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The Watcher in the Pine: A Carlos Tejada Alonso y Leon Investigation

Rebecca Pawel
Soho Press (February 2005)
Unknown $24.00 (288pp)
978-1-56947-379-5

The former commander of the local military post has been murdered. The inexperienced new *comandante* has barely arrived when dynamite is reported missing, apparently stolen by rebels. Is a malevolent plot afoot to launch an attack on the government? Or is there some other motivation, perhaps involving the post's surly Sergeant Marquez, who kills the murder suspect under questionable circumstances? These mysteries are not the most intriguing aspect of this book. Rather, the powerful characters and unique setting are most compelling.

Winner of the Edgar Award for *Death of a Nationalist*, the author is a true master of the historical novel. She stunningly re-creates the era when Generalissimo Franco tightened his iron grip on war-ravaged Spain. She imbues her characters with multifaceted personalities and competing internal tensions. For example, young Lieutenant Tejada is dispatched to a distant outpost, and he defies convention by bringing his pregnant wife, Elena, to the rustic and dangerous military base. Though Tejada is a member of Franco's *Guardia Civil*, Elena is a former Red, or Republican sympathizer, a strong-willed and brilliant woman who provides her husband with both support and frequent vexation due to her independent beliefs. Together, they are a good team, and their love for each other is able to survive the enormous pressures they face in a stricken countryside where the *maquis*, or remnants of the former revolutionaries, have many friends among the local populace.

The tension erupts when Elena is kidnapped. The ransom note demands that Tejada provide weapons, or else she and his unborn child will be killed. When Marquez suddenly arrests the lieutenant, on the grounds that he is too grief-stricken to decide the proper course of action, Tejada must plan an escape to find his beloved wife before she is murdered. Meanwhile, Elena is seeking escape from her strangely unguarded prison, but labor pains announce that her baby cannot wait for her to find safety.

The story unfolds as deftly as a lily at dawn. Delightful historical tidbits intermesh with major plot developments and the author's skillful use of dialogue to give the novel a striking verisimilitude. The reader can *feel* the love and panic flashing through the lieutenant's mind when he discovers that his wife and unborn son are in danger, and can empathize with his horrible despair when he remembers that his last meeting with his wife had ended in a terrible argument. Thanks to the engrossing story and dynamic character development, this latest Carlos Tejada adventure will captivate anyone who loves mysteries or complex historical novels.
ALAN J. COUTURE (August 18, 2009)

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