning?” I had never imagined that I might be summoned by our new commander.

“Right now, Manuela. I’ve been looking for you for more than an hour already.”

In the command tent, which had once been Austin’s, General Burleson briefed me on a situation he hoped that I, because of my gender and ethnicity, might be able to help with. “We have a spy inside the city. Well, two actually. I believe that you are already acquainted with William John Smith. Is that not so?”

“Yes, sir. I know him as *el Colorado*.”

“And Sam Maverick?”

I shook my head. That name was unfamiliar to me.

“Maverick is a boarder in Smith’s home, which is now under armed guard. Anglo-Americans inside the city are forbidden from leaving their homes, but Smith and Maverick are allowed to receive visitors. They have been collecting valuable intelligence and sending it out in letters carried by a servant boy. This evening, a Mexican picquet shot that boy as he left the city. We need you to take his place as our courier. Are you up to the task?”

“Yes, sir. You can count on me.”

“Captain Seguín tells me that you are quite competent.”

“Yes, sir, I am. Resourceful too and a crack shot with any type of firearm.”

He laughed. “And not overly modest about it either. Very well. Carry on. And do be careful. I should really hate to hear that you’d been shot for a spy.”

Saluting smartly, I said, "Thank you, sir, for this opportunity to serve my country. I shan't let you down."

Suppressing his amusement at my earnestness, he returned my salute with more panache than he would ordinarily have employed.

As I strode away from the tent, I heard Burleson say to Major Somervell, "All our scouts should be so pretty."

It had never occurred to me that I might be pretty. No one had ever told me that I was. I hoped that it was true. I quite liked the idea of being pretty. *Just don't let it go to your head*, I scolded myself.

In early October, I had left the locked-down city on horseback, but only because I had required a horse to reach the Texian Army. To slip back in, I decided to leave my mount with Henry. I knew that afoot I stood a much better chance of getting past the picquets undetected.

The following morning, wearing a dress and carrying a large basket of baked goods furnished by my aunts, I paid a call on the Smith home. The soldiers posted at the front door allowed me to enter without a challenge. I rewarded them by offering them each an *empanada*.

"This must be very boring duty," I commiserated with them.

"It's not so bad," one of them told me.

"Boring beats dangerous any day of the week," the other confided.

Once inside, I suggested to *señora* Smith (a girl about my own age whom I knew as *María Jesusita*) that it would be a nice gesture on her part and a smart move to offer coffee to go with the pastries I had given the guards. She agreed, and I helped her carry it out. Then, she led me upstairs to her husband's study, where I found him in conference with two other Anglo-American gentlemen, whom he introduced as *Mr Maverick* and *Mr Holmes*. Two of these three men—Maverick and Smith—were future mayors of San Antonio. Of course, I had no way of knowing that then. Of Holmes, I knew nothing, and I was, at first, unsure whether to speak freely in front of him, but he soon put me at ease by making clear his attitude toward the occupying Mexican Army.

"*Señor* Smith," I began, "your servant boy has been shot. He managed to deliver your missive last night to General Burleson, but he is badly wounded and now in the care of army surgeons. The general has asked me to take his place. Whenever you have vital intelligence, I can deliver it for you."

"That's mighty dangerous work for a girl," Maverick observed.

"I'm willing to take my chances, sir."

Smith just nodded. He had nothing for me this day, but Maverick gave me a twelve-page letter addressed to General Burleson. Once I had left the company of the three men, but before departing the house, I concealed the letter beneath my underclothes.

It was not necessary for me to make a return visit to the Smith home, for I arranged every day to meet María Jesusita somewhere out in public—a *carnicería*, a *tortillería*, a dressmaker's shop, a produce market, or a *cafetería*—and there she would surreptitiously pass me a sealed envelope from either her husband or *señor* Maverick. Each night, I sneaked out of the city to deliver that packet of information to General Burleson, and then, before sunup, I returned to Hostería Ballardo. Never once was I challenged by a picquet.

Quite suddenly one day, without any explanation, Smith, Holmes, and Maverick were all released from house arrest and given safe passage out of the besieged city. My services as a messenger were no longer required. So I prepared to resume my previous duties.

When, at last, I was back amongst the Texians, I discovered that our ranks had swollen to around six hundred. Plácido Benavides had arrived with his Tejano volunteers, Silvestre De León amongst them. Colonel Bowie had returned from the Consultation, and the strength of Juan Seguín's Rancheros had grown from thirty-nine to one hundred sixty. Thomas Jefferson Rusk too had arrived with a large contingent of volunteers. And finally, a smartly uniformed militia calling itself the *New Orleans Greys* had arrived from the United States.