

An excerpt from:

THE FIFTH CODEX

by

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The Second in a Series of Eleven Mysteries Set in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

**San Miguel Allende Books
San Miguel de Allende, Mexico**

PROLOGUE THE COLLECTOR

There are more than a few reasons to visit the Plaza San Jacinto in México City. Certainly one is the Bazar Sabado, when local artists come to display their work. There are also several reasons not to. One of these would have to be Pepe Perez, who was as fast as any kid in the San Angel neighborhood. At fifteen, he was slender and attractive; his dark hair lapped his ears and the dimples in his cheeks made him popular with girls. But even better, he could spot a business opportunity from a kilometer away, or even no more than arm's length, at the tips of his nimble fingers.

As he walked beneath the sculptured trees, less than five minutes earlier the two ten-peso coins in the left hip pocket of his white painter's pants had been in the open purse of a young grandmother crossing the plaza toward the market, her attention focused on the vegetable stand on the corner. She'd felt nothing except a slight bump as he stepped into her path, seemingly oblivious as he yelled something to a friend across the street.

The cluster of grapes he was eating, as well as the two bananas in his jacket pocket, had been unwittingly donated by the fruit seller on the corner. He flipped one grape after another into the air and caught them in his mouth as he watched the thinning crowd. He had not seen the inside of a classroom in three years, but his education progressed daily.

What he also saw this evening was an opportunity unfolding half a block down one of the streets that radiated from the plaza. Without emergency lights, an ambulance was pulling up at an unhurried pace before an old house on Calle Madero.

He sauntered along the street and stopped opposite the townhouse to tie his shoe as two ambulance attendants in white uniforms removed a stretcher and, after a moment's pause, were buzzed into the house. One of them stopped to prop the door open with a wooden wedge and Pepe watched as they ascended the stairs inside. When they turned at the landing above, Pepe slipped through the door and darted along the corridor to the back of the house. The door to the kitchen was open but no lights were on. He heard no movement in this part of the house. He found an apple in the refrigerator and chewed on it as he explored the surrounding rooms.

He had seen the interior of houses like this one before, glancing in as the doors opened. The kitchen was large and must have been luxurious long ago, he thought. Now it seemed old fashioned, with scrubbed wooden counters and a gray soapstone sink. Next to the refrigerator was a small door in the wall that piqued his curiosity. He pulled it open. Filling the recess he found an open-fronted empty box with two shelves. It was held at the top with a rope. Another rope hung at the side and when he pulled on it the box moved upward. Pepe had never seen a dumb waiter before. When it creaked he stopped pulling and closed the door without making a sound, looking behind him.

Adjoining the kitchen he found a large pantry with one wall of glass-fronted cabinets containing several sets of dishes and stemmed glassware. On the opposite wall, behind paneled wood doors the cabinets held pots and pans. A series of narrow drawers to the side were locked. Silverware, he guessed; something to check on later. Beyond the pantry on the back of the house was a series of small rooms, all poorly furnished. They reminded him of his mother's home when she was alive, only the ceilings here were much higher. In one of the bedrooms hung an unframed

and faded paper print of Our Lady of Guadalupe, foxed and curling at the edges. Next to it was an empty plywood armoire where he could hide if he heard someone coming.

He returned to the kitchen to wait. After a few minutes noises on the stairs signaled the ambulance attendants descending. An old woman was speaking to them in a whining voice. One of the men responded politely. They passed through the street entry and onto the pavement outside. A moment later one of the men returned, and, after turning out the lights, pulled the door shut and locked it. Pepe stood behind the darkened door and watched them through a small window with an iron grill. As they drove off he invisibly waved goodbye, a grin on his face.

He waited in silence, not yet certain that the house was empty, but no one had come to the door to see the old woman off. Removing his shoes, he climbed the stairs. The marble was worn in shallow curves beneath his feet.

The ceiling was lit by street lights coming through the barred transom and the windows above, and for a moment he studied a painted oval, the center largely decorative, but at each end holding a circular inset portrait; one of an elegant young man with curling side whiskers and an elaborate wavy hair style. In the oval opposite was a young woman, the shoulders of a yellow brocade dress just visible, her black hair pulled back in a bun, a rigidly straight part coming down to her forehead. Her full lips formed the hint of a smile as she looked toward the young man across from her.

Pepe shook his head, staring at her aristocratic white skin. His own was much darker. He knew no one who looked like that, nor did he know anything of history; his life was framed by the opportunities of the coming day, and whatever they would bring.

Two high-ceiling formal rooms faced Calle Madero on the second level, both overlooking the street through tall mullioned windows that came to the floor. Pepe inventoried the silver in the dining room. There were six massive candlesticks. He lifted one and mentally weighed it. Nearly a dozen serving pieces were arranged in and on top of the sideboard. The paintings were typical ancestor portraits that he didn't think would bring much. If Pepe had ever planned to get a job, which he could no longer imagine, a good choice might have been as an appraiser.

He crossed the stair landing to the other side of the house and pushed open a pair of painted and carved doors that protested under the pressure of his hands. He lit no lamps; there was sufficient light coming from the street to examine the room. Tall pieces of furniture covered with dusty white muslin stood along the walls, a gallery of soft sculpture. Pepe lifted one of the covers to find yellow damask upholstery on a mahogany sofa frame, much like the dress of the woman in the oval portrait. Between the windows stood a rectangular parlor grand piano with a Brazil rosewood case, long silenced under the muslin. If Pepe had examined it he would have seen that the veneer was cracked and buckled, but he dismissed it as too heavy to remove from the house. His business was not much concerned with furniture, it was the accessories that interested him. In the corner next to the piano stood a covered harp, taller than his head. Another bulky white elephant. The five portraits of stiff dusty grandees—descendants of the *conquistadores* who had crushed and enslaved his ancestors—he dismissed as pocket change. But Pepe wasn't thinking day of reckoning, he was thinking payday.

Two fine onyx and gilt bronze clocks rested on a fireplace mantle of carved Italian marble on the outside wall. Between them a formal mirror took in the room from within a fluted gold leaf frame. The crystal chandelier, draped in its own muslin bag, hovered like an inverted hot air balloon near the frescoed ceiling. In one outside front corner, a roof leak had loosened the fabric

wall covering, where it drooped like baggy clothes against the plaster. Pepe turned and went back downstairs in search of another apple.

What Pepe did not know was that the tenure of seven generations of the de la Vega family had come to an end that night as Doña Catalina de la Vega, eighty-six years old and unable to manage any more even with her maid's help, was headed for a nursing home in another eighteenth century mansion just eight blocks away. The familiar high ceilings and massive mahogany doors would be some comfort to her there, even if the house now had an institutional feeling. At least there would be more staff. Doña de la Vega had sorrowfully dismissed Maria Ramirez, her last remaining servant, earlier that evening. Occupied with the thought of finding another job, Maria had failed to clean out the refrigerator before she left.

For nearly a week Pepe was not to be seen in the Plaza San Jacinto, and neither the tourists nor the natives missed him. His initial walk-through had told him his new project was beyond his own capabilities, and with two of his friends he spent days sleeping in the decaying mansion, while at night they stacked booty in the front hallway. In the small hours before daylight they loaded borrowed carts and transferred all the portable possessions of Doña de la Vega to a deserted house on a side street not far away.

When they had removed everything of interest, Pepe and his friends held an invitation-only open house for the local fences at their new warehouse. At the end of the day they stuffed the proceeds in a fine old leather briefcase that bore the initials and family crest of Doña de la Vega's long dead husband, Don Eduardo. The jewelry had sold first, and although there was nothing of great value, there were many interesting pieces in the Art Deco style. Doña de la Vega had taken the better items with her. One of the last things to sell was a trunk full of ancient books that had caused some debate among the boys as to whether it was worth moving. Pepe's view prevailed and it took all three of them to load it on the cart.

The trunk was purchased by the same man who had bought most of the old silver. His brother was a respected antiques dealer with a shop in the hotel district near the Zocalo, the great square at the heart of México City. When he delivered the silver to his brother's shop he mentioned the trunk full of books with ribbed leather bindings.

"Perhaps it would be worthwhile to have them too," said the dealer. "You never know what a trunk like that might contain, and from what you describe it sounds like they might be eighteenth century."

The old trunk itself turned out to be of some interest, covered in green leather with a vaulted lid edged in battered wooden strips.

Most of the books inside were medical texts, a surprising number in French, and therefore of insufficient interest to excite the dealer, although they might bring something online. Near the bottom of the chest on one side was a slender volume wrapped in parchment, not bound, consisting of about a dozen leaves written on both sides in some ancient script, and illustrated with intensely colored scenes, attached accordion style. The dealer unfolded it carefully on the long table in his workroom. It was certainly old. The initial page was damaged and all the edges frayed and fragile. The writing might have been Mayan, but he didn't know much about the old languages. In the unfaded areas, in from the edges, the colors on both the hieroglyphics and the illustrations were still strong. It had to be an old copy of an Indian original, and if it were sixteenth century, it might have some value. Not many Spanish copies of these codices survived, since the *Conquistadores* had little interest in the native culture.

Under “C” in his Rolodex he found the number of a man who had bought odd things from him in the past, usually artifacts with a Mayan origin. Occasionally this man purchased larger pottery fragments, but most often they were jade carvings that came from the midnight excavation teams in the Yucatán and Chiapas. This customer insisted on strict anonymity, and so his number was simply listed under “Collector.”

He dialed the Collector and described the colonial era document, making no case for it being other than a copy. Privately, he doubted that it was worth the fee required to have it examined by an expert. There was some haggling before they agreed on a price of 5,000 pesos. Four hundred and fifty dollars, and the Collector reserved the right to return it if he didn’t think it was worth it. The next day the dealer packed it in bubble wrap and shipped it off to San Miguel de Allende, a colonial town in the State of Guanajuato, in the *bajío* area of the central Mexican highlands. A town that might be at least as old as the document itself; a town that had played an important role in the War of Independence in 1810, and where one more secret would not be noticed.

By the time the package arrived on the last day of June, cushioned in its stout cardboard box, Doña Catalina de la Vega had already joined her bristly ancestors in the ground. She had survived only three weeks in the nursing home, and their portraits had been fenced to a dealer in Guadalajara for a tenth of their value.

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