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# THE LAND GRANT

CARLOS CISNEROS



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*Recovering the past, creating the future*

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To Janice Johnson, Frank Whigman and  
Michael Wheeler, thanks for all you do.

## PROLOGUE

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**B**ENITO DEL ANGEL was twenty-six years old when he became a priest. Not a week after being ordained, the humble priest was assigned to his own parish—in the one-traffic-light town of Raymondville, Texas. Although he was young, Del Angel was a caring priest who looked after his congregation, even if he occasionally had to butt heads with his superiors, including Bishop Ricardo Salamanca, head of the Catholic Diocese of the Southern Coastal Counties. For more than a hundred years, the diocese's reach had stretched from Nueces County all the way down to Kleberg, Kennedy, Willacy and Cameron. Four dirt-poor counties stacked on top of each other, near the Gulf Coast, in fertile South Texas.

Although his assignment demanded generating higher levels of monthly tithing at the Cristo Rey church, so far Del Angel had spent most of his time ministering to the sick and the hungry. And instead of pushing his flock to reach deep into its pockets, he had stocked his parish's pantry with food bought with his own savings and had added an extra night a week to the soup kitchen's schedule, where he and three other volunteers fed the homeless of the poor ranching community. The faithful at his church loved Del Angel, but Bishop Salamanca was not exactly sure what to make of the young cleric's growing independent streak.

The irony of the bishop having ordered the young cleric to raise more money from his poverty-stricken parish in order to construct a larger church was not lost on Del Angel. The few good paying jobs to be had in Raymondville were at the two prisons

outside of town, the Wal-Mart nearby and the federal detention center housing undocumented people awaiting deportation. Why was Salamanca intent on squeezing the poor to build himself a new church, when, in fact, the diocese could easily pay for the construction itself? Or, wouldn't that money be put to better use in aiding the poor and infirm? Was Salamanca out of touch? Besides, not only was the diocese as a whole one of the richest in the entire United States, but the diocese also sent twenty-five million dollars a month, overseas, to the Vatican, thanks to its ownership of La Minita ranch—an enormous tract of land aptly named “Little Mine.” With more than half a million acres rich in oil and gas deposits, La Minita was the largest single landholding in North America, and for the past forty-five years it had been titled under the Agnus Dei Foundation, a for-profit corporation owned and operated by Salamanca's diocese.

What people did not know, or had conveniently forgotten, was that back in 1960, seventy-year-old Austin McKnight, the last heir apparent to La Minita, had died lonely and heartbroken. With no heirs of his own, McKnight had willed away everything to the diocese. And now, all the major gas and oil producers—Exxon, Shell, BP, Chevron, Pennzoil—and the railroads, wind farms, shrimp farms and all the telecommunications companies held billions of dollars worth of exploration, production and other similar leases on La Minita. How much money actually poured into the diocese's coffers every year was a well-guarded secret. Anonymous sources close to Salamanca, however, estimated the earnings to be in the range of thirty to fifty million dollars a month.

It was Sunday night, and Del Angel was at the altar getting ready to wrap up the last Mass of the day. He was moving about slowly, purposefully, concentrating, as this particular night the Spanish Mass was packed. The aromas of incense and fresh flowers filled the semi dark space. The present flock was quite different from the Spanish-speaking regulars he ministered to on Sunday mornings. These were the Mexican farmhands and their families, many of them in the States illegally, from in and around Raymondville. They scratched out a meager existence on the

farms and ranches scattered about Willacy County, living under the radar, far below the latest governmental poverty index.

Del Angel raised the chalice and host over his head and invoked God to send down the Holy Spirit and transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. *“Y en la noche que fue traicionado, Jesús tomó el pan y dio gracias. Y partiéndolo se lo dio a sus discípulos y dijo, ‘Tomad y bebed todos de él que éste es mi cuerpo que será entregado por vosotros. Haced esto en conmemoración mía.’”*

As he knelt down for a few seconds of silence and reverence behind the wooden altar, Father Benito then took the host and washed it down with wine. He then stood up and continued, *“De nuevo, tomó el cáliz, y alzándolo dio gracias, luego lo pasó a sus discípulos diciendo . . . ”*

As Father Benito continued with the holy ritual, he noticed the shadow of a man enter by one of the doors located at the side of the church. The man paused for a brief moment, appeared to be removing his hat, and slowly walked toward the center aisle, squeezing and maneuvering through the crowd.

*“Este es el sacramento de nuestra fe. Anunciamos tu muerte, proclamamos tu resurrección, ven, Señor Jesús,”* said the priest, as he stretched out his arms, inviting everyone to stand. His thoughts then turned to the bishop. For weeks, Salamanca had been promising to come and say Mass in an effort to help kick-start the capital campaign for the new church, and tonight was supposed to have been that night, thus the large turnout. Salamanca had cancelled, again at the last minute. His assistant had called and had said the bishop was the guest of honor at an art exhibition being sponsored by a well-connected political donor named Mauricio Mercado and his Corpus Christi law firm.

Once more, Father Benito raised the host slightly over the paten and facing the crowd repeated, *“Este es el Cordero de Dios que quita los pecados del mundo . . . ”*

Father Benito and the altar boy then walked to the front of the altar and took their places, ready to dispense Communion. As per Salamanca’s strict rules, Father Benito was still required to place the host in the mouths of the parishioners, while the altar boy dis-

creetly placed a small silver tray under their chins, in the event a host was dropped.

The stranger then came into view, again, walking down the narrow center aisle, toward the altar, as a line now quickly formed to receive Communion. After dispensing the holy bread and saving about thirty souls, it was now the stranger's turn. The man stopped, locked eyes with Father Benito and opened his mouth in anticipation.

“¿*Cuerpo de Cristo?*” asked the priest. But before the priest could hear the requisite “*amén,*” the stranger pulled a pocket-sized, semiautomatic Beretta pistol from under the hat he'd been clutching close to his chest, and shouted, “Burn in hell, Salamanca!”

Bishop Salamanca flipped the channel on the high-definition flat-screen TV mounted above the decadent, Carrara marble jacuzzi and thought what a nice gift it would be for the Honorable Judge Remington Phillips to grant his diocese's motion to dismiss plaintiffs' lawsuit now pending in one of Kleberg County's district courts.

He'd been soaking in his jacuzzi for almost an hour, trying to relax a bad back—courtesy of an extra fifty pounds he'd been carrying around for the past years—as he enjoyed a tranquil Sunday evening in his quarters overlooking the magnificent bay of Corpus Christi. In the room next door sat a young seminary student who was there for the sole purpose of guarding his holiness' privacy and serving him snifters full of *Canticle*, a rare pear brandy imported from the Isle of Rhodes. The seminary student was also tasked with reviewing the correspondence and accompanying legal bills from the diocese's attorneys defending the latest attack on the Agnus Dei Foundation. For the last twenty years, various groups of heirs—claiming to be descendants of Don Arturo Monterreal, a Spanish settler who received a *porción* or piece of land straight from the king of Spain, Charles III—had tried in vain to reclaim their lands now in the Agnus Dei Foundation's grasp. Of course there was nothing small about the *porción* that Monterreal had received back in 1767. Since Monterreal was the nephew of

the Count of Montcalto, a blueblood with connections to the monarchy, the original conveyance was comprised of close to two million acres.

Legend had it that Monterreal, under the guidance of the Count of Montcalto, had left Asturias, Spain, in the eighteenth century and headed to New Spain to serve as an *oidor*, or high judge. He was commissioned to replace Don Lino Salas, a nobleman from the village of La Pontiaga, who'd fallen ill and no longer could attend to his public duties. Monterreal had first landed in the port of Veracruz and soon headed northwest to replace Salas, who'd been stationed in Monterrey.

The Santibáñez clan—all descendants of Candelario Santibáñez, a great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandson of Monterreal—had been the latest round of heirs to mount an all-out attack on the Foundation, but so far, the diocese's high-powered attorneys had managed to delay the case for almost three years. Not all the delays could be blamed on the tactics employed by the foundation's lawyers. For starters, the first attorney handling the case had died when his Denali SUV rear-ended an eighteen-wheeler on the stretch of highway between San Antonio and Corpus Christi. Then, in a strange twist of fate, the second plaintiff's lawyer to come into the case, an attorney from Florida, had to be committed to a mental institution when the pressure from the case got to him. But now it appeared, thanks to a generous political contribution from Salamanca's Foundation to Phillips' reelection campaign—via the Vatican and routed through the Universal Trinity Alliance, a political action committee—the lawyer-less plaintiffs were about to be thrown out of court.

Bishop Salamanca's lifelong dream of becoming a Cardinal was finally within his reach. The latest directive from the Vatican was to fend off the Santibáñez group at all cost and steer clear of trouble. The last thing the Vatican needed was another story in the papers dealing with sexual abuse or bishops being kicked out of the church for fathering illegitimate children.

The portly bishop stared at his stubby hands, still wrinkled from soaking in the bathwater. Despite being almost seventy years old and having some mobility problems, Salamanca still possessed

a keen mind and the resolve, along with a large war chest, to defeat the Santibáñez group. He was determined to put an end to all this litigation, once and for all. After all, his diocese had spent, unnecessarily, some fifty million dollars over the last two decades defending such frivolous claims, even claims from other sister dioceses from around the state that opined that Agnus Dei should share the gas and oil royalties. This was money, in Salamanca's opinion, that could have been better spent in other evangelical and worthy pursuits.

"Bishop Salamanca?"

Tony, the seminary student, suddenly appeared with a frown on his face. "It's the chief of police from Raymondville, down in Willacy County, Bishop."

"Take a message. I'll call him later."

"I'm sorry, Your Holiness. The chief said it was important. He said there's been trouble at the Cristo Rey church."

From the jacuzzi, Salamanca reached for the receiver and waited for Tony to hand it over.

"Now what? I should have known better than to send a novice to that church." Salamanca threw back the last of the Canticle. "C'mon, hand me the receiver, hurry! *Adeste Fideles*. What did Benito do now?"

"Looks like he got himself killed, sir," muttered Tony as he handed Salamanca the cordless phone.

# CHAPTER 1

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**A**LEJANDRO DEL FUERTE was reading the story of the Cristo Rey shootings in the local paper, while finishing breakfast at his favorite hole-in-the-wall, La Fonda Chiquita, when his cell phone went off. It was Gigi. Not six months after getting engaged, and his fiancée appeared ready to put kryptonite shackles around both his ankles. She wanted to know if he was going to join her at the Blue Moon yoga studio for their daily hour of spiritual rejuvenation and stress relief. Class was starting in fifteen minutes.

Since Alex won the Harrow lawsuit and walked away a millionaire, his stress level, instead of diminishing, had climbed through the roof. At twenty-seven, Alex could not understand if his stress had something to do with playing the stock market or letting Gigi move in with him at the Contessa di Mare, his South Padre Island penthouse.

Alex was looking at the text message with a frown on his face, when Juan, the owner, interrupted, “Let me guess . . . *la patrona*, right?”

“Would you believe it?” sighed Alex. “And we’re not even married, yet. *Qué desgracia.*”

“Have you all picked the date?”

“*N’ombre, qué date ni qué nada.* We can’t even agree on the kind of wedding we want. She wants a destination wedding . . . in Greece, of course. And I can’t have no freakin’ destination wedding. *Está loca.* My grandpa can’t travel anymore. After eating dirt outside of Luby’s, the time he broke his hip, he’s been in and out of hospitals. But, did Grandpa César listen? No way, no how! He

had to go and have his Sunday fried-fish Luann plate. So, now I can't have the old man traveling. *Pero ella no entiende* . . . I don't know what's gonna happen."

"Let me guess—she saw 'Mamma Mia,' the movie, *verdad?*"

"¡Claro! It's all *pinche* Hollywood. They plant all these fantasies in their heads. I mean, Gigi can be the most effective, professional, kick-ass trial lawyer you'll ever see in action . . . but don't get her talking about the wedding. It's like . . . common sense goes out the window. The whole thing's RIDICULOUS."

"So what kind of wedding do you want?" asked Juan as he delivered a basket of warm tortilla chips to the two UPS drivers sitting at the next table.

"I don't know anymore. I thought this would be simple, enjoyable . . . fun. And now, it feels like work. Hell, I don't even know if I want a wedding . . . or even if I want to get married. The last wedding I went to was a disaster . . ."

"Oh, yeah?" asked Juan.

"Yes," continued Alex. "I was a third-year student in law school and one of our classmates was getting married at the Ritz Carlton. Twenty minutes before the guests were due to arrive at the hotel for the lavish reception, the banquet waiters began lighting the candles on all the tables . . ."

"Yeah?"

"The scented candles sat on beautiful, but flimsy, twelve-inch candleholders. One of the holders tipped over as soon as the last waiter finished setting up and exited the ballroom. No one saw it happen, but a tablecloth caught on fire. The sprinkler system went off . . . and there you have it."

"No!" gasped Juan.

"Yep, my friend, the bride was devastated. Anyway, with other weddings going on at the hotel that same night, there was nowhere else to put the party."

"What happened?"

"Not knowing what else to do, the banquet director set up a buffet table out in the parking lot, and we had ourselves a wedding out front."

Juan thought about it for a minute. “Well, you know what they say . . . it’s good luck if it rains . . . and the sprinklers went off . . . so . . .”

“I guess,” mumbled Alex, “but maybe I’m getting cold feet.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Right now, I should be concentrating on hitting homeruns—hitting million-dollar verdicts, getting plenty of trial experience. I should be focusing on making a name for myself. The way I look at it, a lot of folks think I got lucky in the Medina case. That it was pure, unadulterated beginner’s luck. That since that trial, I haven’t tried any big, important cases. Some say I can’t do it again.”

“So you’d rather be trying cases than getting married?”

“I guess . . . I mean,” stuttered Alex, “I’m just worried this is how it’s going to be. She’ll want me to do everything with her . . . be together . . . all the time . . . attached at the hip. Let’s go to yoga, let’s go grocery shopping; let’s go look at wedding dresses, check out tuxedos, bridesmaid dresses, pick a honeymoon destination, the china, registries, work on the guest lists . . . all kinds of crap. And now, we even work together. I don’t know, man. I’m seriously having second thoughts.”

“You’re not ready to throw in the towel, are you?”

“If this is how it’s going to be . . . maybe . . .” shrugged Alex. “I mean, If I’m going to do this, then let’s just have Bishop Salamanca marry us at my ranch. It’s not even an hour away. It’s got everything . . . and everybody can attend. On one side we got the beach. On the other side, there are the rolling savannahs with all the wild, exotic animals, and then we have the 10,000 square-foot main house. Hell, we could even set up air-conditioned tents outside, with one or two stages, waiters, bartenders *y ya*. We don’t have to have all the other stuff . . . bridesmaids, mariachis, a string quartet to play at dinnertime, then the band. It’s too much. Just a DJ, fruit punch, cake and be done. *Vámonos*.”

“Did you finish the landing strip?” asked Juan as he cleaned in and around Alex’s table. “Last time we catered the fund-raiser for Chief Justice Jay Junco, you were in the middle of building it, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. It’s finished. We can now land all kinds of small planes, even Learjets. The place has everything. We could have a real nice, simple, fun wedding there . . . but don’t tell that to Gigi.”

Juan was now refilling Alex’s coffee cup. “Just go with the flow, Alex. Try to relax.”

“I’m trying. Not only is she becoming increasingly difficult, but now with the new diet she just started . . . it’s getting worse. Anyway, you know what they say . . . ”

“It’s her day,” finished Juan as he used his hands to put quotation marks on the phrase, “and she gets whatever she wants, right?”

“*Ni modo*,” said Alex, shrugging his shoulders. He was now standing, reaching for his wallet to pay the bill. The conversation had moved to the cash register area.

“Are you going to make your yoga class?” asked Juan, changing topics as he took the twenty from Alex’s hand and opened the cash register.

“I don’t know. But I do know this,” said Alex, looking down on his clothes, shaking his head, “today is the last day you’ll see me wearing Isla yoga pants, Hemp tank tops and Birkenstock clogs.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m gonna let her worry about the wedding,” started Alex as he collected his change, “and I’m gonna get back to work and get on with life. I miss the courtroom. And I miss getting up and putting on a crisp suit every morning. I miss trading blows with opposing counsel. I want to stop thinking about that damned wedding because more I think about it, the less I want to go through with it.”

Juan extended his hand to shake Alex’s, one of the most, if not *the* most, loyal customer at the mom-and-pop restaurant. “Well, that sounds like a good plan.”

Alex turned to leave. “I better put my foot down while I can. If not, it’ll be too late. Next thing you know, she’ll sign us both up for ballroom dance lessons.”

“You have a great day,” replied Juan, with a grin from ear to ear, “God bless you.”

“Thanks, bro,” said Alex. “I’ll see you around.”