Cathedral of Salt

Anthony LaRose

**All author royalties will go to support wounded veterans.**

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**Chapter I: In the Name of the Father**

Father Philip Quinn performed the signs of the cross and blessed his flock, “In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. And so, the Mass has ended. May the peace and love of the Lord be with you,” the priest said as he stood in the Holy epicenter of the salt mine.

“And also with you,” was the collective reply.

“Please go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord.”

“Praise be to God,” the worshippers answered dutifully.

It was Easter Sunday and over 8,000 people had filled his church that day. He smiled and shook hands as the congregation filed by, politely turning down dinner invitations. “I have a date with the Lord,” he said at least 100 times. When the last of the parishioners had filed past, he ordered his altar boys to collect the remaining wine and sacraments. “Take them and put them in my car,” he told them. “I need a few minutes alone with God.”

From the base of the second level he looked up through the long cavern and watched the last throngs of people pass toward the exit. This had to be enough. *We will finally get our official designation now. 8,000 today!* How could the Vatican ignore that? And every new parish needs a bishop. *Dear Lord, I know I am supposed to be more humble, but what an honor—in Your name, of course, my Savior—to be the first bishop of the Cathedral of Salt*. The priest relished his success—a crowdtwice the number who attended since he had returned to Colombia after almost three decades shifting between the Catholic Church’s many parishes abroad. Before returning to Zipaquirá, Cardinal Finster had thanked him for his valuable work in San Antonio’s poor neighborhoods. *How long had it been since my last…?Over a year now, isn’t it?*He was proud of himself and glad to be back in the small town. *My good works make up for those…trespasses, don’t they?*

He turned to face the central cross. Over five stories tall, it had been carved directly into the salt wall just a few weeks after the mine had opened. White lighting set it off against the darkfaçade at the base of the nathrex where he had been holding Mass every Sunday for the past several months. Father Quinn stood in front. The floor, cut and polished like marble, let the holy image reflect back up at him.Since the earlier days of the mine, it had served as the templon of the church. The cathedral was silent as he knelt and prayed for the Vatican’s recognition. A few weak spotlights illuminated the tunnel. The hair on his neck stiffened as he knelt to pray. A light wind brushed past and he smelled traces of sulfur. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He glanced back and scanned the central plaza. In the center of the church his eye caught a shadow near the sunken carving of Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*.He blinked and stared into the nave; it was empty. He went back to praying. *Was that a drum?* He scanned the cathedral. Another shadow. He thought he saw someone in the upper cavern. *Were those Indian feathers?* “Hello,” he shouted. “Hello! Is someone there?” Even though he stood in the center of a series of tunnels, the sound did not echo. “Carlos? Juan? Are you there?” He quickly gathered his things. “Father,” he said aloud, “I will pray to you later.”He started toward the exit, picking up his pace as chills raced down his spine. More sounds pursued him through the cavern.

“Z*intazbquysqua!*”

*Was that chanting*?He recognized the words. It wasn’t Spanish; but he had heard it before. It was the antique language of the Muiscas. For the past year he had worked in the countryside to bring Christianity to them. “Who’s there? Are you one of my Indian children? Hello?”

As he crossed through the Capitola, its fluorescent lighting dyed his robe a gloomy violet. A long, black shadow projected into the room and stopped him in his tracks. The silhouette was the shape of a man in native headdress, an intimidating bludgeon in his left hand. “Who’s that? Who’s there?” The old priest rubbed his eyes. When he opened them, the figure had vanished. He looked up and down the corridor. He leaned out one of the balconies and strained his vision left and right. Not even a shadow moved. He strained to listen and was greeted with silence. He laughed at himself. “Father in Heaven, are you playing tricks on me?”

The chills were now gone and he slowed his gait.“Ha! Your mind was playing tricks on you,” he said aloud to calm his racing heart.Along the path, he resumed his tradition of stopping to pray at each of the fourteen Stations of the Cross, but today he made them hastily as he scurried toward the surface but this time he just gavea quick nod to each cross, then, an even quicker prayer until he reached the first Station of the Cross. A hundred yards ahead he could see the light of the entryway. He looked back down the tunnel. There was no shadow and the chanting had stopped.

When he reached the first station of the cross, he knelt before the tall, salt cross that symbolized when Jesus had been originally condemned to death. “Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name….”

“*Ys mmisquanuc.”* He heard the voice, again.

*I’m to be punished?* He opened his eyes but stayed kneeling, the base of his robe already stained white with salt. An Indian figure, tall and broad shouldered, stood on the balcony rail that overlooked the towering white cross. The green light of balcony revealed his muscular frame and a face covered with a gold muzzle, a large wring hanging from its base. From each side two rods protruded out before bending upward. His head was shielded by twelve inch high gold plate. Three smaller gold plates dangled across the top. Orange, red, and green feathers exploded out of the top and back. His ears were covered with gold caps. More gold-plating covered his chest in the shape of a crown carved with the images of faces and serpents. Beneath he wore a traditional Pre-Colombian tunic undergarmentwoven from fine cotton fiber, the traditional garb of the Muiscas. Several ancient symbols were stitched in black down the left side. Below his powerful calves, thick gold anklets contrasted against his dark complexion. Several dark red stripes made from the achiote plant decorated the ghostly figures powerful biceps.

“Who are you? How, how did you get in here? You shouldn’t be here.” The priest’s voice trembled.

“*Iahacaquenshysquiemguens?*”The figure bellowed, his voice deep and full, but the salt walls refused to let it echo in the empty caverns. The cathedral went silent again.

“How dare I sin?” As the priest questioned his own translation, the Indian leapt from his perch and landed on the back of the towering cross. His position reflected a crucifixion in reverse. The cross immediately cracked at the base and fell toward the clergyman who struggled to rise and dodge the tumbling statue. He looked into the Indians eyes as the heavy cross crashed upon him. The Indian maintained his balance the entire fall and now stood looking down at the priest’s broken form.

“Who…are…you?” The clergyman asked with his last breath.

“*Paba hue Zipa, quaicachahasaquynsuca*,” came from beneath the gold mask.

“The king will make me suffer,” Father Quinn translated before a murderous blow of the attacker’s club crushed his skull. Blood flowed onto the floor polished smooth from decades of pilgrimage. Without remorse, the salt began to absorb its secrets.

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“*Arriba*. *Arriba*. Wake up, Gringo,” a voice echoed through his head.

Sam slowly opened his eyes. He could feel the blood vessels expanding and contracting in his temples.

“Are you OK?”

He shielded his eyes from dim yellow light that emanated from the small, bare bulb in the ceiling. “Ugh. My head feels like it is on fire, but I think I’m alright. Um, *mi cabezaesta—*”

“Don’t worry, I speak English. Let us help you up.”

Sam felt several pairs of hands haul him to his feet. “Where the hell am I?”

“The Zipa jail. You were arrested at the mine,” a voice said.

Sam lowered his hands from his eyes. “The mine?”

“*Sí*, Gringo, the salt mine. You tourists know it better as the Cathedral of Salt.”

“The what?Sorry, I’m a little out of it.”

“The Cathedral of Salt. It is a salt mine and sometimes used as a Catholic church. There was a Mass there today and a fight broke out, us Indios versus the Catholics. What were you doing there? Are you a protestor or a believer?” The man smiled. He was Colombian and at least part indigenous and matched Grant’s own six-foot plus height.

“Neither, I haven’t been to church in fifteen years and I haven’t protested since we fought to allow beer in the dorms during my college days.” He rubbed his sore shoulder. “I think I got caught in the middle. There was this girl. Someone hit her.”

“Yes, that’s Alejandra. We call her Guasá. She is our leader.”

“Uh, huh,” Samuel grunted with apprehension.

“Sorry, I should have introduced myself. I am ChamiónArroyo, but everyone calls me Chamí.” He proceeded to introduce everyone else in the cell. “I think the police think you are a protestor or you would be in one of the other cages.” He motioned through the open bars. Across the hallway was a cell full of men in wrinkled and torn suits. They glared back at him. Some cursed, others spit.

The FBI agent frantically searched his pockets.

“Looking for your wallet? Just so you know, we didn’t take it. The police likely have it. They take all of that when they bring you in. Since you were unconscious, don’t expect any money to be there, *if* you get it back.”

It wasn’t the money that concerned him, it was the small gold badge and government identification, but he didn’t want to share that with strangers. “I need to get it *all* back. I haven’t even paid for my hotel, yet.”

His fellow prisoners laughed. They spent the next half hour or so making small talk. Most were members of the country’s atheistic communist party or college students, the sons and daughters of wealthy parents, kids who looked for anything to protest. Chamí was the elder of the group and said he was an anthropologist with a local university. He had been protesting for indigenous rights since studying anthropology at the University of Colón. He explained how the ecological park, the mine and the cathedral were all on what was pre-Colombian Indian land and they were protesting for its return. He instructed Grant on how devoutly Catholic the Colombian people were and that the cathedral held a special place for them, especially the miners who were even more fervently devout. “That’s where the trouble started,” he said. “We showed up a half-hour after the Mass. We figured the people would have cleared out by then. Then someone said the priest was dead, and that we were responsible. After that, we yelled at them, they yelled at us. Someone hit someone, the fight broke out, and here we are.”

Sam’s mind faded in and out of the conversation as he prayed for the pain in his head to subside. “And your leader, what did you say her name was? *Guess-ah?*” He was certain he had mispronounced the name. “What happened to her?”

“Ha, ha, ha! She is attractive, no?”

“I guess,” the American tried to be coy.

“We’re not sure, but we think Alejandra—*Gua-sá*—is in one of the other cells. We can’t call to her or the guards will blast us with more pepper spray.”

A hush fell on the chatter between the cells when the clank of opening locks, then shouts of “Grant! Ulysses S. Grant!” bellowed through the jail. Two heavily armed guards marched between the cells looking for the gringo.

The G-Man walked to the bars. “I’m Sam Grant.”

“Come with us.” The guard’s voice was monotone and stoic.

“Me? Why?”

“That’s right, you. The chief wants to see you.”

He looked back at his cellmates.

“Don’t worry,” Chamí said, “nothing will happen to you, Gringo, too many witnesses.” The archeologist winked.

Grant smiled wryly, “Thanks, good to know.”

“I’ll see you around, *Señor* Grant. This is a small town.”

The door swung open and he was whisked from the cell as the two guards hustled him along. The parishioners, thinking he was a protestor, cursed at him. The other cells full of protestors, thinking him a parishioner, did likewise. *What the fuck did I get myself into?* In a crowd of protestors, he spotted the woman. They made eye contact. “Thank you,” she said as he was whisked by. She was beautiful. Thin, but slightly tall for an Indian, she wore her hair long and straight, almost to her waist. Her dark eyes were piercing. He hadn’t really thought about women in over a year, but something about her mesmerized him, attracted him. He needed to talk to her. The outer door to the cells slammed shut before he could reply.

“Hey! Hey! Let go! I want to talk to her!” The guards ignored his plea and led him past the processing area and out onto bustling street. He immediately appreciated the fresh air and took a nourishing breath. Several uniformed officers and small group of people in street clothes watched apathetically as he was pushed past. He heard music from a bar across the street. It felt surreal. He was forced along a busy street by police and yet few people took notice. Grant thought about shouting to them, but suspected it would do little good.

In an instant, the fresh air disappeared as he was pushed through a large arched doorway where two heavily armed sentries held the door for his entrance. The sound of the heavy feet and creaking wooden stairs echoed between the stone walls. When they reached the third floor Grant was shuttled through glass double-doors that seemed vastly out of place in such an old antique building. There was a large insignia of the Colombian police etched on the door. Above it was a name, but more importantly the one word he could understand in English or Spanish, “*General*.” Another officer opened the doors and directed him and his escorts past the secretary and into a large office. A man in a formal uniform sat in a tufted leather executive chair behind a large, oak desk. The tassels on his shoulder epaulets jangled with each slight move. His chest was covered with ribbons and medallions. *Christ, he’s got more medals than a Mexican general*, Sam thought—it was a common joke among American police and military that Latin American officials were short on actual achievement, but long on awarding medals. Numerous diplomas and certificates of achievement adorned the wall behind him. Police officers in full dress uniforms ringed the room. The guards stood him in front of the desk, turned sharply, and exited the room. The only sound was the hum of a small fan.

“Agent Ulysses Samuel Grant, Federal Bureau of Investigation,” the man behind the desk broke the silence.

Grant couldn’t tell if what he had heard was a statement or a question. He breathed deeply through his nose and did his best to project calm. He could feel his face go flush, but was glad that it seemed to reduce his headache.

“That is your name, no?” the man asked again.

“Yeah, I mean, yes, that’s my name.” *They know who I am. Is that good or bad?*

“After my subordinates brought your identity to my attention, we inspected your credentials for safe-keeping and looked you up on the internet.” He motioned to the outdated computer on a small table beside his desk. “You work in the forensics unit, correct?” He poured a bottle of Coca-Cola into a glass of ice. The echo of the carbonation being released sounded like heaven to Sam. He stared at it like it was the last cold drink on earth. Grant knew the man’s actions were intentional. “*Perdón*, Agent Grant, where is my sense of hospitality? Would you like something to drink?”

Sam unconsciously licked his lips. “Please,” he said. His throat was bone dry and his voice scratchy. The general waved to a junior officer who rushed a bottle of water to him. He finished the entire liter in one, long drink. “Thank you, *Señor*.”

“You’re quite welcome.” The high-ranking copgingerly sipped his cola before rising from his desk. He walked toward the American. Grant saw that he was short and chubby, but definitely in charge. He offered a hand; the FBI agent shook it. The Colombian placed his hand on his shoulder. “What brings you to Zipaquirá, Agent Grant?”

“Zippawhatta?”

The general looked at the other police officers for laughter. They complied. “Zipaquirá. That is where you are right now. Did you think you were in Bogota?” He grinned. “You at least know you are in Colombia, don’t you?”

Sam squeezed the plastic water bottle. It made an annoying crinkling sound. He wanted to tell the cop to “go to hell,” but thought better of it. “Yes, I know I am in Colombia and *not* in Bogota. I just didn’t know the name of this town. What is it called, again? Zipacuando?”

“Zipaquirá. It is an ancient Indian word. It means great city of salt, or the name of a chief, something like that. I am not from this part of Colombia. If you like, I can get you a book about it.”

Grant could feel his temperature rising. He was tired, his head pounded, and he was hung over. “That won’t be necessary, *Hombre*.”

“So, what brings an FBI forensics expert to,” the general paused to sip his drink and to embarrass the American, “our little town.”

“I am taking a vacation. *Zip-a-keer-á,*” he pronounced each syllable carefully, “is as good a place as any.”

“Agent, I know a little American history. I have been to your training facilities and I studied one year at an American university.”

“Really?” The American played along. He knew the general was in charge and was going to tell him a story whether he liked it or not.

“Yes. I know something about your civil war. Ulysses S. Grant was a great general, no?”

“Yes, he was.”

“Is that who you are named after?”

“Yes.”

“He was also a drunk, wasn’t he?” There were snickers around the room. The general did not change his expression, but it was obvious he had not liked being slighted.

Some say he was. I don’t really know,” Sam lied. As the son of a history teacher he knew all about his namesake, and his habits. He was well aware of his current condition and the irony of his name.

“No matter.How long will you be here?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.” *Does this guy want me gone?*Grant didn’t like being told what to do, but if this was the general’s point, it was better to “get out of Dodge” than make trouble. If need be, he could be on a plane back to the states that night.

“Well, if you are going to be here a few days,” the general paused to sip his cola.

*Here it comes*,Grantthought.

“We would like your help.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“We would like your help.”

“My help? Why?”

“There has been a death in the mine. A priest was found dead this afternoon in the Cathedral of Salt.”

“A priest was killed where?”

“Well, we don’t know if he was killed. But, he was found dead in the Cathedral of Salt. It is where you were…*found* by my officers.”

The water had helped clear his head and the booze had almost worn off. “You mean the riot? I had nothing to do with that. Was that the church?” He feigned ignorance. *No sense revealing my jailhouse history lesson.*

“Yes, the mine and the church are connected. Were you not there for Easter mass?”

“Easter?No, I was just following the crowd. I was just hanging around to see what was going on; I’m on vacation. I remember some protestors came. A girl was hit. I tried to help,” he rubbed the bump on his head and looked around the room full of police, “and here I am. That’s really all I remember.”

“Yes, well, that *woman* is a revolutionary. We think she may be involved in the death of a priest.” The general’s tone went from measured to almost hostile.

Sam’s head was spinning. “Forgive me, General, but I don’t know anything about a priest, dead or otherwise. And, I am certainly not involved with any revolutionaries.”

“Yes, I believe you. But, as I said, I need your help.”

“What can I do?”

“Your credentials.They say you are a forensics expert. We don’t have anyone with your skills in this area. I want you to take a look at the crime scene and collect evidence.”

“Why me? You must have forensics people in Colombia.”

“This is a small town. We don’t have anyone of your background nearby and it will be hours before anyone can get here from Bogota. In the meantime, we might lose valuable evidence.”

Grant ran his hands through his hair, it was knotted and greasy. He felt grit from the jail floor scratch his scalp and loosen a scab on the large bump on the back of his head. When he lowered his hand there was blood on his fingers. *What if this was a homicide?* They were asking for his help. He didn’t have many options. What could he say? “Well, I guess I can help, but I’ll need to clear it with my office, and I’ll need to call the U.S. embassy.”

“That won’t be necessary. In this case, your help will be strictly *informal*. It has already been cleared at high levels.”

Before he could respond, the general barked orders, “Captain Perez, you are assigned to Agent Grant. Captain Perez has trained with the American forces here in Colombia. He is an experienced investigator and he speaks excellent English. Santos, see to it that Agent Grant has everything he needs.”

The captain snapped to attention and directed Samuel toward the door, “After you, *Señor*.”

Agent Grant walked out of the station with the police captain in tow. He was still taking in everything that had happened in the last hour or so. Once outside he stopped and looked around. The policemen he had seen earlier were gone, as was the small crowd of people. If he had not known what city and country he was in, he might as well have been on Mars. Across the street from the police station were a chicken restaurant, two small bodegas selling various types of candies, potato chips, and soda, and a small café blasting techno-pop music. On its window he saw a gold and blue sign with the word “*Aguila*.” He knew that was one of Colombia’s national beers and he waited no time making a dash for it. Perez tried to intercept him.

“AgentGrant, now is not the time for that.”

“No time for what?”

The nervous officer paused. “For alcohol. We have a serious case to handle.”

“You heard the general say to get me everything I need, right?”

“Of course, *Señor*.”

“Well, right now I need a beer.” He continued across the street. Once across, he looked back. Perez hadn’t moved. “Well, come on, and bring a pad and pen. We’ll need some materials if we’re gonna do forensic work.”

They sat at a small table outside the café. Grant ordered two beers; Perez nothing. The waiter returned quickly with the beers. The G-man drank half a bottle immediately. The anxious police captain spoke first, “Shouldn’t we get to the crime scene?”

“Is it a crime? Do you know that for sure? I thought that was still open for debate.”

“I mean, shouldn’t we get to the site of—can we just get to the mine?”

“Sure, but we have a few minutes. The priest ain’tgonna get any more dead.” He chugged the remainder of his first beer and burped slightly. He could feel his headache fading. He looked at Perez who was standing above him, arms crossed. “Look, I’ll help, but I don’t need a babysitter. I’ll make you a list of items we’ll need. You go get them and I’ll meet you at the mine in 20 minutes.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“It’s that or nothing. I have my I.D.s and passport. I didn’t say this to your boss, but I can grab a cab to Bogota, get on a plane, and be back in America watching American Idol tonight.”

“Very well,” Perez sighed, “what do we, I mean, *you* need?”

Samuel rattled off a list of materials. He also sensed the level of Perez’s annoyance. “Listen, Captain. I know this is a fucked up situation, but if there is one thing I know, it is forensics, and if you listen to me, we’ll find out what happened.”

“OK, Agent Grant. I’ll do as you say, because the general ordered me. But, I hope you aren’t ‘full of shit’ as you gringos like to say.”