

The Rescue of the Madonna

Albox Mystery Thriller

- Sample text -

Diego Marquéz

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The Shadow in the Chancel

The smell of old incense hung heavy in the air of the church, mixed with the oppressive note of fear and an approaching storm. It was a smell that no longer suggested comfort, but rather the end of an era.

Chaplain Antonio Cuesta López stood before the altar of the "Pequeñica," the little Madonna who had been the heart of Albox for centuries. His hands trembled as he touched the fine fabrics surrounding the statue. Outside, the world seemed to have come unhinged. One could hear the distant shouting of the militia, the rhythmic pounding of boots on the cobblestones, and the cracking of gunshots that sounded far too close.

Antonio knew that this was the final moment. The news had spread through the town like wildfire: the militia was advancing, determined to extinguish every symbol of the "old faith." If they reached the church, they would not merely smash the altar; they would shatter or burn the Pequeñica as the embodiment of everything they despised.

His heart hammered against his ribs so loudly that he feared someone in the back pews might

hear it. But the church was empty. The faithful were hiding; the doors were firmly bolted, as if they could lock out the storm of history.

Antonio took a rough linen cloth he carefully pulled from beneath his cassock. His breath came in gasps. Every shadow in the nave seemed to move; every creaking floorboard sounded like a warning shot. He was a man of faith, but tonight he felt like a thief in his own house of God.

With a movement he had practiced in his mind a hundred times, he released the statue's fastenings. As his fingers touched the cold, smooth surface of the Pequeñica, he paused. For a moment, there was only silence—a silence so deep that the ticking of the clock on the wall sounded like the strike of a hammer. He could not allow her to be destroyed.

He replaced the real statue with a copy he had spent weeks of painstaking preparation having made in a hidden workshop. The copy looked almost identical, deceptively real in its form, yet it lacked the mysterious glow that the original possessed. He placed the copy carefully on the pedestal, adjusted the cloak, and stepped back. Sweat ran down his neck as he watched the faint

light of the votive candles dance across the wood of the decoy. It had to be enough. It had to be.

He wrapped the real Pequeñica in the linen cloth. She was heavier than he remembered, a burden consisting not just of matter, but of the hope of an entire people. He pressed the bundle to his chest as if it were his own life. The flight from the church felt like walking through a minefield. Every step was calculated, every sound an agony. He knew the way through the sacristy, through the hidden passages only the servants of God knew. Outside, the night waited—a blacker darkness than he had ever seen before.

The smuggling was a tightrope walk. The statue, securely packed and wrapped in multiple layers of cloth, had to pass through the alleys of Albox controlled by the militia. The cold of the night crept into his bones as he moved in the shadows of the walls. His goal was not his own home; that would have been too dangerous. He had to bring her to a place that offered both refuge and a hiding spot. The convent was his only hope. At that time, it served as a war hospital, a place where the horrors of the civil war were visible in bloody detail.

As he reached the convent, he was met by the

smell of disinfectants, unwashed bodies, and dying soldiers. The cries for help from the wards, once places of silence, echoed through the hallways. Antonio made his way between the beds, which stood packed closely together. He knew that no one would look for a chaplain carrying a statue here. He had located a hidden compartment behind one of the inner walls, a place formerly used for winter provisions. Here, among old beams and dusty crates, he laid the Pequeñica to rest.

This was only the beginning. He knew the coming years would be a test that would shake the foundations of his faith. While the war raged outside and the world went up in flames, the Madonna rested in the darkness of the convent, hidden from the eyes of those who wished to destroy her. Antonio left the room, wiped the sweat from his brow, and returned to the hospital, ready to assist the dying as a chaplain, while keeping in his heart the secret that would signify victory over hatred.

The Weight of Silence

Marina Fernández knew that in these days, a simple shopping trip was no simple task. In the alleys of Albox, where once the bustling activity of farmers and craftsmen determined the rhythm of life, there now reigned a paralyzing uncertainty. Every whisper was a potential betrayal; every shadow could be an informant. For Marina, who as a teacher had taught the local children, the school had long since become a place of silence. But her true task had changed. She had become the guardian of a secret that weighed as much as the faith of an entire people.

She sat at her kitchen table in "Casa Flora." In front of her stood a simple shopping basket woven from willow. It looked ordinary, almost trivial, and that was precisely its greatest strength. Marina had spent weeks studying the militia's movements. She knew when the patrols shifted, at which street corners the inspectors were least attentive, and where the shadows of the houses fell longest across the path. It was a plan that could not happen by chance; it resembled a chess-like maneuver where every square could be paid for with one's life.

She began to prepare the basket. First, she placed a rough, dark cloth inside, whose raw texture swallowed the light. Above it, she placed a layer of fresh market goods—a few dried-out onions, a handful of beans, a crumpled piece of bread. It was a camouflage that had to appear so realistic that even a curious glance from a militiaman would not arouse suspicion. Her hands worked precisely. Every movement was thought through; every gesture was aimed at betraying no nervousness.

In her head, she went through the route again and again. The "Plaza" was the most dangerous point. There, where the crowds pressed together to exchange rumors or receive their meager rations, she would be most exposed. She had to hold the basket so that its weight appeared natural. The Pequeñica was not light, and the contrast between the heaviness of the statue and the light content of a normal purchase had to be masked. Marina practiced walking with the basket in her living room. She balanced the weight, adjusting her steps until she imitated the gait of a woman just finishing her daily errand.

December 8, 1936, would be the day. Marina had received the instructions from Chaplain Antonio Cuesta López, which were so encrypted and

discreet that they had left almost no traces. She knew she would take over the statue at the convent—a place that offered safety from looters but, due to its use as a hospital, was a place of constant movement and observation.

The psychological burden was the worst part. Marina looked in the mirror and forced a mask of indifference. She could not look like a woman holding the fate of the patron saint in her hands. She had to look like someone thinking only of surviving the next day.

Beneath her everyday worries, she hid a determination that surprised even herself. She was no resistance fighter in uniform; she was a teacher who had decided that the history of her home could not end in rubble.

As the evening of December 7 approached, she sat long in the dark. She heard the distant rumble of trucks and the voices of those who had taken possession of Albox. That night, she barely slept. Every bang in the distance made her flinch, and each time she asked herself if this was the moment she would be discovered.

But her resolve was firm. The next morning, when the market bustle would be at its loudest, she would set off. The shopping basket stood

ready—an empty shell that in a few hours would become the most important vessel this town had ever seen.

The Path Through the Eye of the Storm

December 8, 1936, was no ordinary Feast of the Immaculate Conception. In other years, the scent of flowers and incense would have wafted through the streets, accompanied by the solemn ringing of bells. But on this day, the atmosphere was marked by a leaden heaviness that draped over the soul of Albox like a shroud. The market was bursting at the seams, a surreal mix of people desperately trying to secure their daily bread and armed militiamen who patrolled between the stalls with their rifles like a foreign body.

Marina Fernández left the convent when the sun had reached the highest point of its arc. Her basket, covered with a simple cloth, did not weigh like vegetables and bread in her hand, but like the entire fate of the town. The Pequeñica, carefully wrapped in several layers of old, dark linen, lay at the very bottom. To hide the contrast, she had spread a generous layer of fresh, earthy potatoes and a handful of green beans over it. The smell of the earth was intended to mask the heavy, almost sweet scent of old wood and

incense that clung to the statue.

Every step on the uneven cobblestones felt as if she were walking on glass. The crowd pressed her from all sides. Women in black scarves pushed past her; men with grim expressions discussed the front reports in low voices. Marina kept her head down, her gaze fixed firmly on the ground. She was not allowed to look at anyone, for those who lost themselves in the eyes of a stranger betrayed themselves. But the feeling that a pair of eyes—perhaps the practiced eye of a militiaman—could look right through the basket into her inner self made her blood freeze in her veins.

As she reached the central Plaza, her heartbeat rose into her throat until she could hear it pounding in her ears. Here, between the improvised market stalls, the presence of the militia was strongest. They stood in small groups, their boots covered with the dust of the road, cigarettes in the corners of their mouths, while their gazes wandered through the crowd like searchlights. Marina tried to keep her gait as natural as possible. She remembered the training in her living room, the balancing of the weight. She could not stumble. A stumble, an impact, a sound of hard wood against stone, and

everything would have been lost.

Suddenly, as she turned the corner of a stall, the inevitable happened. A militia patrol, four men in dirty uniforms, pushed through the crowd with ruthless haste, voices loud, laughter coarse and indecent. Marina was so focused on protecting her basket from an accidental bump that she did not see them in time. She collided almost head-on with the lead militiaman.

The shock traveled through her limbs like an electric shock. The basket swung in her hand; the weight of the statue seemed to multiply for a split second, as if it wanted to reveal itself. Her knees almost gave way. She held her breath, her eyes wide with terror, unable to utter a word. The militiaman cursed loudly, a coarse, blasphemous remark that echoed across the square. He shoved her aside without sparing her face another glance and pushed past her with his comrades, as if she were merely an annoying obstacle on their path to power.

Marina stood frozen. Her heart raced like that of a trapped bird. She waited for him to turn around, to shout: "Stop! What do you have there?" But nothing happened. The patrol moved away, their voices fading into the roar of the market. She

trembled so violently that she gripped the handle of the basket tightly, almost getting cramps. She had remained unmolested. Chance—or was it a miracle?—had saved her life.

The remaining meters to Calle Escuadra felt like an eternity. Every shadow was a threat, every corner a new danger. When she finally reached the heavy wooden gate of Casa Flora and let it click shut behind her, she took a real breath for the first time. She leaned her back against the cold wood of the gate and listened. Outside, the market continued to scream; the feast of the Immaculate was taking its destructive course, but in here, in the silence of her house, the Pequeñica was safe. She had arrived. But as she placed the basket on the table and lifted the first cloth, she realized that the actual game of hide-and-seek was only just beginning. She had to get her into the wall before nightfall.

The Silence of the Wall

Night had fallen, and the darkness in Casa Flora acted like a living protective shield. Marina was no longer sitting at the table; she stood before an inconspicuous wall in her living room, behind which lay a cavity that only the family knew about. Her hands, which only hours earlier had been trembling while smuggling across the market, were now filled with an almost mechanical calm. There was no more room for fear, only for action.

"Do you hear anything outside?" she whispered without turning around. Her husband, who was with her, listened intently to the silence of Calle Escuadra. "Only the wind and the distant barking of a dog," he replied softly. "The militia are back in their quarters, but we must not lose any time."

With heavy tools they had carefully wrapped in rags to dampen every metallic clanking, they began to break open the lime plaster of the wall. It was painstaking work. Stone by stone, they made progress, drowning out the sound of the crowbar against the stone with the beating of their own hearts. As the first piece of masonry fell out, they exposed the niche. The cavity was

dark, dusty, and smelled of decades-old seclusion.

Marina took the bundle she had freed from the shopping basket and placed it gently into a small, wrought-iron chest. She had cleaned the chest with the greatest care over the past few days to ensure the Pequeñica would remain protected from the humidity of the masonry. As the statue rested in its wooden casing inside the chest, it looked even more precious, almost like a lost treasure from a bygone era.

Her husband lifted the chest with both hands and pushed it carefully into the dark, dusty cavity of the wall. Every centimeter the chest slid deeper into the interior of the wall felt like a step away from the destructive world outside. When it was securely positioned in the niche, they looked at each other. At that moment, they were aware that the Pequeñica, now in her little chest surrounded by bricks and mortar, would find a peace that the world outside Casa Flora denied her.

They began to wall it up. The bricks were pressed firmly into the mortar, while the chest disappeared as a silent core behind the new wall. They worked with a precision nourished only by their shared concern for the statue's survival.

After the final layer of lime, the opening had vanished, and with it the chest, which now rested like a secret vault in the depths of their house. Only when they pushed the massive cupboard in front of the spot did an oppressive but necessary silence return to the room.

The Legacy Beneath the Floor

The renovation of Casa Flora in Albox had been planned as an act of revitalization, a project to transform the old walls into a modern home. But on this sultry Tuesday afternoon in 2026, the burgeoning joy over the progress turned into a moment of naked horror. The workers were in the middle of removing the screed in the back corner of the living room when the foundation suddenly gave way.

It was no ordinary giving way; the floor seemed to tremble under an invisible weight and broke open with a dry crack. Dust swirled up; a musty, decades-old smell drifted from the depths into the room. As the dust settled, everyone in the room froze.

Protruding from the dark hole, like an admonishing finger from a forgotten time, was a bony hand. The skeleton lying hidden in the rubble looked like a foreign body in the modernity of the ongoing construction work. Between the yellowed finger bones, something flashed: a piece of gold that shone in the faint lighting of the construction site like a trapped sunbeam.

"Holy Mother of God," someone from the group

shouted, and the horror echoed off the bare walls. "What is that? Who is that?"

The silence that followed was so thick that one could hear the distant rustling of the town outside like an echo from another world. Work was stopped immediately. With trembling hands, someone reached for the phone to notify the police. It was not long before the blue lights of the patrol cars bathed the familiar facade of Casa Flora in an unnatural blue light. Uniformed officers secured the area while a detective with a furrowed brow inspected the pit. He knelt down, checking the condition of the bones and the found item with professional distance, but there was deep unease in his gaze.

In Spain, where history seemed to be preserved in every layer of the soil, this was not a rare but nonetheless a shattering find. The detective stood up, stroked his chin, and looked at those present. He knew this was not just about a skeleton; the circumstances, the location, and the gold pointed to a past deeply rooted in Albó.

"We have to be careful here," he said, his voice calm but firm. "This is no simple matter for forensics. We need someone who recognizes the historical significance before we destroy

evidence or lose the context." He pulled out his radio and gave instructions. "Get Matteo. The restorer. If anyone knows about the hidden layers of this town and the things better left unawakened from their sleep, it's him. He knows more about the secrets beneath our feet than any other officer at the precinct."

Those present nodded silently. The name Matteo was known in Albox, but no one had guessed that his expertise would one day be needed for such a gruesome legacy in Casa Flora.

While they waited for the restorer to arrive, the atmosphere in the house changed. Casa Flora was no longer just a place of renovation; it had become an archive of horror that now, after decades of silence, was finally telling its story.