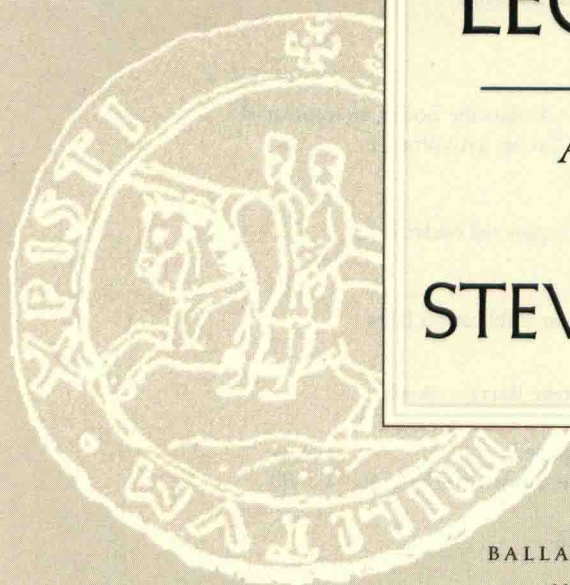


THE TEMPLAR LEGACY

A Novel

STEVE BERRY



BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK



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*For Elizabeth,
Always*

Jesus said, "Know what is within your sight, and what is hidden from you will become clear. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed."

—THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

"It has served us well, this myth of Christ."

—POPE LEO X

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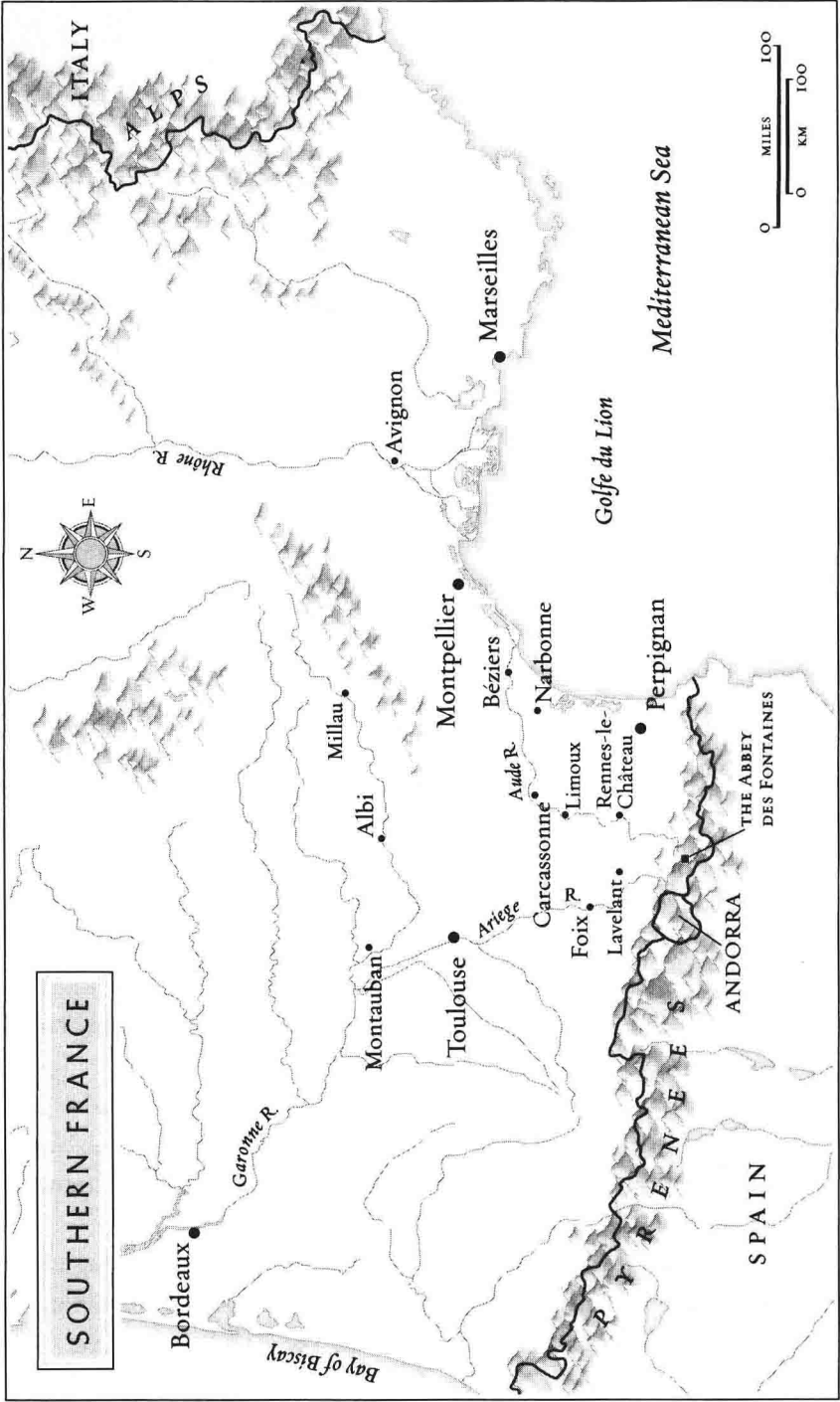
I've been lucky. The same team that produced my first novel, *The Amber Room*, in 2003 has stayed together. Few writers can claim that luxury. So, again, lots of thanks to each is in order. First, Pam Ahearn, my agent, who believed from the start. Next, to the wonderful folks at Random House: Gina Centrello, an extraordinary publisher; Mark Tavani, an editor far wiser than his years (and a great friend too); Ingrid Powell, who can always be counted on; Cindy Murray, who goes to great lengths to make me look good in the press (which is a task in and of itself); Kim Hovey who markets with the skill and precision of a surgeon; Beck Stvan, the talented artist responsible for the gorgeous cover; Laura Jorstad, an eagle-eyed copy editor who keeps me straight; Crystal Velasquez, the production editor who daily steers production on a true course; Carole Lowenstein, who once again made the pages shine; and finally to all those in Promotions and Sales—absolutely nothing could be achieved without their superior efforts.

A special thanks to one of the “girls,” Daiva Woodworth, who gave Cotton Malone his name. But I can't forget my two “other girls,” Nancy Pridgen and Fran Downing. The inspiration from all three remains with me everyday.

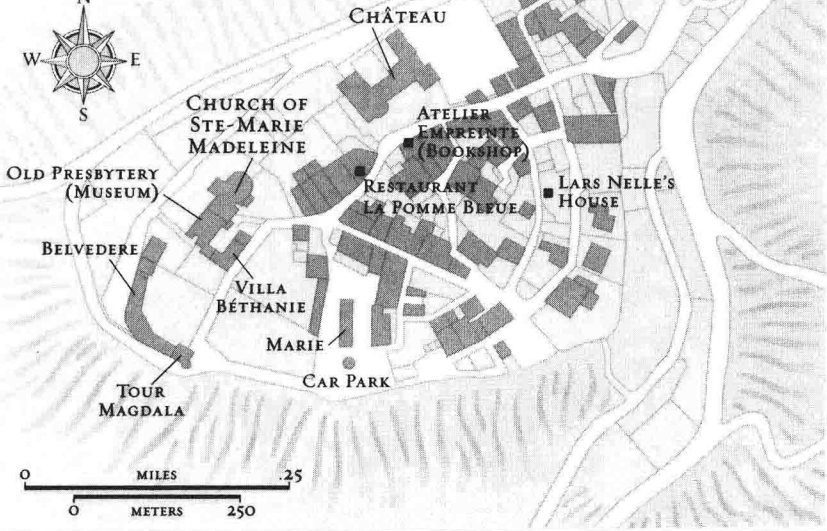
On a personal note. My daughter Elizabeth (who's growing up so fast) brought daily joy to the incredible trials and tribulations that occurred during the production of this book. She is truly a treasure.

This book is for her.

Always.



RENNES-LE-CHÂTEAU



TOMB OF THE ABBÉ BERENGER SAUNIERE'S MISTRESS

OSSUARY

ERNST SCOVILLE'S GRAVE

BELVEDERE

CEMETERY

TOMB OF THE ABBÉ BERENGER SAUNIERE

LARS NELLE'S GRAVE

SITE OF THE TOMB OF THE LADIES HAUTPOUL DE BLANCHFORT

SAUNIERE'S GARDEN

PRESBYTERY

CHURCH

HIDDEN ROOM

CHURCH ENTRANCE

VILLA BETHANIA

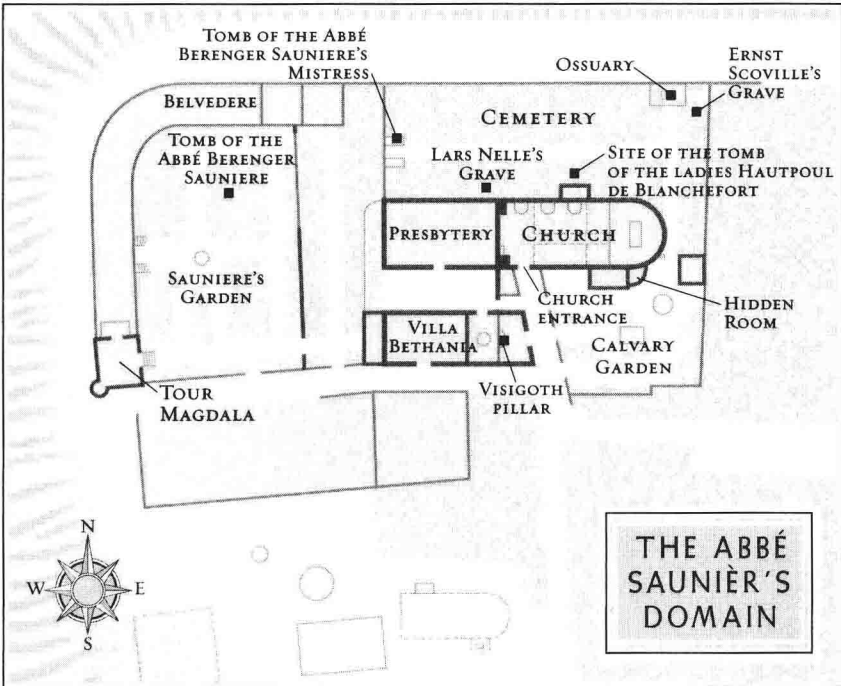
CALVARY GARDEN

TOUR MAGDALA

VISIGOTH PILLAR



THE ABBÉ SAUNIER'S DOMAIN



THE TEMPLAR LEGACY

PROLOGUE

PARIS, FRANCE
JANUARY 1308

JACQUES DE MOLAY SOUGHT DEATH, BUT KNEW SALVATION WOULD never be offered. He was the twenty-second master of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon, a religious order that had existed under God's charge for two hundred years. But for the past three months, he, like five thousand of his brothers, had been a prisoner of Philip IV, king of France.

"You will stand," Guillaume Imbert ordered from the doorway.

De Molay remained on the bed.

"You are insolent, even in the face of your own demise," Imbert said.

"Arrogance is about all I have left."

Imbert was an impish man with a face like that of a horse who, de Molay had noted, seemed as impassible as a statue. He was France's grand inquisitor and Philip IV's personal confessor, which meant he possessed the king's ear. Yet de Molay had many times wondered what, besides pain, brought joy to the Dominican's soul. But he knew what irritated him. "I will do nothing you desire."

"You have already done more than you realize."

That was true, and de Molay once more rued his weakness. Imbert's torture in the days after the October 13 arrests had been brutal, and many brothers had confessed to wrongdoing. De Molay cringed at

the memory of his own admissions—that those who were received in the Order denied the Lord Jesus Christ and spat upon a cross in contempt of Him. De Molay had even broken down and written a letter calling on the brothers to confess as he'd done, and a sizable lot had obeyed.

But just a few days ago emissaries from His Holiness, Clement V, had finally arrived in Paris. Clement was known to be Philip's puppet, which was why de Molay had brought gold florins and twelve pack horses laden with silver with him to France last summer. If things went awry, that money would have been used to buy the king's favor. Yet he'd underestimated Philip. The king longed not for partial tributes. He wanted all that the Order possessed. So charges of heresy had been fabricated and thousands of Templar arrests made in a single day. To the pope's emissaries de Molay had reported the torture and publicly recanted his confession, which he knew would bring reprisals. So he said, "I imagine Philip is presently concerned that his pope may actually have a backbone."

"Insulting your captor is not wise," Imbert said.

"And what would be wise?"

"Doing as we wish."

"And then how would I answer to my God?"

"Your God is waiting for you, and every other Templar, to answer." Imbert spoke in his usual metallic voice, which betrayed no vestige of emotion.

De Molay no longer wanted to debate. Over the past three months he'd endured ceaseless questioning and sleep deprivation. He'd been placed in irons, his feet smeared with fat and held close to flames, his body stretched on the rack. He'd even been forced to watch while drunken jailers tortured other Templars, the vast majority of whom were merely farmers, diplomats, accountants, craftsmen, navigators, clerks. He was ashamed of what he'd already been forced to say, and he wasn't going to volunteer anything further. He lay back on the stinking bed and hoped his jailer would go away.

Imbert motioned, and two guards squeezed through the doorway and yanked de Molay upright.

"Bring him," Imbert ordered.

De Molay had been arrested at the Paris Temple and held there since last October. The tall keep with four corner turrets was a Templar headquarters—a financial center—and did not possess any torture chamber. Imbert had improvised, converting the chapel into a place of unimaginable anguish—one that de Molay had visited often over the past three months.

De Molay was dragged inside the chapel and brought to the center of the black-and-white-checked floor. Many a brother had been welcomed into the Order beneath this star-studded ceiling.

“I am told,” Imbert said, “that this is where the most secret of your ceremonies were performed.” The Frenchman, dressed in a black robe, strutted to one side of the long room, near a carved receptacle de Molay knew well. “I have studied the contents of this chest. It contains a human skull, two thighbones, and a white burial shroud. Curious, no?”

He was not about to say anything. Instead, he thought of the words every postulant had uttered when welcomed into the Order. *I will suffer all that is pleasing to God.*

“Many of your brothers have told us how these items were used.” Imbert shook his head. “So disgusting has your Order become.”

He’d had enough. “We answer only to our pope, as servants to the servant of God. He alone judges us.”

“Your pope is subject to my liege lord. He will not save you.”

It was true. The pope’s emissaries had made clear they would convey de Molay’s recanting of his confession, but they doubted it would make much difference as to the Templar’s fate.

“Strip him,” Imbert ordered.

The smock he’d worn since the day after his arrest was torn from his body. He wasn’t necessarily sad to see it go, as the filthy cloth smelled of feces and urine. But Rule forbid any brother from showing his body. He knew the Inquisition preferred its victims naked—without pride—so he told himself not to shrink from Imbert’s insulting act. His fifty-six-year-old frame still possessed great stature. Like all brother knights, he’d taken care of himself. He stood tall, clung to his dignity, and calmly asked, “Why must I be humiliated?”

“Whatever do you mean?” The question carried an air of incredulosity.

“This room was a place of worship, yet you strip me and stare at my nakedness, knowing that the brothers frown on such displays.”

Imbert reached down, hinged open the chest, and removed a long twill cloth. “Ten charges have been leveled against your precious Order.”

De Molay knew them all. They ranged from ignoring the sacraments, to worshiping idols, to profiting from immoral acts, to condoning homosexuality.

“The one that is of most concern to me,” Imbert said, “is your requirement that each brother deny that Christ is our Lord and that he spit and trample on the true cross. One of your brothers has even told us of how some would piss on an image of our Lord Jesus on the cross. Is that true?”

“Ask that brother.”

“Unfortunately, he was overmatched by his ordeal.”

De Molay said nothing.

“My king and His Holiness were more disturbed by this one charge than all others. Surely, as a man born into the Church, you can see how they would be angered over your denial of Christ as our Savior?”

“I prefer to speak only to my pope.”

Imbert motioned, and the two guards clamped shackles onto both of de Molay’s wrists, then stepped back and stretched out his arms with little regard for his tattered muscles. Imbert produced a multi-tailed whip from beneath his robe. The ends clinked and de Molay saw that each was tipped with bone.

Imbert lashed the whip beneath the outstretched arms and onto de Molay’s bare back. The pain surged through him then receded, leaving behind a sharpness that did not dull. Before the flesh had time to recover, another blow came, then another. De Molay did not want to give Imbert any notion of satisfaction, but the pain overcame him and he shrieked in agony.

“You will not mock the Inquisition,” Imbert declared.

De Molay gathered his emotions. He was ashamed that he’d screamed. He stared into the oily eyes of his inquisitor and waited for what was next.

Imbert stared back. “You deny our Savior, say he was merely a man

and not the son of God? You defile the true cross? Very well. You will see what it is like to *endure* the cross.”

The whip came again—to his back, his buttocks, his legs. Blood splattered as the bone tips ripped skin.

The world drifted away.

Imbert stopped his thrashing. “Crown the master,” he yelled.

De Molay lifted his head and tried to focus. He saw what looked like a round piece of black iron. Nails were bound to the edges, their tips angled down and in.

Imbert came close. “See what our Lord endured. The Lord Jesus Christ whom you and your brothers denied.”

The crown was wedged onto his skull and pounded down tight. The nails bit into his scalp and blood oozed from the wounds, soaking the mane of his oily hair.

Imbert tossed the whip aside. “Bring him.”

De Molay was dragged across the chapel to a tall wooden door that once had led to his private apartment. A stool was produced and he was balanced on top. One of the guards held him upright while another stood ready in case he resisted, but he was far too weak to challenge.

The shackles were removed.

Imbert handed three nails to another guard.

“His right arm to the top,” Imbert ordered, “as we discussed.”

The arm was stretched above his head. The guard came close and de Molay saw the hammer.

And realized what they intended to do.

Dear God.

He felt a hand clamp his wrist, the point of a nail pressed to his sweaty flesh. He saw the hammer swing back and heard metal clang metal.

The nail pierced his wrist and he screamed.

“Did you find veins?” Imbert asked the guard.

“Clear of them.”

“Good. He is not to bleed to death.”

De Molay, as a young brother, had fought in the Holy Land when the Order had made its last stand at Acre. He recalled the feel of a

sword blade to flesh. Deep. Hard. Lasting. But a nail to the wrist was something altogether worse.

His left arm was pulled out at an angle and another nail driven through the flesh at the wrist. He bit his tongue, trying to contain himself, but the agony sent his teeth deep. Blood filled his mouth and he swallowed.

Imbert kicked the stool away and the weight of de Molay's six-foot frame was now borne entirely by the bones in his wrists, particularly his right, as the angle of his left arm stressed his right to the breaking point. Something popped in his shoulder, and pain pummeled his brain.

One of the guards grabbed his right foot and studied the flesh. Apparently, Imbert had taken care in choosing the insertion points, places where few veins coursed. The left foot was then placed behind the right and both feet were tacked to the door with a single nail.

De Molay was beyond screaming.

Imbert inspected the handiwork. "Little blood. Well done." He stepped back. "As our Lord and Savior endured, so will you. With one difference."

Now de Molay understood why they'd chosen a door. Imbert slowly swung the slab out on its hinges, opening the door, then slamming it shut.

De Molay's body was thrust one way, then another, swaying on the dislocated joints of his shoulders, pivoting off the nails. The agony was of a kind he'd never known existed.

"Like the rack," Imbert said. "Where pain can be applied in stages. This, too, has an element of control. I can allow you to hang. I can swing you to and fro. Or I can do as you just experienced, which is the worst of all."

The world was blinking in and out, and he could barely breathe. Cramps claimed every muscle. His heart beat wildly. Sweat poured from his skin and he felt as if he had the fever, his body a roaring blaze.

"Do you mock the Inquisition now?" Imbert asked.

He wanted to tell Imbert that he hated the Church for what it was doing. A weak pope controlled by a bankrupt French monarch had somehow managed to topple the greatest religious organization man had ever known. Fifteen thousand brothers scattered over Europe.

Nine thousand estates. A band of brothers that had once dominated the Holy Land and spanned two hundred years. The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon were the epitome of everything good. But success had bred jealousy and, as master, he should have fully appreciated the political storms churning around him. Been less stiff, more bending, not so outspoken. Thank heaven he'd anticipated some of what had already occurred and taken precautions. Philip IV would never see an ounce of Templar gold and silver.

And he would never see the greatest treasure of all.

So de Molay mustered his last remaining bits of energy and raised his head. Imbert clearly thought he was about to speak and drew close.

"Damn you to hell," he whispered. "Damn you and all who aid your hellish cause."

His head collapsed back to his chest. He heard Imbert scream for the door to be swung, but the pain was so intense and swept into his brain from so many directions that he felt little.

He was being taken down. How long he'd hung he did not know, but the relaxation to his limbs went unnoticed because his muscles had long ago numbed. He was carried some distance and then realized that he was back in his cell. His captors laid him onto the mattress, and as his body sunk into the soft folds a familiar stench filled his nostrils. His head was elevated by a pillow, his arms stretched out at each side.

"I have been told," Imbert quietly said, "that when a new brother was accepted into your Order, the candidate was draped about the shoulders in a linen shroud. Something about symbolizing death, then resurrecting into a new life as a Templar. You, too, will now have that honor. I have laid out beneath you the shroud from the chest in the chapel." Imbert reached down and folded the long herringbone cloth over de Molay's feet, down the length of his damp body. His gaze was now shielded by the cloth. "I am told this was used by the Order in the Holy Land, brought back here and wrapped around every Paris initiate. You are now reborn," Imbert mocked. "Lie here and think about your sins. I shall return."

De Molay was too weak to respond. He knew that Imbert had most