

## CHAPTER ONE



### INQUISITIONAL PRISON, TOULOUSE

*Saturday, 24th January*

‘You are a traitor?’

‘No, my lord.’ The prisoner was not sure if he spoke out loud or answered only within his own ruined mind.

Broken teeth and shifting bone, the taste of dried blood pooled in his mouth. How long had he been here? Hours, days?

Always?

The inquisitor gave a flick of his hand. The prisoner heard the rasp of a blade being sharpened, saw the irons and pincers lying on a wooden table beside a fireplace. A squeeze of the bellows to fan the coals. He experienced an odd moment of respite, as terror of the next torture momentarily banished the agony of the raw skin on his flayed back. Fear of what was to come drowned, if only for an instant, his shame at being too weak to endure what was being done to him. He was a soldier. He had fought well and bravely on the battlefield. How was it that now he was too fragile to withstand this?

‘You are a traitor.’ The inquisitor’s voice sounded dull and flat. ‘You are disloyal to the King, and to France. We have evidence from many attesting to it. They denounce you!’ He tapped a sheaf of papers on his desk. ‘Protestants – men like you – give succour to our enemies. It is treason.’

‘No!’ the prisoner whispered, as he felt the breath of the

gaoler warm upon his neck. His right eye was swollen shut from a previous beating, but he could sense his persecutor coming close. 'No, I –'

He stopped, for what could he say in his defence? Here, in the inquisitional prison in Toulouse, he was the enemy.

Huguenots were the enemy.

'I am loyal to the Crown. My Protestant faith does not mean –'

'Your faith brands you a heretic. You have turned away from the one true God.'

'It is not so. Please. This is all a mistake.'

He could hear the pleading in his own voice, and he felt ashamed. And he knew, when the pain came again, he would say whatever they wanted to hear. Truth or not, he had no strength left to resist.

There was a moment of tenderness, or so it seemed to him in his desperate state. A gentle lifting of his hand, like a lord romancing his lady. For a fleeting instant, the man remembered the wonderful things that existed in the world. Love and music, the sweetness of springtime flowers. Women, children, men walking arm-in-arm through the elegant streets of Toulouse. A place where people might argue and disagree, might put their case with passion and knowledge, but also with respect and honour. There, wine glasses were filled to overflowing and there was plenty to eat: figs and cured mountain ham and honey. There, in the world where once he had lived, the sun shone and the endless blue of the Midi sky stretched over the city like a canopy.

'Honey,' he murmured.

Here, in this hell below earth, time no longer existed. The *oubliettes*, they called them, where a man might disappear and never be seen again.

## THE BURNING CHAMBERS

The shock of the assault, when it came, was the worse for being unheralded. A squeezing, then a pressure, then the metal teeth of the pliers splintering his skin and his muscle and his bones.

As pain embraced him in her arms, he thought he heard the voice of a fellow prisoner from a neighbouring chamber. An educated man, a man of letters, for several days they had been held in the same cell. He knew him to be a man of honour, a bookseller, who loved his three children and spoke with gentle grief of his wife who had died.

He could hear the murmuring of another inquisitor behind the dripping cell wall: his friend was being interrogated too. Then he identified the sound of the *chatte de griffe* slicing through the air, the thud as the talons connected with skin, and it shocked him to hear his fellow prisoner screaming. He was a man of fortitude who, until now, had borne his suffering in silence.

The prisoner heard the opening and closing of a door, and knew another man had come into the cell. His cell or the one next door? Then murmuring, the shifting of paper on paper. For a beautiful moment, he thought his ordeal might end. Then the inquisitor cleared his throat and the questioning began again.

‘What you know about the Shroud of Antioch?’

‘I know nothing of any relic.’ This was true, though the prisoner knew his words counted for nothing.

‘The Holy Relic was stolen from the Eglise Saint-Taur some five years past. There are those who claim you were one of those responsible.’

‘How could I be?’ the prisoner cried, suddenly defiant. ‘I have never set foot in Toulouse until . . . until now.’

The inquisitor pressed on. ‘If you tell us where the Shroud

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is being hidden, this conversation between us will stop. The Holy Mother Church will, in Her mercy, open Her arms and welcome you back into Her grace.'

'My lord, I give you my word I –'

He smelt the searing of his flesh before he felt it. How quickly is a man reduced to an animal, to meat.

'Consider your answer carefully. I shall ask you again.'

Now this pain, the worst yet, was granting him a temporary reprieve. It was pulling him down into darkness, a place where he was strong enough to withstand their questioning, and where speaking the truth would save him.