

THE MAGDALENE CHRONICLES

• BOOK 1 •

THE
MAGDALENE
DECEPTION



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Excerpt

Prologue

Southern France – March 1244

The relentless siege of the last surviving Cathar fortress, perched strategically on the majestic peak of Montségur in the French Pyrenees, entered its tenth month.

The massive army of crusaders dispatched from Rome, thirty thousand strong, were garbed in distinctive white tunics, their mantles emblazoned with the scarlet Latin cross. Knights commanders led hordes of common foot soldiers, some seeking personal salvation, others simply out for adventure and the promise of plunder. They had already devastated most of the Languedoc region of southern France in the years preceding. Tens of thousands of men, women, and children had been slain, regardless of age, sex or religious belief. Entire villages were burned, rich crops destroyed, and the fertile land which yielded them was poisoned in a cruel, single-minded quest to root out and extinguish a small and peaceful, yet influential mystic order known as the Cathars.

The defeat of the impregnable Montségur remained the ultimate prize for the Church's troops. Rumors of a vast treasure had reached the ears of every soldier, stirring up the passion with which these feared European mercenaries carried out their holy mission. As was the customary practice during a crusade, whatever pillage remained after the plundering—*spolia opima*, the richest spoils for supreme achievement—could be claimed by the victor. That temptation, bonded by the personal assurance of the pope that all sins would be forgiven and their paths to heaven assured, was enough to seduce anyone, nobleman or peasant, to take up cudgel, pike, or arrow in the name of God.

In 1209, Pope Innocent III had ordered a Holy Crusade to crush the spirit and, if necessary, the life of each and every dissident in the Languedoc region bordering France and Spain.

This independent principality had distinguished itself by fostering an artistic and intellectual populace well beyond that of most northern European societies at the time.

The people of the Languedoc practiced a religious tolerance that encouraged spiritual and secular diversity. Schools teaching Greek, Hebrew and Arabic languages and the customs which accompanied them flourished, as did those espousing the Kabbalah, an occult form of Judaism that dated from the second century.

Most settlers in the Languedoc viewed Christianity with the utmost repugnance; at the very least its practices were perceived as being more materialistic than godly in nature. The irreligious of the region passed over Christianity in large part due to the scandalous corruption exhibited by its local priests and bishops who, unable to influence the heathens within their provinces, came to prefer the rewards of commerce and land ownership over the tending of a meager flock.

Consequently, the authorities in Rome felt compelled to deal with this unforgivable heresy once and for all, in towns such as Toulouse and Albi within the Languedoc area.

Consigning his troops to their commanders, Pope Innocent III invoked a special benediction to all, lauding the divinity of their mission. Asked how they might distinguish their Christian brethren from the heretics, the crusaders were simply told, "Kill them all. God will spare His own."

And so the Albigensian Crusade began.

The new moon cast no light over Montségur as night fell on the first day of March 1244, obscuring not only the hastened activities of its occupants, but the lingering threat conspiring outside its walls. A dense alpine fog had settled over the mountain, and the castle that straddled its inaccessible peak had withstood nearly a year of unceasing battle.

Weakened by the tenacity of their predators and yielding to the hopelessness of their situation, Raymond de Péreille, Lord of Château du Montségur and leader of the remaining four hundred defenders, commanded his troops to lay down their arms, and descended the mountain to negotiate terms of their capitulation.

Though offered lenient conditions in return for their surrender, de Péreille requested a fourteen-day truce, ostensibly to consider the terms, and handed over hostages as an assurance of good faith. Knowing there was no alternative for their captives—nearly half of whom were priest-knights, or *parfaits*, sworn to do God's work—the commanders of the pope's regiment agreed to the truce.

Over the next two weeks, reprieved from the constant threat of attack they had been enduring for months, the inhabitants of Montségur resolved to fulfill their own destiny before relinquishing their fortress—and their lives—to the Inquisition.

On the last day of the truce, as if guided collectively by a single will on a predestined course, the surviving members of the last Cathar settlement made special preparations for their departure.

Four of the strongest and most loyal of the *parfaits* were led by Bishop Bertrand Marty, the senior abbé of the fortress, as they descended deep within the mountain down a long, stepped passageway carved into alternating layers of earth and limestone. The end of the passage appeared to be just that, as if the original tunnelers had simply stopped work and retreated without finishing the job. But, while the others held torches, Abbé Marty withdrew a large rusted key-like wedge from beneath his cassock, and thrust it into a hidden cavity near the low ceiling.

The abbé manipulated the key for a few moments. A muffled sound of grating metal from beyond the stone wall echoed through the tunnel, and the seemingly impenetrable granite slid inward slightly, revealing a door.

Aided by the *parfaits*, the door swung open into a small dank chamber filled with an enormous cache of riches—gold and silver in varied forms, gilded chalices and bejeweled crosses, an abundance of gems and precious stones, overflowing bags of coins from many lands.

And, in a far corner removed from the bulk of the treasure itself, stood a wide granite pedestal on which rested an ornately carved wooden reliquary, crafted to hold the most holy of relics, next to which sat a large book wrapped in brown sackcloth.

Standing before the legendary treasure of the Cathars—glittering and hypnotic in the dim torchlight—would prove seductive for most men. But the Albigensians held little regard for earthly goods, other than as a useful political means to achieve their spiritual destiny. Ignoring the abundant wealth spread before them, the abbé fetched the sackcloth while the other four *parfaits* hoisted the ancient reliquary to their shoulders, then they left the room and solemnly proceeded back up the granite stairway. In the thousand-year history of the Cathars, these would be the last of the order ever to see the treasure.

But the most sacred relic of the Christian world would never, they vowed, fall into the unholy hands of the Inquisition.

Emerging from the stone passage, Abbé Marty led the *parfaits* and their venerable cargo through the hundreds of waiting Cathars who had assembled outside, forming a

candlelit gauntlet leading to the sanctuary. All were dressed in traditional black tunics, all wearing shoulder-length hair covered by round *taqiyah* caps as was the custom of the sect.

Once inside, the *parfaits* lowered the reliquary onto the stone altar. The abbé removed the ancient book from the sackcloth and began the sacred Consolamentum, a ritual of consecration, while the four appointed guardians prepared themselves for their special mission.

Armed with short blades and truncheons, the *parfaits* carefully secured the reliquary in the safety of a rope sling, then fastened taut harnesses around themselves.

“Go with God, my sons,” Abbé Marty intoned as he gave them his blessing, “and in His name ensure this sacred reliquary be protected for generations to come.”

The four men climbed over the precipice and, assisted by their brothers gripping the ropes tied to their harnesses, gently and silently rappelled hundreds of meters down the escarpment. Sympathizers waiting at the base of the mountain assisted the *parfaits* in liberating their holy treasure, guiding them away from the danger of other troops and hiding them and the reliquary deep in one of many nearby caves.

Throughout the night, those remaining at Montségur celebrated their brotherhood, their holy calling, and their last hours alive. Descending the mountain the next morning, in a state of pure spiritual release from the material world, Abbé Marty led the last of the Cathars as they willingly marched into the blazing pyres awaiting them, martyrs to their cause.

The holy reliquary of the Cathars has never since been found.

Chapter 1

Present Day

Rounding the northern wall of the Colosseum with a measured stride, a tall young man with longish black hair glanced at the Tag Heuer chronometer strapped to his left wrist. Noting the elapsed time of his eighth mile, he wiped away the sweat that was now stinging his eyes.

Damn this Roman heat. Not even sunrise, and it's already a scorcher.

Approaching the wide crosswalks flanking the west side of the immense Colosseum, he wondered if this was the morning he would meet God. Dodging the murderous, unrestrained traffic circling the stadium became a daily act of supreme faith, as the blur of steel subcompacts, one after another, careened around the massive structure on their way, no doubt, to some less hostile place. Since his arrival here he had discovered that this was the way with Italian motorists in general, though Roman drivers excelled at the sport. Veteran observers could always tell the difference between natives and visitors: a local would cross the road seemingly ambivalent to the rush of oncoming traffic. Non-Romans, who could as likely be from Milan as from Boston or Paris, approached the threat of each curb-to-curb confrontation with a trepidation bordering on mortal terror.

Crossing the broad Via dei Fori Imperiali, his route took him through the Suburra, the most ancient inhabited area of Rome and off the beaten path of most tourists. As a newcomer to a city whose normal pulse was barely evident beneath the confusing ambiguities of new and old, the runner felt most comfortable here in the Suburra, a semi-industrial working-class neighborhood, much like the one he only recently left in New York. In the summer, people got up early to tend their gardens before the real heat forced them indoors. The early morning air was thick with alternating scents of Chilean jasmine, honeysuckle and petrol fumes.

He ran another ten kilometers, long blooms of sweat accentuating a lean, muscular frame beneath a gauzy white t-shirt as he burst into a sprint up the final few blocks, past the empty trattorias and shuttered shops whose merchants were just beginning their morning rituals.

Slowing to a cool-down pace as he crossed the Sant'Angelo bridge spanning the Tiber River, he turned left up Via della Conciliazione as the massive dome of Saint Peter's Basilica loomed suddenly ahead. Though it could be seen from almost anywhere in Rome, this approach always gave him the impression that the dome seemed to tip backwards, being swallowed up by the grand facade of the church the closer he got to it.

"Buongiorno, padre." Several female voices, almost in unison, broke the cobblestone pattern of his reverie.

Father Michael Dominic looked up and smiled politely, lifting his hand in a slight wave as he swiftly passed a small cluster of nuns, some of whom he recognized as Vatican employees. The younger women blushed, leaning their hooded heads toward each other in hushed gossip as their eyes followed the handsome priest; the older women simply bobbed a chilly nod to the young cleric, dutifully herding their novitiates into obedient silence on their way to morning Mass.

Though he had only been in Rome a couple of weeks, Michael Dominic's youthful exuberance and keen intellect had become known quickly throughout the cloistered population of Vatican City, setting him apart from the more monastic attitudes prevalent since the Middle Ages.

But despite the fusty parochialism and an atmosphere of suspended time he found within its walls, Dominic still felt the intoxication of privilege at having been assigned to Rome so early in his religious career. It had not been even two years since he lay prostrate at the altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, to be ordained by his family friend and mentor Cardinal Enrico Petrini.

It was no secret to Vatican insiders that the eminent cardinal's influence was chiefly responsible for Dominic's swift rise to the marbled corridors of ecclesiastical power now surrounding him. The young priest's scholarly achievements as a classical medievalist were essential to the work being done in the Vatican Library. But the progressive cardinal also was grateful for the vitality Dominic brought to his vocation, not to mention the charismatic ways in which he could get things accomplished in an otherwise plodding bureaucracy. Though Dominic could not account for his mentor's vigorous inducement that he come to Rome—and knowing this particular prince of the Church so well, it was surely more than a familial gesture—he had trusted Enrico Petrini completely, and simply accepted the fact that this powerful man had believed in him strongly enough to give him an opportunity which he most certainly would not have had otherwise.

Pacing slower now, Dominic drew in rhythmic gulps of searing air as he neared the Vatican. A block or so before reaching the gate, he stepped inside the Pergamino Caffè on the Piazza del Risorgimento. Later in the day the cramped room would be filled with tourists seeking postcards and gelato, but mornings found it crowded with locals, most nibbling on small, sticky cakes washed down with a demitasse of thick, sweet coffee.

Across the room Dominic spotted Signora Palazzolo, the ample wife of the proprietor, whose wisps of white hair were already damp with perspiration. Seeing the priest approach, the older woman's face broke into a broad, gap-toothed smile as she reached beneath the counter and withdrew a neatly folded black cassock that Dominic had dropped off earlier, which she handed to him with deliberate satisfaction.

"*Buongiorno, padre,*" she said. "And will you take *caffè* this morning?"

"*Molto grazie, signora,*" Dominic said, accepting the cassock graciously. "Not today. I'm already late as it is."

"Okay this time," she said with a gently scolding tone, "but it is not healthy for a strong young man to skip his breakfast, especially after making his heart work so hard in this unforgiving heat." Her hand reached up to wipe away the dampness as she spoke, coifing what little hair she had left in a vain attempt to make herself more attractive.

Heading toward the back of the shop, Dominic slipped into the restroom, quickly washed his face and raked his hair into some semblance of order, then drew the cassock over his head and buttoned it to the starched white collar now encircling his neck. Emerging from the restroom minutes later and making for the door, he glanced back to see the signora waving to him, now with a different look on her face—one beaming with respect for the clergyman he had suddenly become, as if she herself had had a role in the transformation.

Of the three official entrances to the Vatican, Porta Sant'Anna, or Saint Anne's Gate, is the one generally used by employees, visitors and tradesmen, situated on the east side of the frontier just north of Saint Peter's Square. Although duties of security come first, guards at all gates also are responsible for monitoring the encroachment of dishabille into the city. Dominic learned from an earlier orientation that casual attire of any sort worn by employees or official visitors was not permitted past the border. Jeans and T-shirts were barely tolerated on tourists, but the careless informality of shorts, sweatpants or other lounging attire on anyone else was strictly forbidden. An atmosphere of respect and reverence was to be observed at all times.

Vatican City maintains an actual live-in population of fewer than a thousand souls, but each workday nearly five thousand people report for duty within the diminutive confines of its imposing walls—walls originally built to defend against the invading Saracens a thousand years before—and the Swiss Guards at each gate either recognize or authenticate every person coming or going by face and by name.

One of the Guards whom Dominic had recognized from previous occasions, dressed in the less formal blue and black doublet and beret of the corps, waved him through with a courteous smile as Dominic reached for his ID card.

“It is no longer necessary to present your credentials now that you are recognized at this gate, Father Dominic,” the solidly built young guard said in English. “But it is a good idea to keep it with you just in case.”

“*Grazie*,” Dominic responded, continuing in Italian, “and it would be helpful to me if we could speak the local language. I haven’t used it fluently since I was younger, and I am outnumbered here by those who have an obvious preference. You know, ‘When in Rome....’”

The guard’s smile faded instantly, replaced by a slight but obvious discomfort as he attempted to translate, then respond to Dominic’s rapid Italian.

“Yes, it would be pleasure for me, padre,” the young soldier said in halting Italian, “but only if we speak slowly. German is native tongue of my own home, Zurich, and though I speak good English, my Italian learning have only just started; but I understand much more than I speak.”

Dominic smiled at the younger man’s well-intended phrasing. “It’s a deal then. I’m Michael Dominic,” he said formally, offering a sweaty palm.

“It is an honor meeting you, Father Michael. I am Corporal Dengler. Karl Dengler.” The guard’s face brightened at the unusual respect he was accorded, as he extended his own white-gloved hand in a firm grip. Recently recruited into the prestigious *Pontificia Cohors Helvetica*, the elite corps of papal security forces more commonly known as the Swiss Guard, Dengler had found that most people in the Vatican—indeed, most Romans—were inclined to keep to themselves. It was never this difficult to make friends in Switzerland, and he welcomed the opportunity to meet new people. He also knew, as did everyone by now, that this particular priest had a powerful ally close to the Holy Father.

“An honor for me as well, Corporal,” Dominic said a bit more slowly, yet not enough to cause the young man further embarrassment. “And my apologies for soiling your glove.”

“No problem,” Dengler said as he smiled. “With this heat it will be dry in no time. And if you ever want a running partner, let me know.”

“I’ll take you up on that!” Michael said with a wave as he passed through the gate.

Already the Vatican grounds were bustling with activity. Throngs of workers, shopkeepers and official visitors with global diversities of purpose made their way along the Via di Belvedere to the myriad offices, shops and museums—any indoor or shaded haven, in fact, that might offer escape from the heat of the rising sun.

Another Swiss Guard stood commandingly in the center of the street—looking remarkably dry and cool, Dominic thought, despite the obvious burden of his red-plumed steel helmet and the traditional billowy gala uniform of orange, red and blue stripes—directing foot and vehicular traffic while smartly saluting the occasional dignitaries passing by.

To any observer, Vatican City appears to be in a state of perpetual reconstruction. Comprising little more than a hundred acres, the ancient city state is in constant need of repair and maintenance. Architectural face-lifts, general structural reinforcement and contained expansion take place at most any time and in various stages, manifested in the skeletal maze of scaffolding surrounding portions of the basilica and adjoining buildings. *Sampietrini*, the uniquely skilled maintenance workers responsible for the upkeep of Saint Peter's, are ever-present throughout the grottoes, corridors, and courtyards as they practice time-honored skills of the artisans who have gone before them, traditionally their fathers and their fathers' fathers. It was quite probable, in fact, that a given *sampietrino* working on, say, a crumbling cornerstone of the basilica itself, could very well be shoring up work that was originally performed by his great-great-grandfather more than a century before him.

Dominic walked to the end of the Belvedere, then turned right up the Stradone dei Giardini and alongside the buildings housing the Vatican Museums, until he reached the northern wall of the city.

A priest learns early that his life will suffer many rituals, and in at least one secular aspect, Michael Dominic's was no different. Every day he ended his morning run with a meditative walk along the inner walls surrounding the immaculately maintained papal gardens. The fact that many of the same trees that lined the paths have been rooted here for centuries—serving the contemplative needs of whichever pope might be ruling at the time—gave Dominic a more natural feeling of historical connectedness, in subtle

contrast to other abundant yet more imposing, reminders of where he now happened to be living and working.

“Ah! Good morning, Miguel.” It was a gentle breeze of a voice, yet Dominic recognized it clearly in the early, warm quiescence of the Vatican gardens.

“*Buongiorno*, Cal!” Dominic said brightly. Brother Calvino Mendoza, prefect of the Vatican Archives and Dominic’s superior, was approaching the entrance to the building. Clad in the characteristic brown robe and leather sandals of his Franciscan order, Mendoza was a round, timorous man in his seventies—quite pleasant to work with, Dominic thought, if a little indiscreet in his obvious affection for men.

“You are up early today,” Mendoza said in heavily-accented English, furtively appraising Dominic’s form beneath the cassock. “But then, defying the wicked heat and traffic of Rome is best done before sunrise, no?”

“It is, yes,” Dominic laughed easily, his damp hair glistening in the sun as he shook his head in amusement, “but in another hour or so I expect the pavement to start buckling.”

Dominic had come to enjoy Mendoza’s fey demeanor and playful flirting. Nearly everyone he had met here seemed overly stern and impassive to be really likable, and Dominic was naturally drawn to people he found more hospitable anyway. This gentle man had a quick mind for humor and was never, Dominic found, lacking for a proverb appropriate to the moment. It was also common for Mendoza to call many on his staff by the Portuguese equivalent of their name, maintaining an affectionate cultural touchstone to his native home of Brazil. As for the subtle intimations, Mendoza grasped early on that Dominic’s vow of chastity was not likely to be compromised, and particularly not by another man.

“You’ll get used to it,” Mendoza nodded, smiling. “It is worse in the mornings, to be sure, but come late afternoon we are blessed by the *ponentino*, a cool wind off the Tyrrhenian Sea.

“And besides,” he quipped, “*‘To slip upon a pavement is better than to slip with the tongue—so the fall of the wicked shall come speedily.’*” He finished by glancing around the garden with mock suspicion, as if every word were prey to overcurious but unseen ears.

“Ecclesiastes,” Dominic responded. “And thanks for the admonition.”

Pleased that the young priest indulged his occasional whimsy, Mendoza shuffled up the few steps of the entrance to the Archives.

“Now, come Miguel, your days of orientation are over. Let’s get on with the real work,” he said dramatically, his arms nearly flapping as his large body moved up the steps into the Archives. “Today is a very special day.”

“I’ll catch up with you shortly, Cal. I’ve got to take a quick shower first. But why is today so special?”

From the top of the steps, Mendoza turned around to face Dominic and, like a child with a tantalizing secret, whispered with barely contained excitement, “The treasures we are about to exhume have not been seen by any living soul for several hundred years.”

Clearly a man who enjoyed his work, Calvino Mendoza’s eyes gleamed with anticipation as he lifted one heavy eyebrow in an arch, then spun as quickly as his heavy frame would allow and disappeared through the heavy wooden door.

As Dominic walked back to his apartment at the Domus Santa Marta, the resident guesthouse just south of Saint Peter’s Basilica, two men in a golf cart were heading in his direction, both dressed in the familiar black and red garb of cardinals. The cart stopped directly in his path and one of the men stepped out, approaching him.

“Father Dominic, I presume?” The heavysset man had a thick Balkan accent, with an intelligent face bearing an inscrutable mask of expression.

“Yes, Eminence? How can I help you?” Dominic said.

“I am Cardinal Sokolov, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. I simply wanted to extend a hand of welcome on behalf of those of us who have been expecting you.”

Dominic recognized the cardinal’s department, better known as the infamous Office of the Holy Inquisition before someone had come up with a less diabolical name.

“Good to meet you, Your Eminence,” he said, surprised by the comment. “I didn’t realize anyone was actually expecting me, though.”

“Oh, yes,” Sokolov said, holding Dominic’s hand in an uncomfortably firm grip as they shook. “Having Cardinal Petrini’s endorsement carries a great deal of influence here. But it also comes with certain expectations. First and foremost, keep to yourself. Do not expect to make many friends here. One is surrounded by vipers masquerading as pious souls.

“Secondly, know that you are being watched at all times. Conduct yourself appropriately and you may survive your time here. There are many who were vying for your job as *scrittore* in the Secret Archives, and they will seek any opportunity to displace you.

“Lastly,” the cardinal said scowling, his eyebrows a black bar across his fleshy face, “come to me directly if you witness or suspect anyone of illicit or unbecoming activities. Such careful scrutiny will be viewed with admiration by His Holiness, for whom I speak in this regard.”

Dominic was dumbfounded by the audacity of the man’s welcome, hardly the tone he would have imagined and one that shed a darker light on his exhilaration at now working and living in the Vatican.

“I will keep all that in mind, Eminence,” he said, forcibly pulling back his hand from the cardinal’s cloying grasp.

Sokolov stood a moment longer appraising Dominic’s face, then turned and shuffled himself back into the golf cart, which pulled away with a mounting whine as it headed into the papal gardens.

Troubled by the encounter, Dominic returned to his apartment, the fresh burdens expected of him weighing on his mind. *What have I gotten myself into?* he thought, stepping into the shower.