

THE TEMPLARS' CHALICE

A Seekers After Lost Treasure Adventure

C. L. DECKER



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Dedicated to my wonderful wife
Carol A. Scribner

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***Here begins a
tale of riches
hidden in time,
emerging at the
cost of lives lost
and riddles unwound.***

PROLOGUE

Ren Merit, founder of Seekers After Lost Treasure—SALT, for short—sat in his favorite chair tucked into the corner of his Singapore office. He was surrounded by memories and treasures collected from around the world. A thin, bound document lay lightly on his lap but very heavily on his heart. Cardinal Robochon had just left SALT headquarters with a commitment to the Vatican from Ren and his small, highly skilled team. Ren's "collected family" had agreed to put their lives on the line to find a treasure that might or might not exist.

Dangers they had faced before on assignments, but never truly life-threatening ones. Was this moment really what he had dreamed of as a young boy, when he lay in bed at night in Oxford, long after lights-out, reading tales of the brave and selfless Knights Templar?

"Is the risk worth the reward?" he asked himself as he began to reread the Vatican's translation of the ancient codex ...

MONTEDONICO CODEX AD1550

Alas, I can find
no one who will carry
forward this
obligation, and with
increasing age and
frailty, I feel that
I must transcribe
this history to
writing. I will do my
best to secrete this
document into a safe
repository, hopefully
only to be found by a

true believer who
will carry on this
tradition and oath.

In the year of
Our Lord 1301, Sir
Jacques de Molay, the
great and last grand
master of the Knights
Templar—the Poor
Fellow Soldiers of
Christ and the Temple
of Solomon—was
concerned about the
future of this
fraternity of warrior
monks. He feared
their dissolution and
disbanding, with
confiscation of their
wealth. He needed to
devise a plan to
preserve enough of
the Templars'
treasure to allow the
resurrection of the
order should such
calamity occur.

De Molay's
solution came when a
grateful Indian
maharaja gave the
Templars a large and
precious yellow
diamond, called the
Eye of the Tiger, as
a gift for saving his
son's life. This

lustrous gem, which de Molay could hold in the palm of his hand with all its tremendous value, inspired his plan to convert some of the wealth of the Templars into precious gemstones. This would allow treasure to be sent out from the commandery and hidden elsewhere in secret.

He then sought and found a young novitiate, Robert de Vieu, to carry out the plan. De Molay entrusted de Vieu with this secret plan, begging him to forgo knighthood in the Templars to serve God in a different way. De Vieu sewed the gemstones into the hem of his simple and tattered frock coat and, early one foggy morning, rode from the commandery on a beast of burden, unseen and unacknowledged. He carried with him the

story and the gems to preserve the treasure of the Templars and began his life as an itinerant preacher.

As de Molay foresaw, the Templars were arrested, tortured, and tried for heresy, and many were burned at the stake. Their lands and remaining wealth were confiscated, and all debts owed to the Templars were discharged. De Vieu continued to preach the word of Our Lord as he wandered the countryside of France and Italy, awaiting the resurrection of the Templars. It did not happen.

The monk, as he aged, found another monk to entrust his charge, asking him to take the cloak concealing the stones. This monk also awaited the reinstatement of the Templars in vain and, as he too aged, found another monk and

charged him with the same obligation.

This passing of the obligation continued until about 1515, when this charge was bestowed upon the monk Pietro Vargas of Florence. After carrying the stones for ten long years, he came to believe that the resurrection of the Templars was not to be and that the stones should be used in the service of Our Lord.

He knew of the famous jeweler Benvenuto Cellini, who had had a commission from Pope Clement VII to create a special chalice for his use. Vargas had heard that before the commission had been completed, it had been suddenly and without explanation canceled. Vargas called on Cellini and, after swearing him to secrecy, made him a proposal to

continue work on the chalice but now to include the Templars' stones. Cellini accepted the secret commission in exchange for a small emerald.

Weeks later, Vargas was summoned to a clandestine nighttime rendezvous with Cellini at his workshop. As Vargas beheld the finished chalice glistening in the candlelight, he was stunned with its beauty. The large, yellow Eye of the Tiger, believed to provide protection from evil, had been placed appropriately in the center of the base. Inset around the rest of the base were ten exquisite Asian star sapphires symbolizing the celestial sphere where God reigned, alternated with emeralds, thought to act as a verification of truth. The large node of the chalice's

stem was inset with rubies. The deep bloodred color referenced the wine, to be transformed into the blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who spilled his blood to atone for the sins of the world. When the officiant held the chalice aloft, the brilliance of the red stones would be easily seen by the worshippers. The cup of the chalice was enhanced with engraved lines that intertwined like vines coming together above the more deeply engraved letters *IHS* ... the name of Jesus Christ.

After Vargas saw this masterpiece, he began to worry just how it could be safely put to use serving the Lord, while preventing any knowledge of its existence. He realized that it needed to be hidden

in some way, in plain sight.

He knew a devout monk who was a skilled master of clay. He invited him as an act of faith to create a clay covering for the chalice. The monk accepted the mission, taking a vow of silence about its existence. The potter explained that he would cover the chalice with a coat of clay and then fire it at a low temperature, so as not to melt the gold beneath. This brought about two problems. First, the weight of the chalice was so great because of the gold that it would betray its assumed ceramic construction. Second, the low-fired clay would subject the ceramic to easy chipping and breaking, revealing the gold beneath. Thus, the idea of its daily use had to be

forgone. Vargas had to accept that the chalice's very existence should please God. With his all-seeing eye, God would be aware of the bejeweled golden chalice within.

Vargas had to find a place to secrete the chalice where it would not be discovered, nor damaged with time. He thought and prayed long and hard on a suitable location. With a great inspiration, he thought of the perfect place. As Vargas grew old, he shared with me the location of the chalice.

I place this document in the archives of a simple parish church, to be discovered in some future time. So, I here leave you this clue to its whereabouts, until such time as a true believer finds and

understands this clue
and can retrieve the
chalice, the treasure
of the Templars, and
place it in service
to Jesus Christ, Our
Lord and Savior.

The clue:

**The fortieth stop
on the Path of the
Milky Way
The head of the
Baptist
holds the Key.**

30th of September in
the year of our lord
1532

Fra Niccolo Montedonico

He closed the last page. Reading the document again that told the story across the ages, Ren felt as if he were a time traveler. At this moment, he and his team were stepping into history. But would this be a step too far for what might simply prove to be the ravings of an old monk in his dreams of sacred treasure?

Realizing he'd just made a very personal commitment, he said aloud to the empty room, "Well, I guess we're all about to test the walls of our limitations, but at what cost?"

Chapter 1: ROME, ITALY

The morning sun pierced the thin layer of golden haze that hung over the Trastevere district of Rome. Hara Bugno slowly pushed her heavy cleaning cart down the carpeted hall of the residential Hotel Comistar. Her day had already been long, getting her extended Albanian-Italian family fed and off to school, or to jobs that still left bills unpaid. This early in her day, she was already weary. Her sneakered feet ached as she knocked on the door of apartment 212 and called out, “*Servizio in camera.*” Hearing no response, she pulled the pass key from her apron pocket, inserted it into the lock, and pushed the door open. She cautiously stepped inside, always worried that the room might not be empty.

Hara instantly froze where she stood. No breath or sound came from her mouth, which had instinctively dropped open in shock at the sight before her. Frozen in place, she could not move. At her feet lay a man, fully dressed, facedown, with a dark, wet hole in the back of his head. Blood had oozed onto his shirt collar and seeped into the carpet beneath him. Suddenly able to feel her body shaking, Hara took in a deep breath and let out a long, mournful, deep-throated scream of agony. The emotional release let her move again, and she turned and raced screaming down the stairs to the front desk. Hearing her, Marco, the front desk manager, met her at the foot of the stairs. He lowered her gently into a chair as she told him through her tears what she had just found in apartment 212.

Within minutes of the manager’s call for help, they both heard in the distance the sound of a wailing police car siren, followed shortly by the arrival of a blue-and-white.

Marco led the two police officers quickly up the stairs to the apartment. They entered cautiously, being careful not to disturb anything, as they first checked to be sure no one else was there. They called dispatch to confirm the dead body and asked that Commissario Rizzo be notified.

Commissario Rizzo was enjoying his first and last moments of peace for the day, coming between the usual morning turmoil at home and his stressful work as a district police commissioner in the Rome Police Department. Settling his large frame into a chair at his favorite café near the Forum Romanum, Commissario Rizzo was served his daily espresso and *cornetto*. Though he was in charge of the police station in Trastevere, he preferred to live across the Tiber River, near the Forum, to allow him this daily ritual. As he was finishing his coffee and pastry and taking a last draw from his morning cigarette, his mobile rang. His day had begun.

“*Pronto,*” he answered, pausing to listen, then responding, “Have them seal off the apartment and not allow anyone else to enter. Then call the forensic science team and Sergente Berto. Tell them to meet me there. I’m on my way.”

He gobbled his last bite of the *cornetto* and stubbed out his cigarette, crumbs falling from his shirt as he stood to make his way to the crime scene. He didn’t need the address. He knew the hotel. It was just around the corner from the famous Santa Maria church known for its wonderful gilded and frescoed nave. The commissioner didn’t use his lights or siren ... it was too late, the man was already dead, so what was the rush?

He drove past the Forum Romanum, rimmed by the elegant and world-famous Italian stone pines. The traffic was light this time of day, too late for the workers and too early for the tourists sleeping in, recovering from the previous night's pleasures. Despite his lack of speed, he seemed to set a new record for crossing from the Forum to the precinct of Trastevere. Maybe it was because he didn't take his favorite scenic route, across the Sant'Angelo Bridge, that allowed him to look upriver and enjoy one of the best views of St. Peter's. This morning, to arrive at the crime scene sooner, he took the Garibaldi Bridge across the Tiber instead.

He showed his warrant card to the hotel manager as he finished his second cigarette of the morning; not too bad for a chain smoker. He was led to apartment 212. Before he entered, Sergente Berto handed him booties and rubber gloves. "I assume no one else has been in here since you arrived?" he asked the sergeant.

"No, we've kept everyone out," was the curt reply.

Commissario Rizzo and Sergente Berto entered the apartment together. On the victim's body, the commissioner found a wallet with fifty euros, a credit card, a national identity card, and a photo pass for entry to restricted areas of the Vatican. All documents identified him as Franco Trevisi. The wallet also contained a business card from the Data Transfer Services Company of Florence with his name, as well as the company name, address, and phone number. No other papers were found on his body. His watch was in place and his mobile was in another pocket. Commissario Rizzo noted to himself, "The presence of the wallet, watch, and mobile indicates it was not a burglary gone wrong. This and the bullet hole in the back of his head make it look like a professional execution, but why?"

The apartment had a Juliet-style balcony with a view of the piazza below, a small two-person couch, a table with two chairs, and a wall-mounted flat-screen TV. He could see into the galley kitchen with its modern appliances, including a very intricate espresso maker. A door led to a small bedroom with a double bed and a chest of drawers that contained a couple of shirts and some underwear. Slacks and a tweed jacket hung in a small closet. The pockets were empty.

As they finished the search of the apartment, Sergente Berto noted, "Strange, don't you think, that there's no computer or paperwork around."

"I agree," answered Commissario Rizzo, handing him Franco Trevisi's business card. "While you're waiting for the forensic team, call the Florence police and have them notify the family and his company of Trevisi's death. See what information they can get. Also call Trevisi's mobile carrier and get his call log. I'll head back to the office and call the Vatican, since he had their security pass on him," he said, his voice gravelly from many years of smoking his favorite Italian brand of cigarettes.

He was back in his office, savoring his second espresso of the day, when his clerk, Nico, stuck her head in. "Believe it or not, the Vatican is on the line, asking to speak to someone in charge of the Trevisi investigation."

Commissario Rizzo choked on the last sip of coffee. "The Vatican, calling me?"

In all his years as a police commissioner, he had never been contacted by the Vatican. He had needed to talk to their security department only a couple of times, and he had always been the one to initiate the call.

He punched the lit line on his desk phone and announced, "Commissario Rizzo."

"This is Cardinal Robochon from the Vatican. Are you investigating the death of Franco Trevisi?"

"Yes. How did you find out about his death so quickly?"

"DTS—Data Transfer Services Company—which is digitizing documents in the Vatican Secret Archive, called our office immediately after being notified of his death by the Florence police."

This was lightning fast for both the police and the Vatican. "*Impressi*," thought Commissario Rizzo. "This death may be more important and complicated than I thought at first glance."

“Just what are your responsibilities at the Vatican, Cardinal?” asked the commissioner.

The cardinal explained that he was in charge of security for the Vatican Secret Archive, the Vatican Museums, and the Vatican Library. “Trevisi was digitizing the old archival documents that were continuing to deteriorate despite the precisely controlled environment in which they are stored. They have become so fragile that we instituted a program to digitize them to preserve them for future study. We hired DTS, and they sent Trevisi to perform the work. We vetted the company before hiring them, and once Trevisi was assigned to the project, we also had a thorough background check performed on him. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. If you would like, I can have all the security clearance paperwork forwarded to you.”

“Yes, that would be helpful. As soon as possible, please,” answered Commissario Rizzo.

“As you can understand, this news was very upsetting,” continued the cardinal. “I immediately went to the Archive. We were quickly able to find a discrepancy between the number of scanned documents and the number of actual documents. It appears that one document is missing, but we do have the digitized copy. I had it printed out, and it appears to be in an old Italian language I cannot read. I will arrange a translation, and if it appears to have any bearing on the Trevisi murder, I will contact you.”

Commissario Rizzo replied, “So, we can’t know yet if the document was stolen for its own value or for what it says. The translation is certainly the first step in answering this question. It may give us a possible motive for Trevisi’s murder. After the translation, even if it doesn’t seem related, would you be so kind as to call and give me a summary of its contents and a general idea of its inherent value? That might help us a lot.”

“Yes, as you wish, but you should know that it may take a day or so,” the cardinal said and abruptly disconnected.

The call left Commissario Rizzo trying to imagine how the missing document was a motive for the murder. The obvious conclusion was that Franco Trevisi had stolen the missing document. Why make a copy of it first, though? Maybe this was to assuage his conscience in the stealing. Then why was he murdered? Did he sell the document to someone who wanted no loose ends? Did he renege on the deal? Did he want more money? There was no such document in Trevisi’s hotel apartment, so if he had stolen it, where was it? Taken by the murderer? If so, what made it valuable enough to commit murder for?

Nico walked into Commissario Rizzo’s office the next morning and handed him Franco Trevisi’s mobile call log, with background information from Sergente Berto. As she did so, she said, “There’s a Florence detective named Romano on the line for you.”

Commissario Rizzo picked up.

“Commissario, I’m following up on Sergente Berto’s request for information on the Trevisi murder. We found a recent wire transfer of €50,000 to Trevisi’s bank account, which he shared with his younger sister Ravena. She hasn’t worked for a year, so she couldn’t account for the money. The transfer came through one of the safe-haven banks and couldn’t be traced. Trevisi has never had that much money in his account over the past two years, so it stood out.

“Ravena insisted that he was a very honorable man,” Detective Romano continued, “and had been taking care of her since their parents were killed in an auto accident seven years ago. She also shared that she is currently being treated for ovarian cancer. She has had surgery, but the cancer has spread. She’s been told that there is no cure, but that there is an experimental therapy that shows some promise but is very expensive and not covered by insurance.

“Very interesting, don’t you think?” the Florence detective offered. “The estimated cost of this treatment is about €50,000.”

“Quite a big coincidence, I’d say,” the commissioner responded as he thought to himself that this could well have been the motive for the theft.

"I'm looking at Trevisi's mobile call log. He called only two numbers over the last week. All the calls were to Ravenna, except one to a man named Hans Rhinehardt. He's a well-known German industrialist/arms dealer and art collector," said Commissario Rizzo.

"Please thank everyone in your division for their very speedy response," the commissioner added. "And I personally owe you one, Detective. I know that your workload is as heavy as mine."

Detective Romano admitted, "We sped up the process, knowing that Trevisi was working at the Vatican. We want to keep good relations with the Vatican!"

"Agreed. If anything else comes to you on this case, please give me a call. And as I said, I owe you." The minute he hung up, Commissario Rizzo buzzed Sergente Berto and asked him to do a background check on Hans Rhinehardt through both Europol and Interpol. Nico interrupted his thoughts to let him know that an inspector from the precinct near the University of Rome was on the line for him. He picked up the phone. "Commissario Rizzo here, how can I help you?"

Ten minutes later, his back to the door, the commissioner didn't hear Sergente Berto enter and seemed startled when he spoke. "Do you have a minute?"

The commissioner spun his chair around. "Perfect timing. Would you believe, two seemingly unrelated, identical murders have been committed within twenty-four hours here in our city?" He noted the look of surprise on Sergente Berto's face as the facts registered with him.

Commissario Rizzo explained, "I just got a call from the *commissario* of the Prati precinct near the University of Rome. One of their linguistic professors has been found dead in his home. Can you guess how his housekeeper found him?"

"Don't tell me. He was lying on his face with a bullet hole in the back of his head!"

Commissario Rizzo nodded ever so slightly.

"Twice in two days. Any other connections found?" Sergente Berto asked.

"His computer had been smashed and the hard drive destroyed. Nothing appears to have been taken, but the technicians are still working on the scene. The lead officer had read about our case earlier today and noted the similarities. He asked to have us contacted."

Commissario Rizzo thought a minute, then continued as the sergeant pulled up a chair. "I see the two murders fitting into a likely scenario. I think Trevisi stole the document to help his sister. Whoever killed him to get the document then killed the linguist after he translated it. It seems, at this point, that the message in the document is more valuable than the document's inherent value."

Sergente Berto leaned forward in his chair. "I actually came in to tell you what I learned from Europol about Rhinehardt. They do not have him on a watch list, but two of his employees, Boris Waldorf and Antonio "Tony" Stasso, are listed as suspicious. Both had been noted to be near the location of several art and antiquity thefts in the past, some with associated murders. There was never any evidence directly linking them to the crimes, and any potential witnesses to those crimes all seemed to ironically end up dead."

"This current theft and the murders smell to me like an addition to Europol's unsolved cases, and I hate unsolved cases!" said Commissario Rizzo with frustration in his voice.

"I'm going to take the bull by the horns and call this German," he added, suddenly sitting bolt upright and pounding his fists on the desk. Sergente Berto always appreciated it when his commissioner got personal about a case. He knew now he'd aggressively pursue any and all leads until someone was charged for these crimes.

Commissario Rizzo put the phone on speaker so Sergente Berto could listen in. When the call went through, the commissioner identified himself as Commissario Rizzo of the Rome police. Surprisingly, the secretary put him right through to Hans Rhinehardt.

"Yes, how may I help you?" the German barked in a clipped voice, obviously not appreciating this interruption to his day.

Commissario Rizzo explained briefly that a murder victim, Franco Trevisi, was found in Rome, and his mobile log showed a call to this number a few days ago.

"I never received such a call," Hans voiced sternly, implying no possibility of any error on his part.

Not easily put off, Commissario Rizzo responded, "Then how do you explain your number on his mobile?"

"I have no idea," he answered as he cut Commissario Rizzo off and sent the call automatically back to his secretary.

"Yes, can I help you?" she answered.

"Commissario Rizzo again. I need to ask you a few questions."

"Yes, but make it short. I have work to do!" she answered brusquely.

Commissario Rizzo asked her if she could recall having a conversation with someone from Rome a few days ago by the name of Franco Trevisi. She hesitated for a bit, then said, "Yes, he told me he'd heard that Herr Rhinehardt had a collection of old documents. He thought Herr Rhinehardt might be interested in buying an old manuscript he had 'obtained' from the Vatican Archive. It contained the words 'Templar' and 'treasure,' but he could not read the rest, as it was written in some old Italian language. He said he needed money desperately and wanted to sell it as quickly as possible. I told him we do not deal with stolen artifacts and hung up. I never mentioned the call to Herr Rhinehardt." She disconnected.

Commissario Rizzo looked over at Sergente Berto as he said, "Well, it's obvious we're not going to get anything useful out of those two. We know there's more to the story, because Trevisi's call to Rhinehardt lasted fourteen minutes ... too much time for a simple rejection. I think it's time for a call to the Vatican."

His call was put directly through to Cardinal Robochon. "You have some news for me, Commissario?"

Just as Cardinal Robochon finished the call with Commissario Rizzo, the cardinal's private secretary entered the office and placed the translation of the stolen document on his desk. On the cover sheet the translator had titled the document "The Montedonico Codex," based on the author's name.

Cardinal Robochon gasped aloud as he read the translation. With the very disturbing information he had just received from Commissario Rizzo about Hans Rhinehardt, combined with the two murders and the contents of the document, the cardinal needed to talk with the pope as soon as possible.

Fortunately, the pope's secretary was quickly able to clear some time from the pope's pressing schedule that very afternoon for a meeting with Cardinal Robochon. The secretary had sensed the urgency in the cardinal's voice as he requested the meeting. It had bordered on a demand, not in line with the cardinal's usual gentle demeanor.

As the cardinal entered the pope's private study, he found the Pontiff sitting at his small writing desk with his reading glasses perched on the edge of his nose. He motioned for Cardinal Robochon to sit down.

"What brings you to me with such urgency, Paul? It must be very important." The pope spoke with an easy familiarity.

The two men of God had long been colleagues and indeed at times had expressed a brotherly affection for each other. There was a bond of trust between them, something the cardinal was counting on at this moment. As the cardinal settled in his seat opposite the pope, he leaned forward to speak, making clear the extreme need for confidentiality. The two were alone, and the cardinal spoke very directly without the usual greetings used when addressing the pope.

"Your Holiness, what I am about to share with you is not pleasant and has already involved two very grisly murders here in Rome, and the theft of a very valuable ancient document from our archives. I believe that this has been organized by a ruthless German arms dealer by the name of Hans Rhinehardt, who will stop at nothing, not even murder, to procure a precious piece of treasure for himself."

The pope stiffened slightly in his chair as he took in the information. “Certainly not what I had expected today. You have my full attention. I’m waiting to learn what request will come of this very tragic turn of events. Continue, please. I sense that time is critical in this matter.”

The cardinal quickly and succinctly painted a full picture of the document’s connection to the hidden treasure of the Knights Templar, its theft, the involvement of the two men whose bodies had recently been found, and the trail that lead indirectly to the arms dealer. “We must find this Templar treasure first, if it exists. If Rhinehardt finds it first, it will be lost forever to the Church. This is a dangerous mission, and the possibility of further cost in blood cannot be dismissed. It appears prudent to hire an outside expert consultant for this task.”

The pope hesitated only for a few seconds. “You have my full support. What do you need from me, from the Vatican?”

The cardinal answered quickly. He had come prepared. “I would like to hire a very special search firm known as SALT—Seekers After Lost Treasure. They specialize in retrieving lost art and other treasures. I have never worked with them directly but have been aware of their work in the retrieval of a Tintoretto stolen from a church in Livorno.”

The pope again agreed, but with a single caveat. “I don’t recall the story, so I am relying completely on you and your judgment. The task of retrieving the Templar treasure is now your responsibility. Proceed as you choose.”

“Thank you for your confidence and timely response. I will contact SALT immediately.”

