

The Protective Wall

Albox Mystery Thriller

- Sample text -

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Prologue

Albox, November 1804

The stinging, yellowish smoke from burning sulfur hung like a poisonous blanket over the narrow alleys of the town. It burned the eyes, crept into the lungs, and settled like a layer of ash on the tongue. But the smoke was intentional. It was meant to drive away the miasmas—that foul, invisible air which the *Juntas de Sanidad* (Health Boards) claimed carried death from house to house.

Suddenly, the walls of the nearby Santa María church trembled. A dull, deafening bang made the windowpanes rattle. Once again, the militiamen had ignited a charge of gunpowder in the *Plaza Mayor* to break the heavy air by force. But the only thing the tremors brought was the renewed whimpering of the dying behind the barricaded wooden doors.

At the gate to the *Paseo*, right at the slope to the dried-up *rambla*, stood Miguel, gripping his wooden musket. His hands were trembling, and it was not due to the cool autumn air. Before his feet lay the barricade that had turned Albox into a prison: a hastily thrown-together rampart of loose

stones, heavy wooden beams, overturned carts, and the torn-out front doors of those the fever had already claimed. Every gap in the town had been walled up. The *cordón sanitario* was absolute.

A figure emerged from the darkness of the *rambla*. It was staggering.

"Halt! In the name of the King, not a step further!" screamed Miguel's voice, cracking with fear.

The figure in the riverbed raised its hands. In the pale moonlight, its face shimmered an unnatural yellow. Under the eyes, black, dried blood clung—the unmistakable sign of the "Black Vomit."

The final stage.

"Please..." the man rasped. "My family. We will pay. I have *escudos*. *Reales* of pure silver. The doctor in La Loma said this tincture will save us..." He held up a small, dark glass bottle in which a viscous, mercury-containing mass shimmered. "He demanded everything we had... please..."

Miguel felt cold sweat running down his back. King Charles IV's order was unequivocal. Anyone who breached the defensive wall was committing high treason.

Turn them away! If they resist: shoot to kill!
hammered in his head.

"Back into the *rambla*!" roared Miguel, leveling his weapon. "There is no salvation! The doctor lied to you!"

A shot whipped through the night, followed by a dull impact in the sandy riverbed. The small bottle shattered on the stones, and its contents seeped poisonously into the ground.

Miguel lowered the weapon. He did not know if the bullet had hit the infected man or if pure despair had struck him down. He only knew that the town was dying. Walled in behind a rampart of stone and fear, while outside in the darkness, the charlatans were cashing in on the blood of the dead. And the true gold did not lie in the hands of the guards, but had long since been buried somewhere deep in the foundation of this dying fortress...

Albox, Present Day

One simply must not underestimate the heat in the Almanzora Valley. Even in spring, when the wind from the Sierra de los Filabres mountains should still carry a cool edge, the air in the narrow alleys of Albox sometimes sat as relentlessly as if someone had placed a lid on a

giant oven.

Matteo wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a dark streak of wood dust and linseed oil on his skin, and leaned against the massive doorframe of his workshop. His muscles were making themselves felt; he had spent the last four hours stabilizing the heavily damaged backrest of a 19th-century Andalusian walnut cabinet. A beautiful piece, but the wood was as dry as crispbread and forgave not a single wrong squeeze with the clamp.

Actually, he should have been enjoying the silence of his workshop—the scent of beeswax and old oak—but the peace this morning was history anyway. A deafening, rhythmic thudding vibrated deep in the soles of his feet. *Trrr-rat-tat-tat-tat*. A heavy jackhammer was eating its way through the ground, followed by the hoarse panting of a diesel engine.

The *Plaza Mayor* was one single, monumental construction site. The municipality had recently begun the long-awaited and fiercely disputed renovation work on the central market square. The goal was a complete modernization of the town center: new pipes, barrier-free paving, fancier streetlights. The result, for the moment,

was simply organized chaos. Heavy tracked excavators had ripped up the old, familiar pavement over a large area and carved deep brown wounds into the ground. Bright red plastic barrier fences stretched like a labyrinth across the square, blocking the entrances to the small cafés and forcing pedestrians to take adventurous detours over makeshift wooden planks.

The fine, calcareous dust from the broken stones and old mortar hung like a permanent, dry mist in the air. It settled as a gray veil over the windowpanes, crunched between one's teeth when breathing shallowly, and covered the abandoned plastic chairs of the closed outdoor terraces. The older gentlemen of the town, who usually sat on the benches under the trees every morning to loudly debate politics and the olive harvest, had retreated grumbling into the shady interiors of the surrounding bars. The parking shortage was the number-one topic of conversation at the bakery.

For Matteo, however, the whole thing had almost something meditative about it. Every bucketful of the excavator was for him like a vertical cut through the centuries-old layers of time in Albox. Under the modern asphalt lay the paving of the

20th century; beneath that, the foundations of the Napoleonic era; and who knew how deep one had to dig to encounter the remains of the Moorish settlement? The town was literally standing on its own ruins.

"If that yellow colossus over there goes another two meters deeper, the boys will be standing in the living room of a 14th-century Moorish family tomorrow," grumbled a deep, familiar voice beside him.

Raffael stepped out of the shadows of the alley entrance toward him. He was wearing a faded T-shirt, sunglasses around his neck, and held two ice-cold cans of Coke glistening with condensation in his hands. He handed one to Matteo, which felt heavenly cool against his strained palms.

Matteo opened the can with a hiss, took a deep gulp, and felt the cold tingle dispel the dryness in his throat. "Let them dig," he said with a wry grin as he let his gaze wander over the barriers. "The deeper they get, the more likely it is they'll hit something older than the Spanish Constitution. And everything that is old, broken, or made of wood ends up on my table. Bad for the town's traffic, but damn good for my business."

Raffael laughed quietly and also leaned against the wall. Together, they watched the hustle and bustle on the *Plaza*. Right at the corner where the narrow, shady access alleys flowed directly into the marketplace, in the shadow of the mighty walls of the venerable Santa María church, the civil engineering team was toiling away. A massive yellow excavator was currently scratching a deep swath into the ground to make room for the new main sewage pipes. The bucket lowered, dug itself with raw hydraulic force into the mixture of soil, clay, and old rubble, and lifted again.

But upon the next lowering, the soundscape changed abruptly.

It was not the dull crunch of sand or the splintering of soft limestone. An ugly, metallic, and unyielding rumble went through the ground. A bone-shaking *clong*, followed by the hateful howling of the diesel engine. The excavator vibrated violently, as if it had slammed with full force against a massive iron plate or a ton-weight block of granite. The hydraulic hoses tightened like the tendons of an attacking predator, but the bucket did not move a millimeter further.

The excavator operator, a gaunt Spaniard with a

weathered face and a neon-yellow safety vest, cursed loudly and in varied Andalusian Spanish. He yanked the levers back, switched off the smoking engine, and pushed his cap to the back of his head. Suddenly, an unusual, almost eerie silence spread over the construction site.

"¡Me cago en la ley de la gravedad!" (I st on the law of gravity!) he shouted down to his colleagues. "Nothing works here anymore! I'm stuck. There's something down there in the way that doesn't belong!"

Within seconds, the typical busyness of a construction site collapsed. Three other workers, armed with shovels and pickaxes, gathered at the edge of the deep pit. They leaned far over the barrier fence, gesturing wildly with their arms, and pointed into the dusty abyss. One of them, the foreman—whom Matteo knew fleetingly from the local bar—looked searchingly across the square. When his gaze discovered Matteo and Raffael at the workshop, his expression brightened. He waved excitedly with both hands, as if there were a signal to give.

"Hey! Matteo!" the foreman shouted over the construction site with a rough voice. "Come over here! Bring your buddy. You guys are into this old

stuff, right? I think my excavator just dug up your next job!"

Matteo looked over at Raffael. The quiet amusement on his face had suddenly vanished, replaced by that professional curiosity that seized him every time the earth revealed its secrets. He set the Coke can down on the windowsill.

"Well," Raffael said quietly, pushing his sunglasses onto his nose. "It looks like the harmless hole in our marketplace just stopped being harmless. Shall we go and see?"

Matteo just nodded, pushed himself off the wall, and walked with quick steps toward the barrier fences. The hot wind carried the smell of freshly ripped-up, ancient ground toward them—a scent of damp earth, mildew, and something strangely metallic that hadn't seen daylight for centuries.

Metal in the Dust

Matteo jumped gracefully over the red-and-white barrier fence and slid down the steep flank of the freshly excavated pit. The ground under his boots was dusty and loose, a mixture of younger construction rubble, gray ash, and stone-hard clay. Down here, about a meter and a half below the level of the *Plaza Mayor*, the smell of damp, compressed earth was intense. It was the scent of centuries that had survived without oxygen or light.

Raffael followed him somewhat more cautiously, kept his balance on the slippery slope, and stood close behind his friend. The construction workers stood above on the edge, arms propped on shovel handles, looking down with a mixture of curiosity and relief—after all, every forced break due to a potential historical find meant less heavy back-breaking work for now.

Matteo crouched down. Right in front of the steel teeth of the excavator bucket, which had left a deep scratch in the dark soil, lay the obstacle. At first glance, it seemed inconspicuous, almost like one of those damn treacherous, fist-sized pebbles that one bruises one's wrists on at home

in the garden with a spade. Anyone who had ever dug up a flowerbed knew this phenomenon: the culprit was often not that big, but it felt like one had hit the root of a mountain.

This thing here was hardly bigger than an old shoebox or a small crate, but the force with which it had defied the ton-weight hydraulics of the excavator revealed that it was anchored with enormous resistance deep in the untouched primordial soil.

"Hand me the shovel," Matteo said with a calm but firm voice, without taking his eyes off the object. He reached a hand up, toward the construction workers standing above at the edge of the hole he was currently in.

The foreman reacted immediately. He handed Matteo a narrow, worn hand shovel with a short handle down. "Watch out, kid. Hope that's not an old aerial bomb from the Civil War," he joked half-heartedly, but the laughter of the other workers sounded a bit strained.

Matteo ignored the comment. He gripped the wooden handle tightly, knelt directly in the dust, and began with short, masterfully dosed movements to scrape away the loose earth around the object. He worked his way in from the

sides to expose the contours. It was delicate work. The clay had been extremely compacted by the pressure of the excavator bucket, almost like cement.

After a few centimeters, the metal of the hand shovel hit resistance. *Cling*. A bright, singing tone. That was no stone. Stone swallowed sound; metal replied to it.

Matteo set the shovel aside and now used his bare fingers to rub the crusted dirt away from the top of the object. His fingernails filled with black earth, but he hardly felt it. Under the sticky layer of dirt, something suddenly became visible. It was a tiny patch, barely a square centimeter in size, that reflected the glaring Andalusian sunlight. Something shiny. It was not very large, but sufficient to cause the excavator's teeth to bounce off dully.

Raffael leaned forward so far that his shadow fell onto Matteo's hands. He narrowed his eyes, trying to see through the stirred-up dust.

"What is that?" Raffael asked quietly. In his voice already resonated that unmistakable undertone of "hunting fever" that Matteo knew all too well. "Is that iron? Or bronze?"

Matteo dug carefully further, loosening the earth

under the object with the tip of the shovel to see how deep it reached. The shiny spot was surrounded by a thick, dark-green, almost black patina, typical of metal that had lain extremely long under a seal of air in damp soil. It appeared to be a massive, thick-walled chest or a small iron box, whose fittings had been forged with brutal force. And the shine he had exposed came from a scratch that the excavator had torn into the centuries-old surface.

"I don't know yet," Matteo replied while wiping the sweat from his nose and exposing the contours of a heavy, archaic-looking lock. He looked at the rough structure of the material, which had absolutely nothing to do with modern mass-produced goods. "But it seems to be something very, very old, Raffael. And whoever buried this here certainly didn't want it to ever see daylight again."

The Find

The excitement on the construction site was now palpable. After Matteo had spent almost an hour scraping away the stone-hard Andalusian clay centimeter by centimeter, he finally held the object completely in his hands.

It was indeed a massive small type of treasure chest, forged from thick iron. It was rough, heavy, and despite the deep scratch the excavator had left on the top, it appeared absolutely indestructible.

"What the hell is that?" the foreman shouted from above, staring into the pit with wide eyes.

"We'll see in a moment," Matteo replied, smiling broadly. His heart was doing real somersaults at that moment. A find, in the middle of the town, right in front of his doorstep—that was exactly what he lived for. That was an absolute bullseye for a restorer.

Raffael leaned so far forward at the edge above to get a glimpse that he almost lost his balance and would have tipped headfirst into the pit. Only the spirited grip of a construction worker on his shirt held him back.

Matteo reverently stroked the raw metal, which still carried the coolness of the earth within it. "That's astonishing," he only said quietly to himself. He still couldn't quite grasp what he had just dug out of the ground of Albox. The thing had outlasted centuries.

"That's surely a treasure!" one of the construction workers called out enthusiastically. "We'll split it, boys!"

"No," Matteo laughed, shaking his head while pressing the heavy box firmly to himself. "It doesn't belong to us. This is a case for the town's history."

"Then open the damn thing already! What's in it?" another worker shouted impatiently. The curiosity had meanwhile infected everyone at the pit.

"Slowly, slowly," Matteo replied level-headedly. "We don't want to damage anything at all here."

He lifted the metal box carefully as if it were made of gossamer-thin glass—a paradoxical sight when considering that the ton-weight hydraulics of the excavator had proven the exact opposite shortly before and had broken its teeth on it. Reverently, Matteo held the box clutched, while attempting to climb up the slippery, steep

flank of the pit. The heavy iron pulled him downward, but Raffael reacted immediately. He knelt down, grabbed Matteo firmly by the forearms, supported him, and helped him up to the safe asphalt with combined efforts.

Once arrived there, Matteo steered determinedly toward a makeshift wooden table that the construction workers had set up nearby for their plans and coffee cups. With a dull, metallic thud, he set the box in the middle of the tabletop.

Raffael scratched his head in bewilderment and stared at the misshapen thing covered in earth crusts. "That's something... Madness."

Matteo was completely speechless for a moment. His thoughts were racing. What could that be? Which epoch did this metalwork originate from?

At that exact moment, the heads of those standing around snapped around. The Mayoress of Albox came running with quick steps across the turbulent *Plaza Mayor*. She had noticed in her office at the town hall that the dull thudding of the construction machinery had stopped abruptly, and a stationary construction site meant, in the worst case, expensive delays. But when she saw the crowd of people, she sensed that something

unusual must have happened.

She pushed through the barrier fences and immediately fixed her gaze on the mysterious metal box on the table. "What is that?" she asked curiously while crossing her arms.

"We don't even know exactly ourselves, *Señora Alcaldesa*," the foreman stuttered, tugging nervously at his safety vest. "That... that thing there completely incapacitated my excavator. It was deep in the primordial soil."

Raffael looked at his friend. "Can you open it, Matteo?"

Matteo leaned deep over the box and examined the front. "There's a damn thick lock attached here," he explained, pointing to the block-like mechanism that was crusted with rust and clay. "But it's old. And what is old is mechanical. That is technically certainly doable without destroying the box. But here in the dust, that won't work. I need the right special tools from my workshop for that."

"Good," Raffael decided immediately. "Then we'll bring it over to the workshop. It's only a few meters."

The Mayoress looked from the box to Matteo and

noded decisively. "I would like to know exactly what we found on our municipal ground, please. Keep me absolutely up to date, Matteo."

Matteo saw the burning curiosity in her eyes, and a mischievous smile stole onto his face. He made an inviting gesture in the direction of his workshop alley.

"You know what, *Señora*? Just come along with us. We'll open it together in the workshop. Then you'll be the first to find out which secret the *Plaza Mayor* has hidden."

The Mayoress did not let that be said twice. The administrative distance was forgotten instantly; she was far too curious to return to her office now. "Agreed," she said with an energetic nod. "I won't let that escape me."

Together, the three set off while Raffael carried the heavy, mysterious iron box, inside which the gloomy history of the year 1804 was just waiting to be unleashed...