

Chapter One

The year was 1920, and Mexico was at war with itself. Rebels rode through the land in small groups, stealing money, food, and horses to help fight the army. The army did the same, often shooting those who helped the rebels. For those who only wanted peace, it was a time of great sadness and fear.

Carlos Orozco was twenty-eight years old. He worked in the kitchen of his father's café on the square in the centre of town. Mostly, he spent his days cooking eggs, beans, tacos, and stews. The café also served beer, as well as soups made from peppers and corn. Though Carlos's days were long, he knew he was lucky to have any job at all.

One day, as Carlos washed dishes, his father came into the kitchen.

“Carlos,” he said. “A group of horsemen is riding in from the south.”

“You can hear the drumming of hooves?” asked Carlos.

“Yes,” said his father.

Within an hour, about a half-dozen riders entered the town. Looking on, Carlos could tell that they were rebels. They were unwashed, wore huge moustaches, and had bands of bullets crossed over their chests. Still riding their horses, the rebels filled the town’s central plaza in front of the café. At the same time, the women of the village slipped out of their back doors. They took shelter in the hills ringing the town.

Soon, the rebels grew hungry and went to the only place in town that served hot food. As they filed into The Orozco Café, the rest of the customers quickly finished their meals. They all left, fearing trouble. The rebels sat and started talking loudly. One man, whom the others called “Captain,” yelled for service. He was a large man, and he wore a pair of pistols, one on each side. Both guns were the size of small dogs.

The Day the Rebels Came to Town

Carlos's father went to greet the rebels.

"Food," ordered the captain. "Lots of it. And beer."

Carlos prepared plate after plate of tacos, rice, beans, and chicken with lime. No matter how hard he worked, his father kept rushing into the kitchen. "Please, Carlos," he said. "Work faster. We can't keep men like these waiting."

After an hour or so, the shouts for food died down. The rebels now shouted for tequila. Carlos's father didn't want to give them strong liquor after all the beer they had drunk, but he had no choice.

Carlos left the kitchen, thinking that his father might need help with clearing the tables. The rebels were all sitting back in their chairs, hands resting on full stomachs, burping.

"Hey," said the captain.

Carlos looked up and saw that the rebel leader was talking to him.

"You the cook?"

"Yes," said Carlos.

"That was good. Damn good. I like the way you cook things here in the South."

The room went silent.

“Thank you,” said Carlos.

“We could use someone like you.”

Carlos said nothing.

“Yes, yes. Our last cook had a bit of an... of an accident.” The men around him snickered. “So I am giving you a job in our Army of the North. You will fight for the freedom of Mexico. You will be under the supreme command of Pancho Villa himself. What do you think of that? We’re riding back north today.”

“Please,” Carlos said. “It is an honour. But I must say no. I am needed here.”

The rebel captain walked toward Carlos. He wore spurs, and they jangled as he came near. Dust rose from the floor. When he was less than an arm’s length away, he stopped. Carlos could smell the garlic and onion he himself had chopped early that morning. He could also smell the tequila on the man’s breath.

“Let me put it this way,” said the captain. “If you don’t take this job, I’ll be forced to think you don’t support our cause.”

He pulled one of his guns from its holster and grinned. “And I don’t need to tell you how we deal with them types.”