



THE MAGDALENE CHRONICLES
BOOK

2

**THE
MAGDALENE
RELIQUARY**

A NOVEL

GARY McAVOY


THE MAGDALENE
RELIQUARY



GARY MCAVOY

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PROLOGUE



CARCASSONNE, FRANCE – 1209–1244

Ten thousand of Pope Innocent III's most feared Crusaders had already swept through the Cathar stronghold of Béziers, killing twice that many men, women, and children as the Albigensian Crusade ravaged its way through the Languedoc region of southern France. The next major assault would take place in the ancient fortified city of Carcassonne, the jewel of the Occitania province.

Word of the pope's troops drawing close to the city had reached the ears of Raymond-Roger Trancavel, Viscount of Carcassonne, and in haste he put into motion several defensive strategies. First, he sent all of the city's Jews away, knowing certain death awaited them at the hands of the Catholic army. Then he alerted the Cathars, urging them to flee the city. Few did, preferring to take their chances behind the strong defenses of the heavily walled city.

Long a discreet supporter of the peaceful Cathar movement, Trancavel had tried to make accommodations with the approaching army to spare his city and its people, but the pope's

commanders refused a meeting. His lands, indeed his very life, were now at stake. But there was one last mission he had yet to accomplish in fulfillment of an oath taken years before.

Accompanied by loyal bodyguards and a small cadre of regimental troops, Trancavel had arranged a secret visit with a trusted friend, Raymond VI, Count of Toulouse, carrying with him a small wooden box containing the legendary treasure of the Cathars. The ornately carved box was a sacred reliquary which itself had been handed down to him for safekeeping by Godfroi de Bouillon, conqueror and first ruler of the Kingdom of Jerusalem and Lord of Bouillon, France. Godfroi was of Merovingian descent, a bloodline traced directly back to Mary Magdalene, from whom the reliquary had been acquired after she personally carried it from Jerusalem to France as she and other apostles fled the Romans.

After Trancavel died at the hands of the Crusaders in the fall of Carcassonne, Raymond VI had mounted several resistance campaigns against the Crusaders, only to lose Toulouse and suffer excommunication by the Church in the process. Years later he was able to regain his lands, but before he died he passed on the sacred reliquary to his son, Raymond VII, who succeeded his father as Count of Toulouse in 1222.

Like his father, Raymond VII was sympathetic to both the Jews and the Cathars, and for his failure to suppress both factions, he too fell into disfavor with the Church. But war was again at hand, as the King of France sought to restore his rights in the Languedoc. Raymond VII lost his battles with the king's forces and was ultimately forced to sign the Treaty of Paris, ceding much of his property to the crown. To ensure that the holy reliquary entrusted to him not be acquired by the king, Raymond made secret provisions to transfer it to the Cathar leaders, devout followers of Mary Magdalene. The fabled sacred treasure was now in the hands of its final guardians.

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IN THE ENSUING years the heretical Cathars continued to endure one defeat after another in the wake of the pope's Crusades, and the last of the movement's survivors, some four hundred souls, eventually resettled themselves in the mountaintop castle at Montségur, a fortified peak at the foot of the Pyrenees some fifty miles south of Toulouse. But their own days were numbered, as the Albigensian Crusaders blockaded the base of the mountain waiting for their moment to put an end to the scourge of this heresy once and for all.

After ten months of relentless sieges, in March 1244 the Cathars finally acceded to discuss the terms of their surrender with the pope's commanders waiting below. Unbeknownst to the Crusaders, however, four of the most capable Cathar soldiers known as *parfaits* had secretly descended the mountain, taking with them the sacred reliquary, which they eventually hid in a cave near Périllos, a day's journey east of Montségur.

Raymond VII, Count of Toulouse, had by now been informed by one of the brave escaped *parfaits* of the secret whereabouts of the reliquary. To ensure its location would be known to future faithful collaborators, yet still protected, Raymond had enlisted the services of one of the renowned mapmakers of the day, Pietro Vesconte. He also dispatched a small trusted group of soldiers to accompany Vesconte and the *parfait* to the cave site, and while the troops set up their base for a few days' encampment, Vesconte used the time to explore the entire cave and lay down on paper an intricate design of the cave system and the exact location of the concealed reliquary.

His mission accomplished, Vesconte returned to his workshop to complete the map on sturdy parchment, and prepared it in the form of a shrewd puzzle so as to prevent the casual observer from understanding its solution without substantial effort, much less what its purpose was.

Testing the design, Vesconte assured himself that, by folding and refolding the panels in specific ways, it would require great

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thought and effort to eventually arrive at the solution—
ultimately revealing the secret location of the legendary treasure
of the Cathars.

CHAPTER 1



PRESENT DAY

Standing in the center of the sprawling Cathedral cavern of the *Grotte de Lombrives*, the three young men geared up for their descent, echoes of their jangling gear the only sounds in an otherwise silent underground chamber.

Two of the three, Karl Dengler and Lukas Bischoff, were already expert cavers, skills adapted during their rigorous training as elite Mountain Grenadiers, the Swiss Army's equivalent of U.S. Navy SEAL teams. The third man, Michael Dominic, was new to the sport, and not a little intimidated by the massive subterranean labyrinth extending 24 miles deep into the earth below the Aude Valley. As a Jesuit priest working in the Vatican, the deepest he had ever been underground was in the basement of the Church's Secret Archives.

"How far back in are we going?" Dominic asked his comrades, swallowing hard as pearls of sweat lined his brow.

Dengler, a blond, five-foot-nine, superbly conditioned athlete, sensed his friend's hesitation, but couldn't resist wracking up the tension. "Not far, Michael. Only half a mile or so ... deep, deep

into the ground, beneath billions of tons of earth and granite and limestone. Exciting, isn't it!"

Dominic just stared at Dengler with a curious mix of tension and disbelief. "Thanks for the daunting optimism, Karl."

The largest and widest cave by volume in Europe, the Lombrives Cathedral is big enough to accommodate the entire Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, and then some. But this wasn't even the largest cavern in the extensive cave system snaking its way through the Languedoc region of southern France. That distinction belonged to the soaring Rule of Satan hall, which was four times larger than the Cathedral.

A vast pool of stagnant, emerald green water, brilliantly illuminated by shafts of daylight streaming in through open light wells in the roof of the chamber, formed a verdant natatorium for the pale salamanders and Iberian frogs native to the area.

Dengler and his partner, Lukas, double-checked Dominic's gear before they made their way through the shallow hypogean lake and beyond the gallery, deep into the recesses of the cavern.

"I've checked the cave survey, and though this is mostly a horizontal vault, there are some tricky vertical passages. I'll take the lead. Michael, you stay close behind me, and Lukas will take the rear guard."

"*Rear guard?!*" Dominic asked with slight alarm. "What are we guarding against?!"

"Well," said Dengler, impishly, "horizontal caves are often home to animals seeking shelter from weather and predators, like bats and raccoons and bears."

"*BEARS?!*" Dominic cried out, the word echoing throughout the great chamber.

"Shh!" Dengler whispered. "You'll wake them."

Dominic took a deep breath, blushing as Dengler and Lukas laughed.

"Don't worry, Michael," Dengler reassured him. "Cave bears are extinct in this part of France. You may find pictures of them

on the walls, though, since these caverns once served as shelter for tribes in the Paleolithic era, some forty thousand years ago. And as for bats, well, nearly every cave has bats.”

Wading through the ankle-deep water, the three men stayed close to the walls, careful they wouldn't crush any aqueous troglobites as their steps took them farther into the cave. Geological formations dating back millions of years struck the eye at every turn. Countless stalactites hung like massive icicles from the ceiling; tapering columns of stalagmites, formed by eons of calcified water dripping from above, rose intermittently from the floor bed; shimmering crystals and other minerals formed in nooks and crannies, beckoning those with an eye for natural treasures.

Emerging from the pool, their waders dripping with still water scum, the team slowly made its way to the rear chambers of the cave as the ceiling descended, narrowing their passage.

“You know,” said Dominic, making conversation to ease his anxiety, “this cave is among those rumored to contain the Holy Grail, hidden by the Cathars in the thirteenth century. If I have to put up with you two lovebirds harassing me in some bat-ridden cave, the least you could do is to help me look for it while we're here.”

Dengler and Lukas looked at each other, adventure in their eyes. “Holy Grail?” Dengler asked. “Are you serious?”

As they walked, LED headlamps on their helmets cast eerie shadows along their respective paths, giving the illusion of nebulous figures lurking in the dark. *The perfect time for a story*, Dominic figured.

He began to explain the historical heritage of the many caves in the Sabarthès region of France, renowned for their role in perpetuating oral traditions of the Holy Grail and other great treasures reputed to be buried here.

He told them about the legendary Cathars, a Gnostic sect of peaceful Byzantine settlers who opposed the Church of Rome's dogma and established their own Christian dualist movement in

the nearby French city of Albi—from which they became known as Albigensians, the name thus given to the thirteenth-century Crusade which ultimately wiped out Catharism, along with the lives of hundreds of thousands of its followers.

In 1209, vowing to crush the heresy sweeping the Languedoc during a brutal Inquisition campaign, Pope Innocent III launched the twenty-year Albigensian Crusade, perpetrating what many believe was among the earliest acts of genocide instigated by the Catholic Church.

A later revival of the Crusade in 1244 had, by then, virtually obliterated all bastions of Catharism, driving the sect's remaining adherents—a hardy settlement of some four hundred men, women, and children—to seek refuge in a high mountain fortress known as Montségur.

Of the remaining men, some 200 had submitted themselves to the *Consolamentum*, a sacred baptismal ceremony whereby ordinary souls became “perfect” in the eyes of their Cathar brethren. Known as *parfaits*, these perfecti renounced the normal trappings of the physical world, embracing spiritual wholeness tempered by unyielding austerity.

The Cathars were also known to possess a great fortune in treasure, which, as their number dwindled, had been passed on to surviving members with one single objective—to ensure that the trove would never fall into the unholy hands of the Inquisition. But the real treasure of the Cathars was believed to be much more than just the gold, silver, and precious gems they were known to have acquired over time. The true treasure was rumored to be something of great spiritual significance, not only to the Albigensians themselves, but to all of Christianity—a reliquary containing the bones of Jesus Christ.

Straddling the summit of the impregnable mountain fortress presented a formidable challenge to the pope's Crusaders—an army ten thousand strong—and defeat of its well-defended peak proved nearly impossible. The Cathars had already withstood some ten months of unceasing assaults, but the tenacity of the

Church's troops eventually wore down Montségur's defenders, and while terms of their surrender were being negotiated, under cover of darkness four of the most capable *parfaits* secretly descended one side of the mountain that was less guarded, taking with them the fabled holy relic. With the help of sympathizers waiting at the base of the escarpment, they carried the reliquary away from Montségur and hid it in one of the many caves of the region.

"This region," Dominic repeated pointedly. "And very possibly, *this* cave."

Dengler and Lukas were spellbound by Dominic's tale, visions of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* swimming through their minds as they pushed their way deeper into the cave.

"You would think others might have found something by now," Dengler said with a look of skepticism.

"Well, you don't think the Cathars would have just left it out in the open, do you?" Dominic countered with a sly smile.

Approaching the first vertical pitch, Dengler free-climbed up to anchor a traverse line. For Dominic's benefit he rigged a ladder to prevent his novice friend from struggling too much on the climb, then extended the traverse out between the two walls before lowering the rope through a tight descending slot. As they made their way down, the pitch quickly widened to reveal the next rebelay point several meters lower, above a breathtaking shaft. A couple more rebelays completed the full descent, and they found themselves in another magnificent gallery, the light from their headlamps dancing off crystal formations jutting out from the gallery walls.

"So what happened to the Cathars after they surrendered?" Lukas asked as they took in the splendors of the vast chamber, their headlamps dancing across the glittering walls.

Dominic's response was somber. "The pope's Crusaders had built a huge bonfire at the base of Montségur, demanding that all *parfaits* renounce their heretical beliefs when they descended the mountain. Prepared for martyrdom, those who refused

voluntarily walked into the blazing pyre, unrepentant, assured of a divine afterlife. The few remaining Cathars were allowed to go free, thus keeping alive the legend of the reliquary through later generations.

“It’s been fairly well known, or at least widely believed among some scholars, that Mary Magdalene and her fellow disciples had spirited a reliquary, said to be an ossuary containing Christ’s bones, out of Jerusalem as they fled the Romans. For centuries people have tried and failed to find the reliquary in these caves.

“But it’s *got* to be here somewhere,” he added mischievously, “so keep your eyes open.”

Pointing to a large vertical crack between two giant boulders, Dengler led them forward. “Our route will take us up this chimney, which opens into a rift at the top. Just follow me.”

At first the crack proved easily climbable, but the rift soon led to an intimidating ten-meter drop, followed by a scramble down a descending passage. Dengler attached a rope to a couple of natural belays further up the rift, then placed two anchors over the pitch head to allow for a free-hang down the pitch. The others followed him dutifully.

The bottom of the pitch required a low, awkward crawl between two limestone slabs, and they squirmed through a few puddles along the way. After another ten meters the passage widened at a trench, followed by a four-meter climb down to the floor of a small enlargement in the cave, though still too narrow to accommodate them all. So, one by one they crawled forward through a tight passage bending left, then right, culminating with a tricky sideways wriggle leading to another short drop.

The situation was becoming formidably claustrophobic for Dominic, as it might for most people unaccustomed to the confining rigors of caving.

“Guys,” he grunted as he struggled through the rift, the gear around his waist grinding against a sandstone wall, “this is a bit

more than I expected. Are you sure we'll be able to get out of here?"

"It won't be a problem, Michael," Dengler said cheerfully. "We'll just go back out the same way we came in."

"A pity I didn't bring breadcrumbs," Dominic replied.

They continued crawling, climbing, dropping, and squeezing through the cave for some time, until finally they came to an impressively large vault with several routes leading off of it—including an exit that led straight out into the lush forest from which they had originally come.

Seeing this easier path of escape from the tight confines of the earth, the expression on Dominic's face turned from worried to optimistic.

"*Hallelujah!*" he whispered to himself, then in a louder voice, "That was great, guys—hours of exercise punctuated by moments of terror. Did you two really have to do much of this training to be Swiss Guards?" he asked.

"That was nothing," said Lukas assertively. "Try rappelling down a rocky 300-meter cliff in a snowstorm."

"Pass," said Dominic simply, preferring his normal everyday challenges of translating ancient manuscripts in the civilized comfort of the Vatican reading rooms.

Coiling his rope and securing his gear, Dengler had a thought. "If you ever want to go looking for that Cathar treasure, Michael, count us in. It sounds like our kind of adventure, doesn't it, Lukas?"

Catching his partner's eye, Lukas nodded with a grin. "Let's get a move on, we've got to be back in the Vatican by noon tomorrow. I've got gate duty."

Their explorations done for the long weekend spent in France, the team made their way through the woods, around the mountain and back to Dengler's Jeep Wrangler. Stowing their gear in the cargo bay, they all piled in for the twelve-hour drive back to Rome.

CHAPTER 2



As the mighty bells of Saint Peter's Basilica ended their sixth and final drone, the portly bald monk slowly stood from the wooden chair he had occupied for the past few pre-dawn hours.

Though his aching body longed for relief from the intense concentration his task was demanding, he could not risk wasting the precious time he would have alone in the Tower of the Winds.

He sauntered around the cramped, dimly lit room, as much to divert his attention from the devastating document behind him as to impose disciplined calm on an overworked mind. A musty stillness hung in the room, and the constricting tightness in his chest added to his need for fresh air.

Lifting the bolt and pulling back the tarnished metal hasp, the monk opened the heavy door and walked out into the empty Meridian Room, with its colorful fresco of a storm on the Lake of Galilee adorning the south wall. A shaft of brilliant morning sunlight streamed in through the open mouth of the Triton dominating the scene, casting its beam on the black meridian line bisecting a white circle on the marble floor. Originally built in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII as an observatory, it was in this

room at the top of the *Torre dei Venti* that the Gregorian calendar was conceived, forever changing the means by which the civilized world would record its history. But history would be reshaped even further if the information in the document the monk had just read was ever revealed.

Breathing deeply, the weary friar shuffled across the hall in his leather sandals and out onto the rooftop terrace of the Tower. From here, one could enjoy Rome's most breathtaking panorama, its beloved Pantheon eclipsing the skyline as dawn bathed the timeless city. The sharp contours of the buildings, their ochre tiled roofs and gilded steeples seemingly joined as one across the broad horizon, obscured the muddy flow of the Tiber River as Rome itself portrayed one of the ancient frescoes gracing the walls inside the room.

But there were no thoughts of enjoyment for Brother Calvino Mendoza this early morning. For him, the skyline beyond the Vatican walls took on a menacing oppression as he reflected on the explosive discovery he had just made.

CHAPTER 3



A few hours later that morning, two Swiss Guards, bearing the corp's less formal daily uniform of blue and black, smartly saluted as the Jeep Wrangler approached Saint Anne's Gate, the main entrance into Vatican City used by employees, visitors, and tradesmen. Recognizing the vehicle's three occupants, the lead guard on duty raised the boom barrier and waved them through, smiling at Sergeant of the Guard Karl Dengler as he drove his SUV onto Via di Belvedere.

Parking across from the Vatican Bank next to the post office, Dengler, Dominic, and Lukas unloaded their caving gear. "Thanks for a great time, guys," Dominic said wearily, spent from the long road trip. "I'm not sure I'd do it again, but as first experiences go, this was definitely one of those."

Dengler looked at him quizzically, unsure if Dominic's statement was sincere or not. "We'll get you back in the caves yet, Michael, just you wait."

Tossing them a wave, Dominic trudged back to his apartment in Domus Santa Maria, the Vatican's guesthouse, then dropped his gear on the floor and fell onto the bed.

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THE ALARM WOKE him forty-five minutes later, just the quick doze he needed before heading into the office. His mornings usually began with a brisk run through Rome, before the tourists came out in droves and the shopkeepers began their morning rituals opening for business. But there was neither time nor inclination for running today.

After showering, Dominic threw a clean black cassock over his head, fastening all 33 buttons—one for each year of Christ’s life on earth, for nothing lacks symbolism in religious protocols—up to the starched white Mandarin collar encircling his neck. Satisfied with what he found in the mirror, he left his apartment and made his way to the Secret Archives.

L’Archivio Segreto Vaticano, known to the world by the more intriguing name Secret Archives of the Vatican, had for nearly a thousand years served as the sole repository of the Church’s infinite collection of official documents.

All manner of books and papers acquired since the eighth century—political and religious tracts, account ledgers, personal records and correspondence of the popes and the Curia, the Vatican’s governing body for ecclesiastical and secular matters—are spread out over some 53 linear miles of shelving in the vast underground section known as the Gallery of the Metallic Shelves and elsewhere in the tight confines of the Vatican. Over time, the sheer volume of materials had branched out into adjoining hallways, aisles, and side rooms, like a river finding its own path, as more documents had been added to the collections.

As assistant prefect, or *scrittore*, of the Archives, Michael Dominic had, by age thirty, found fulfillment in his life’s ambition long before he had expected to. Aided since childhood by the influence of his patron and mentor, now Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Enrico Petrini, Dominic fully realized the weight of privilege extended to him by his assignment to the Vatican so early in his religious career. His mother, Grace, had been rectory housekeeper to then Father Petrini in the diocese of

Brooklyn, New York, when Dominic was born. As he grew up, all his mother would tell him about his father was that he left shortly after his birth, and that's where the matter ended. That vacuum was solemnly filled by Enrico Petrini, who stepped in to foster Michael's development as a young man, ultimately leading him to college, seminary, and graduate schooling in courses of classical medievalism, paleography, and computer sciences—three areas of study making him uniquely qualified for a life of service in one of the world's most historically important library institutions.

PASSING THE GOVERNMENT PALACE, Dominic walked through the papal gardens, plucking and savoring a ripe autumn apple from the trees lining the Stradone dei Giardini on his way to the Apostolic Library building. A fresh rain had come overnight, brightening the vivid colors of the trees, bushes and flowers, exuding a sweet petrichor over the many acres of Vatican landscaping which had served the contemplative meditations of popes for centuries.

Bounding up the steps of the Archives building, Dominic came face to face with his superior, Brother Calvino Mendoza, prefect of the Secret Archives.

"Buongiorno, Cal!" Dominic said cheerfully.

Wearing the distinctive brown garb of his Franciscan Order of Friars, a simple white corded cincture surrounding his ample waist, Brother Mendoza greeted his assistant with a forced smile, his normally buoyant personality oddly subdued.

"I see you're back from exploring the caves of France, Miguel," he muttered. Mendoza favored giving affectionate nicknames to those close to him, reflecting the Portuguese equivalent of their name as an homage to his native home in Brazil. "Does that make you an official spelunker now?"

"Hardly," Dominic said with a smirk, trying to lighten his

friend's dour mood. "And the appropriate term is caving. 'Spelunk' is the sound an incompetent caver makes when he slips and falls in a puddle of water."

Mendoza managed a smile, then turned sullen again. "Well, don't write it off entirely, for '*the cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.*'" The monk was also known for pithy quotes appropriate to the occasion.

"Speaking of treasures, what have you got lined up for us today?" Dominic asked.

"Ah, yes. Today you'll be working with the new ICR team. Peter has set up our segment of the project down in the digitizing lab. Will you check with him on what he needs from us?"

"Sure, Cal. But, what's ICR? Sounds intriguing."

"Oh, Miguel," Mendoza sighed, rolling his eyes. "You know technology bores me to tears. ICR stands for '*In Codice Ratio,*' but just ask Peter or Toshi for details."

Dominic headed down to the subterranean digitizing lab, where for the past year he had been assisting Peter Townsend and Toshi Kwan, the two scientists in charge of the team preparing digital versions of historical manuscripts from the Vatican Secret Archives, making them accessible to scholars worldwide. Due to the lack of space and support staff, the Archives' reading rooms can only accommodate around a hundred scholars per month. With an online digital database available to students and scholars, millions of previously inaccessible manuscripts can now be researched by anyone with a computer and authorized access.

Entering the lab, Dominic made his way through the maze of digital cameras, scanners, light boxes, and tables lined with ancient manuscripts, until he found the man he was looking for.

"Hey, Toshi, what have you got here?" Dominic asked the young computer scientist. Toshi Kwan was at the heart of the lab's work, a brilliant cryptanalyst with specialized expertise in

steganography, the art of hiding information within information. Many historical manuscripts—popes' letters to their lovers written in code, for example, or secret communiqués to other world leaders—were peppered with hidden meanings crafted by medieval cryptographers in order to avoid potentially damaging disclosure to the popes' enemies.

"Hey, Michael, good to see you!" Kwan replied. "You're going to love this new project we've taken on, *In Codice Ratio*. It's a first-of-its-kind undertaking in automatically transcribing the Vatican's ancient, handwritten manuscripts into computer-readable text using advanced optical character recognition, or OCR. It's totally unprecedented."

Kwan went on to explain that the ICR team had initially enlisted the help of over a hundred students in two dozen Italian high schools to manually identify a specialized dataset of characters based on a sample of thousands of medieval handwritten parchments from the thirteenth century. He pointed out that it's much easier for the human eye to distinguish characters and symbols from the wide variety of strokes that resemble patterns of handwriting, than it is for computer-automated programs to do the same task. As a result, the high-rate of accuracy provided by the curated dataset now made it much less of a challenge for computers to "read" handwritten manuscripts using the newly-trained OCR, making them more accessible to scholars searching on specific words and phrases.

His exuberance was contagious, and Dominic's own interest grew as Kwan continued. "We're talking about important documents here, Michael—letters to and from kings, queens, and other world and religious leaders, official Curial correspondence, ecclesiastical and secular legal opinions, and a rich array of other historical communications which had never been previously transcribed, much less seen in modern times. Making such profound sources of knowledge from past civilizations and cultures transcribable was paramount to expanded scholarship, one of the main purposes served by the Secret Archives."

“This is a remarkable project,” Dominic exclaimed. “But also a bit alarming. How soon before I’m out of a job?!”

Kwan laughed. “I think you’re good for a few lifetimes, Michael. There’s still much to be done by us mere mortals before the Singularity occurs.”

Dominic was impressed, knowing well the difficulty of transcribing arcane manuscripts in Ancient Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and other languages common to every place and era since the first century. His own work involved such often-formidable translations, as *scrittori* in the Secret Archives strived to interpret and index the millions of documents in its care. And that process alone would require multiple lifetimes by an army of specialists.

The Archives only had a full-time staff of some eighteen *scrittori* and assistants, the team responsible for transcribing, indexing, and filing the Archives’ vast collection of documents—over thirty million manuscripts and growing at a million per year. To put things in perspective, one section of the Archives, known as the Miscellanea, contains fifteen enormous poplar cabinets called *armadi*. Each *armadio* contains an average of ten thousand packages of documents which have never been explored. To inventory just one package would require the full-time effort of two specialists over a week’s time. To record all ten thousand packages in one cabinet alone, then, would take nearly two hundred years. That was the main obstacle faced by the small team of dedicated personnel serving the Archives, and it was by no means an insignificant one.

It was just last summer when Dominic, purely by chance, stumbled onto a letter that began a series of events which ultimately led him to discovering an original handwritten manuscript by Mary Magdalene—a document that, had it been publicly revealed, would have forever changed the course of religious belief throughout history. At the pope’s direction, however, that document had been sealed away in the enigmatic

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Riserva, a secured room where the Vatican's most sensitive documents were kept under lock and key.

Dominic had personally hidden the manuscript deep inside one of the *armadi*, the great poplar Borghese cabinets, where he was confident no one might come across it.

God help any who did.