

Darkness in Cordoba

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The buzzing phone dragged Salvador out of troubled sleep. He yawned, stretched out an arm from under the cozy bedcover, and groped around on the bedside table for the lamp switch. Hazy remnants of disturbing images continued flashing through his mind. Were they an anxiety nightmare or was it an omen?

He shivered, clicked on the light, perched gold-rimmed reading glasses on the end of his nose, picked up the offending instrument, and glanced at the flashing screen. It was a tad after five a.m. The dean of the cathedral was trying to contact him. His light brown eyes were instantly alert because any calls before six implied something out of the ordinary. He sat up and swiped the green icon.

“What is it, Demetrio?” he said.

“Can you come to the cathedral immediately, Eminence,” said Demetrio, his voice shaking.

“Why?” said Salvador.

“It’s Father Julián,” said Demetrio. “He’s dead.”

“Oh no,” said Salvador crossing himself. “Where?”

“In the Chapel of the Souls of Purgatory.”

“Have you informed Father Ildefonso?”

“No, let him sleep, he wouldn’t have the stomach for this.”

“Don’t touch anything. I’m on my way.”

The Bishop of Córdoba, Salvador Velasco Gumersindo, a tall imposing man in his early sixties with short-cropped gray hair, cast aside the duvet, scurried across the rug, and into the en-suite marble-clad bathroom of his quarters in the grand episcopal palace. Was this the omen? He thought.

He dried off in front of the open wardrobe, threw the towel on the bed for the housekeeper to deal with, and surveyed his wide range of clothing options. Something quick, he thought extracting a full-length, light brown monk’s robe from the wardrobe. He slipped it over his head covering his naked hairy body. The rough outer cloth had been lined with cotton making it warm and comfortable in the chill of the ancient cathedral. He pulled on a pair of knee-length socks, jammed his feet into a pair of trainers, and headed out onto the landing. He trotted down two wide flights of stairs to the lobby, unlocked the front door went out into the courtyard and around under the cloisters to the main gate. As he approached the sixteenth-century gothic arch which formed the principal entrance to the palace, he raised the hood over his head and opened one of the heavy, studded wooden doors as quietly as he could.

He peered in both directions, but Calle Torrijos was empty of traffic and people. Opposite stood an ancient building, parts of which were built more than fifteen hundred years ago by Arab invaders. The original Mosque was converted into a cathedral from the thirteenth century onwards but retained much of its Islamic features. It loomed ominously under the glow of halogen streetlights. The modern illuminations appeared incongruous with the ancient Moorish arches and metal-lined doors surrounded by intricate Islamic carvings. He closed the palace door with a dull thud and with a sense of foreboding walked out onto the street. A solitary, anonymous, sinister figure in the stillness before dawn.

He walked quickly past the ice-cream shop and tourist trinket store. Both sides of the street were lined with waist-high barricades of aluminum frames draped with red material printed in gold with a border and single cross. They would restrain the holy week crowds from overspilling onto the processional route. They bestowed an air of warmth, color, and a soft reverence to the hard stone

surfaces. Most of the balconies overlooking the street were similarly decorated. He crossed the cobbles toward the Puerta de Los Deanes, the entrance to the Courtyard of Oranges at the northwestern end of the huge cathedral.

Another studded door led into the cloistered courtyard; it was partly ajar. He went through and paused momentarily torn between the urgency to attend Father Julián and racking his brain to decide who would take over the poor man's onerous responsibilities. Was the cathedral ready for the day's processions, had Julián completed his tasks before departing?

He glanced at the Campanario Torre del Alminar, the forty-two-meter-high bell tower the lower part of which during Muslim times had been the minaret. To the right of the tower was the imposing Puerto Perdón through which the processions would enter from the street into the cathedral grounds. The metal ramp covering the steps was in place. Otherwise, entry for the cumbersome Pasos, processional thrones, would prove impossible. In the open-air courtyard, the serried ranks of orange trees had all been neatly trimmed and the brick-lined irrigation channels renowned for tripping up rubber necking tourists had been covered with plywood inserts.

The lull before the storm, he thought, thinking of the masses of penitents, raucous music bands, and even a fully armed detachment of the country's most fearsome regiment, the Spanish Legion, passing this way later in the day.

"I pray the day goes well," he muttered and headed to his right toward the massive double timber doors of the public entrance. One of them was wide open. He rushed past the shelves of multilingual visitor brochures, the counter where audio devices were distributed, and the dormant security scanning equipment into the cool darkness of the interior. He spotted a solitary dim light straight ahead.

The interior illuminations were all controlled by a time clock. They switched on at eight am and turned off at eleven p.m. The bishop wondered how to override the timer, but he didn't know where it was in the complex building. He made a mental note to remedy that.

He scurried past Puerta de las Palmas, the door through which the processions would later enter the cathedral. He stopped dead. The door reminded him of something critical. The route for the processions went straight past the chapel containing Father Julián's body and out at the Puerta de Catalina at the far corner of the North Wall. The bishop's pulse was by now racing at a dangerously high level as he pondered the possible changes to the well-rehearsed route and accompanying rituals. Would the police want to close off access? Will I have to divert the processions, who will supervise, and what about my religious and dignitary responsibilities? But more significantly should I cancel Wednesday?

"God, help me," he mumbled gazing at the heavens.

He continued toward the light, along the inside of the north wall passing several chapels secured by ornately designed, robust, wrought iron railings. Each interior was lavishly decorated with statues, tapestries, artifacts, and paintings depicting biblical scenes. As he neared the light, he prayed for Father Julián to rise again. Then he shook his head. Despite his religious calling, his common sense told him miracles never happened. They were just the creative imaginings of biblical scribes ordered to instill fear and obedience into the heathen masses so the church could retain power.

To his right, ghostly ranks of stone, granite, and marble pillars, many scavenged from Roman ruins, supported double-height rows of Moorish and Roman arches. The spaces between the columns were protected by a timber beam ceiling. The unique blend of architectural features gradually faded into the black abyss of the distant gloom.

The silence was deafening.

He shuddered as if someone was standing on his grave, arrived at the chapel gate, and spotted the single source of light, a large torch jammed between the chapel railings at head height, its bulb fading fast.

The dean, Father Demetrio, stepped forward from leaning against the chapel entrance; a tall, thin

man in his early sixties, with bushy black hair and a prominent nose. He was dressed in the customary black jacket, pants, shirt, and white dog collar. They patted each other's shoulders.

"Have you called an ambulance," said the bishop.

"No," said the dean. "He's stone cold."

"He's been murdered?"

"Possibly, or it's suicide. The police need to ascertain the cause before he's moved."

"You're right, where is he?"

"Come and see for yourself," said the dean taking the bishop by the arm and leading him toward the closed gate where he took out his phone and pointed it at the chapel interior. "Prepare yourself, Eminence. It's not a pretty sight."

The dean switched on his flashlight. The bishop peered through the sturdy bars. "My dear Lord," he whispered and fell to his knees in prayer.