

The legacy of 1518

Albox Mystery Thriller

- Sample text -

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Prologue (Year 1518)

The earth above Albox is not yet trembling, but the animals are already restless. In the deep cellars of the Moorish fortress, high up on the hill, a lonely oil lamp is burning. Yusuf, the Moorish master builder, who now bears the name Diego under the Christian rulers, knows that the time of the Moriscos has run out. They are being forced to extinguish their faith and their history.

With trembling hands, but the precision of a master, he chisels a final inscription into the massive keystone of the secret archive. It is not a Moorish text; that would be too dangerous. He uses the language of the new masters, Latin, disguised as a Christian blessing, yet the numbers and letters harbor a deadly secret.

He whispers the words as the chisel bites into the stone:

"Invenietis me in fundamentis oppidi, ubi lapides veteres loquuntur. Lux lunae viam monstrabit, sed caveas ruinam." (You will find me in the foundations of the town, where the ancient stones speak. The light of the moon will show the way, but beware of the collapse.)

A few hours later, on November 9, 1518, all hell

breaks loose. The earth tears open, the castle crashes down the slope, burying Yusuf and his secret. The survivors suspect nothing when, weeks later, they collect the fallen stones of the fortress to build the new Albox in the valley...

The Whispering Stones of the Old Town

The dust on the ground floor of the old, dilapidated cortijo was so thick you could almost cut it with a knife. The centuries-old house sat right in the middle of the narrow, steep maze of alleys in the old town of Albox, built directly against the bare rock of the hill. The building was actually only supposed to be gutted and renovated, but half an hour ago, the construction workers' sledgehammers had gone on strike.

They had called for Matteo.

Matteo stood in the swirling lime dust and coughed briefly while pushing his protective goggles onto his forehead. The workers had torn down a thick, load-bearing interior wall and had stumbled upon something in the foundation area that absolutely did not belong here. Instead of the usual irregular rubble stone from the region, monumental, perfectly hewn blocks had emerged. They were huge, majestic, and undoubtedly originated from the old Moorish fortress that had tumbled down from the hill during the great earthquake of 1518. The original inhabitants of Albox had simply recycled the

rubble back then as cheap building material for the new village in the valley.

But this one cornerstone, which now lay exposed at eye level in front of Matteo, was different.

Matteo knelt down and pulled his fine restoration brush from his pocket. With cautious, routine movements, he swept the centuries-old mortar dust out of the deep grooves of an inscription. Clunky, weathered characters emerged.

Matteo squinted. He was a craftsman and restorer, not a linguist. Latin was definitely not one of his strengths. He ran his fingertips over the cold indentations. Through his experience with old church texts, a few words immediately caught his eye: he could decipher "Lux," which meant light. And directly behind it stood "lunae," which inevitably made him think of Luna, the moon. Light of the moon. As he turned his gaze further down, his craftsman reflexes kicked in. Below the letters, precise geometric vectors, lines, and astronomical angles were chiseled. This was no Christian Bible verse. This was an encrypted message that had to do with a very specific moon phase and exact lighting. But the actual Latin sentence in between? He did not understand it. It was a closed book.

A violent tingling spread in Matteo's stomach. He knew he was holding a puzzle piece in his hands. And he knew exactly who he needed now.

He pulled out his smartphone, took a sharp photo of the stone, and immediately dialed a number in Granada.

At the other end of the line, it took agonizingly long for someone to pick up. When the connection was finally established, Moreno's voice sounded dull, sluggish, and bored to death. The old historian was stuck in his apartment in Granada, barely allowed to move due to his broken ribs, and was likely fading away from inactivity.

"Moreno? It's me, Matteo."

"Matteo! My boy!" Moreno's voice immediately became a shade louder. "Please tell me you have work for me. If I have to read these stupid gossip magazines for one more day, I will jump off the walls of the Alhambra voluntarily. I am dying of boredom!"

Matteo had to laugh involuntarily. "I have more than just work for you, my friend. I am standing here in the middle of the old town of Albox in an old cortijo. The workers uncovered an original fragment of the old castle while tearing down a

wall."

At the other end of the line, there was suddenly a violent rustling sound. "The castle from 1518? Are you sure?" urged Moreno.

"Absolutely sure," said Matteo, stepping closer to the block. "And here is the best part: there is a Latin inscription on the cornerstone. I just sent you a photo. I can only decipher 'Lux' and 'lunae,' something with moonlight. And there are astronomical angles chiseled underneath, Moreno. This is a code."

For two seconds, there was absolute radio silence on the line. Matteo only heard the heavy breathing of the historian as he opened the image on his phone.

Then, suddenly, a loud, pain-filled hiss sounded.

"Damn... ouch! Damn ribs..." Moreno had sat up far too quickly from excitement. But the pain was completely irrelevant to him at this moment. His voice trembled with academic greed as he read the text from the screen and translated it for Matteo as if shot from a pistol:

"Invenietis me in fundamentis oppidi, ubi lapides veteres loquuntur... Matteo! This is brilliant! It means: 'You will find me in the foundations of the

town, where the ancient stones speak. The light of the moon will show the way, but beware of the collapse."

Matteo held his breath. Where the ancient stones speak...

"Matteo, do you hear me?" shouted Moreno, almost ecstatically into the phone. "That is Yusuf, the Moorish master builder! He hid the castle's archive before the earthquake! Don't you dare touch the stone; I'm getting a ride immediately! Screw the doctors, I'm coming to Albox!"

Matteo was just about to answer, then hastily pressed the red button and slid the phone silently into his trouser pocket. A figure had appeared in the dusty door frame of the cortijo. An elegant man in a tailored suit, who did not fit into a dirty construction site at all, stepped inside, brushed an invisible speck of dust from his lapel, and looked at Matteo with a highly intelligent, lurking smile.

"A fascinating find, isn't it?" said the stranger with a gentle, almost too friendly voice.

The Stranger

A man stepped inside who fit here like a Ferrari on a dusty dirt road. He wore a tailored, dark gray suit, immaculately white cufflinks, and bench-made leather shoes that were already starting to get a matte layer of fine lime dust on them. He seemed to be in his late fifties, his hair slate-gray and perfectly coiffed, his eyes behind elegant glasses cool and analytical. He brushed an invisible speck of dust from his lapel and looked at Matteo with a highly intelligent, lurking smile.

"A fascinating find, isn't it?" said the stranger with a gentle, almost too friendly voice.

Matteo sized him up from head to toe. In Albox, everyone knew everyone. It was impossible to walk through the narrow alleys here unnoticed, especially not in this outfit. No one in this village knew this man. He was not a local, not a municipal official, not a well-known craftsman. He was an absolute stranger.

An icy shiver ran down Matteo's back before the man even opened his mouth again. The workers had broken through the wall just half an hour ago. The discovery was brand new. No one in

the village knew about it. It was an absolute mystery: how did this stranger even know that he had to come to this inconspicuous, hidden house at exactly this moment? Who had informed him? Or had he been shadowing Matteo?

"And you are?" asked Matteo, folding his arms across his chest. The restorer in him had immediately set all antennas to receive.

The stranger smiled charmingly, took a step closer to the broken wall, and extended a hand that had never held a sledgehammer in its life. "Dr. Vincent Vance. I am traveling in the province of Almería as an independent consultant for an international cultural foundation. The workers outside told me that something... unusual had been uncovered here."

Independent consultant. Of course. And the workers outside certainly hadn't said anything, as they barely spoke a word of English or standard Spanish, Matteo thought. His intuition raised a loud alarm. The man was lying through his teeth.

"There are only old building blocks here," Matteo deflected, moving unobtrusively in front of the chiseled Latin fragment. "Nothing that would interest an international foundation. Just recycled material from the area."

Dr. Vance tilted his head slightly to the side. His smile remained glued in place, but his eyes narrowed into slits as he tried to look past Matteo.

"Oh, don't sell yourself short, Señor...?" He waited briefly, but when Matteo did not mention his name, Vance simply continued smoothly. "A man of your reputation immediately sees that this is no ordinary limestone. Just look at the fine surface finishing. This is the best sandstone from the region's quarries, hewn exactly in the Moorish style. This," he pointed with a vague hand gesture at the broken edge, "is a genuine corner fragment of the old fortress wall. Probably the northwest flank. Fell in November 1518 during the great earthquake."

Matteo raised an eyebrow. The man was lying about his identity, but he had real, deep expertise, and he was targeting this one stone specifically and without wasting time.

"A nice fairy tale," replied Matteo coolly. "But as you can see, the stone is supporting the ceiling. It stays where it is, and tomorrow, plastering will continue as normal here."

Vance laughed softly, a dry, almost silent sound. He stepped so close to Matteo that he could

smell the Swiss man's expensive aftershave.

"It would be an infinite shame to simply bury such a historically significant fragment under cheap cement," whispered Vance. He looked Matteo straight in the eyes. In this gaze, there was suddenly nothing charming left, just the naked, calculating coldness of a predator. "Sometimes these old stones contain... messages that want to be read in the right light. Don't you think?"

While Vance was still speaking, Matteo's mind was racing. The puzzle fell together with a frightening, banal logic. Vance was no ghost; he had no clairvoyant abilities. The truth was much simpler and fit perfectly into a small place like Albox.

The construction workers had found the stone a good thirty minutes ago. Before they had even called Matteo, something else had certainly happened: one of the men had pulled out his smartphone.

A quick photo via WhatsApp to the elegant, foreign gentleman who had been sitting in the café at Plaza San Francisco for days, handing out conspicuously generous tips, and asking seemingly casual questions about old finds and historical walls. A worker had sensed quick

money and informed Vance immediately.

Vance was in town anyway. And since Albox is not large, it only takes five minutes on foot to get from Plaza San Francisco to the narrow alleys of the old town.

He had exploited the lead cold-bloodedly. He had probably already studied the photo of the inscription on his phone display while Matteo was still in the car.

Matteo felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. This man was not just intelligent; he had already stretched his feelers deep into the village and had the locals under his control without them even suspecting the evil game behind it.

On the Way to Albox

Meanwhile, Raffael Moreno had found someone to drive him to Albox for good pay.

"Drive slowly, boy!" he shouted as they hit a deep pothole. "My ribs are absolutely not in the mood for that!"

"Yeah, yeah," he received as a monosyllabic answer.

It was a young man from the neighborhood, Enrico, who currently had nothing to do and was happy about a few euros he could earn on the side. "You wanted to get to Albox as fast as possible."

"Yes," groaned Raffael, holding his side with a face twisted in pain. "But I wanted to arrive in Albox, not in hell or on some cloud as a harp-playing angel!"

Enrico noticeably took his foot off the gas and from then on tried to avoid the worst potholes.

"See," groaned Raffael again as the car glided more smoothly over the asphalt. "It works. You can drive sensibly after all."

It was just under a two-hour drive from Granada to Albox. Hopefully, Matteo wouldn't do anything

reckless in the meantime, Moreno thought anxiously. The impatience tortured him more than the physical pain. He took his phone out of his pocket, searched for Matteo's number in the recent calls, and pressed redial.

It took only two rings before Matteo answered.

"Listen to me," Moreno cut straight to the point, even before his friend could say hello properly. "You must not change anything at all about the stone, do you understand? I am on my way, so kindly wait for me!"

"Yes, alright already," replied Matteo at the other end of the line, but his voice sounded muffled and unusually restless. "But that's easier said than done. A foreigner just showed up here who is acting damn important."

Moreno immediately became alert. "A foreigner? What kind of foreigner? What is his name?"

"He says he comes from Switzerland and introduces himself as Dr. Vance."

"Vance?" asked Raffael, stunned. An icy shiver ran down his back. "Are you sure? Does he look like he's in his late fifties, gray hair, tailored suit, and as slickly groomed as grandma's favorite doll?"

"Exactly that one," answered Matteo, surprised.

"How do you know...?"

"I'm coming!" shouted Moreno entreatingly into the phone. "Stall him, Matteo! Don't let him touch the stone!"

He hung up, spun around, and tapped Enrico on the shoulder so hard that he gasped himself.

"Forget my ribs, boy! Step on it! We are in a damn hurry!"

The Game with the Plaster

Dr. Vincent Vance took a slow step toward Matteo, his cheeky, smug grin etched onto his face as if by chisel. "You surely know, Señor, that there are many more of these stones in the village," Vance said with calculated casualness. "And this single block here won't get you any further, no matter how interesting it looks. It is just a tiny part of a much larger puzzle."

Matteo scratched behind his ear. He tried not to show his growing nervousness, but the Swiss man's words struck a nerve. "Of course I know there are many more stones," Matteo retorted spontaneously. "The question is just: Where?"

As soon as the words left his lips, they came back to bite him. *Oops*, Matteo thought grimly. *Damn, did I just say too much?* He was furious with himself. He shouldn't let this arrogant dandy provoke him. You couldn't trust this Vance as far as you could throw a Moorish block. But one question hammered in Matteo's head: What was the guy actually doing here? A few old, recycled fortress stones in a house wall were usually completely uninteresting for an international foundation. There was more to it. Much more.

Vance was now sauntering leisurely around the construction site, where the dense lime dust had almost completely settled. His bench-made leather shoes left clear prints on the dirty floor. Suddenly, he stopped in front of a still-untouched section of the wall, a few meters from the first find.

"Have you actually seen this one yet?" Vance asked without turning around.

Matteo tensed up. He stepped forward. "Which one?"

Vance pointed the tip of his elegant, silver ballpoint pen at a spot on the rough interior wall. Only a tiny corner had been cleared of the old plaster there, barely larger than the palm of a hand. But as Matteo looked closer, his breath hitched. Beneath the crumbling layers of lime, the next perfectly hewn edge could be seen, and on it, the fine, dark grooves of further characters emerged. A second stone.

"Of course I know that one," Matteo lied as smoothly as he could this time. He did not want to show any weakness to this peacock, nor admit that he had simply overlooked the second block in the heat of the moment.

"Oh, really?" Vance raised an eyebrow, amused,

and turned around. "And what about it? What does the inscription on this one say?"

"You can see for yourself!" Matteo snapped at him, annoyed. The Swiss man's arrogance finally brought his blood to a boil. "It still has to be carefully uncovered! I can't see through the old plaster, damn it. I don't have X-ray eyes!"

Vance just nodded slowly, and a quiet, almost pitying laugh escaped his throat. Matteo reacted exactly as Vance had expected—emotional and thin-skinned.

"Well, I won't strain your precious time and your... lacking X-ray vision any further," Vance said in his usual soapy tone. He reached into the inside pocket of his tailored suit and pulled out a flat, silver case. "I will be in touch. Or even better: you call me as soon as there is something truly interesting to report."

With an elegant movement, he slid a business card into Matteo's fingers.

Matteo looked at the piece of paper in his hand. It wasn't ordinary cardboard, but a heavy, matte-black luxury card with a tactile texture and real gold edging. A real braggart's card that oozed pretension. In swirling gold letters, it read:

*Dr. Vincent Vance Senior Director of Global
Heritage Acquisitions & Cultural Sovereignty The
Vance & Partners Foundation Genève, London,
New York*

Matteo turned the ostentatious card over once,
but the back was empty, smooth, and as black as
Vance's intentions. When he raised his gaze
again, the stranger was already on his way
toward the dusty exit.

The Phone Call in the Shadows

Vincent Vance stepped out of the dusty archway of the cortijo into the glaring sunlight of Albox. He tapped his lapel fleetingly with two fingers to remove the barely visible lime dust and walked a few steps down the narrow alley. Only when he believed he was at a safe distance did he slow his pace.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his smartphone, and dialed a number blindly. It didn't take long for the other end to pick up.

"Yes," Vance spoke into the microphone in a hushed but strictly professional voice. "I think we have a really good lead."

He paused and listened to the deep voice on the other end of the line. After a short silence, Vance nodded coolly. "Good. I will stay on it. Rely on me."

He hung up and put the phone away.

What Vance didn't suspect: Matteo was standing upstairs at the open, unbarred window hole of the upper floor. He had leaned forward cautiously to see if the guy was really leaving. The acoustics in the narrow, steep alleys of the old

town were treacherous; like a stone funnel, every spoken word was carried upward. Matteo had understood every single word of the phone call clearly.

He pulled his head back and stared into the void while his thoughts raced.

Was that intentional? Had Vance known he could be overheard and staged the whole thing just to confuse him further and exert psychological pressure? Or was this otherwise perfectly calculating Swiss man just a human after all, who in his boundless arrogance had truly believed that the simple craftsman couldn't hear him in the alley anymore?

Matteo clenched his fists. Whoever had been on the other end of that phone call, the game for the legacy of 1518 had only just begun.

The Chase Across the Asphalt

Enrico pushed the car to the limit. The asphalt of the highway raced under the tires while the engine roared at a worryingly high frequency.

"Enrico, I didn't know you were a race car driver!" Moreno shouted over the noise. He clung desperately to the grab handle above the window with his left hand, while his right hand tried to stabilize his aching chest.

"I was supposed to step on it, right?" Enrico asked back without taking his eyes off the road. A broad grin was on the young man's face.

"Yes, just do it!" Moreno forced out as the car hit a bump and his ribs protested violently. "But watch out that you don't get caught. You know that gets damn expensive in Spain."

"Yeah, yeah," Enrico just laughed lightheartedly. "I have my tricks." He pointed his index finger fleetingly at the display of his navigation system, which was running along cheerfully and reliably indicating every fixed speed camera and mobile radar trap along the route in advance.

"Alright then..." Moreno muttered and closed his eyes for a moment. He just had to hold on. The

ribs hurt so brutally, as if they wanted to leave his chest at any moment and find some distance. Every breath was torture, every kilometer a personal battle against the stabbing pain.

"If only I had a cognac..." Moreno stammered softly to himself as he winced. A strong gulp of alcohol to numb the pain and calm the nerves—that would have been exactly what he needed now.

"In Albox, you'll surely get one!" Enrico laughed in good spirits from the driver's seat.

For the young man from the neighborhood, everything here was just a big adventure, a welcome bit of fun, and quick money. For Raffael Moreno, however, it was deadly serious. He stared silently at the barren, sun-scorched hills that flew past the window. Everything inside him contracted. He feared the worst, even if he couldn't quite grasp what awaited him in the old town of Albox. It was a deep, dark premonition. If Vance had his fingers in the pie, it was never just about a bit of monument preservation. It was about a ruthless crime against history.