

LABYRINTH

Kate Mosse



PROLOGUE



I

Pic de Soularac Sabarthès Mountains Southwest France

MONDAY 4 JULY 2005

A single line of blood trickles down the pale underside of her arm, a red seam on a white sleeve.

At first, Alice thinks it's just a fly and takes no notice. Insects are an occupational hazard at a dig, and for some reason there are more flies higher up the mountain where she is working than at the main excavation site lower down. Then a drop of blood splashes on to her bare leg, exploding like a firework in the sky on Guy Fawkes night.

This time she does look and sees that the cut on the inside of her elbow has opened again. It's a deep wound, which doesn't want to heal. She sighs and pushes the plaster and lint dressing tighter against her skin. Then, since there's no one around to see, she licks the red smear from her wrist.

Strands of hair, the colour of soft brown sugar, have come loose from under her cap. She tucks them behind her ears and wipes her forehead with her handkerchief, before twisting her ponytail back into a tight knot at the nape of her neck.

Her concentration broken, Alice stands up and stretches her slim legs, lightly tanned by the sun. Dressed in cut-off denim shorts, a tight white sleeveless T-shirt and cap, she looks little more than a teenager. She used to mind. Now,

as she gets older, she sees the advantage of looking younger than her years. The only touches of glamour are her delicate silver earrings, in the shape of stars, which glint like sequins.

Alice unscrews the top of her water bottle. It's warm, but she's too thirsty to care and drinks it down in great gulps. Below, the heat haze shimmers above the dented tarmac of the road. Above her, the sky is an endless blue. The cicadas keep up their unrelenting chorus, hidden in the shade of the dry grass.

It's her first time in the Pyrenees, although she feels very much at home. She's been told that in the winter the jagged peaks of the Sabarthès Mountains are covered with snow. In the spring, delicate flowers of pink and mauve and white peep out from their hiding places in the great expanses of rock. In early summer, the pastures are green and speckled with yellow buttercups. But now, the sun has flattened the land into submission, turning the greens to brown. It is a beautiful place, she thinks, yet somehow an inhospitable one. It's a place of secrets, one that has seen too much and concealed too much to be at peace with itself.

In the main camp on the lower slopes, Alice can see her colleagues standing under the big canvas awning. She can just pick out Shelagh in her trademark black outfit. She's surprised they've stopped already. It's early in the day to be taking a break, but then the whole team is a bit demoralised.

It's painstaking and monotonous work for the most part, the digging and scraping, the cataloguing and recording, and so far they've turned up little of significance to justify their efforts. They've come across a few fragments of early medieval pots and bowls, and a couple of late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century arrowheads, but certainly no evidence of the Palaeolithic settlement which is the focus of the excavation.

Alice is tempted to go down and join her friends and colleagues and get her dressing sorted out. The cut smarts and her calves are already aching from squatting. The muscles in her shoulders are tense. But she knows that if she stops now, she'll lose her momentum.

Hopefully, her luck's about to change. Earlier, she'd noticed something glinting beneath a large boulder, propped against the side of the mountain, neat and tidy, almost as if it had been placed there by a giant hand. Although she can't make out what the object is, even how big it is, she's been digging all morning and she doesn't think it will be much longer before she can reach it.

She knows she should fetch someone. Or at least tell Shelagh, her best friend, who is the deputy on the dig. Alice is not a trained archaeologist, just a volunteer spending some of her summer holiday doing something worthwhile. But it's her last full day on site and she wants to prove herself. If she goes back down to the main camp now and admits she's on to something, everybody will want to be involved, and it will no longer be her discovery.

In the days and weeks to come, Alice will look back to this moment. She will remember the quality of the light, the metallic taste of blood and dust in her mouth, and wonder at how different things might have been had she made the choice to go and not to stay. If she had played by the rules.

She drains the last drop of water from the bottle and tosses it into her rucksack. For the next hour or so, as the sun climbs higher in the sky and the temperature rises, Alice carries on working. The only sounds are the scrape of metal on rock, the whine of insects and the occasional buzz of a light aircraft in the distance. She can feel beads of sweat on her upper lip and between her breasts, but she keeps going until, finally, the gap underneath the boulder is big enough for her to slide in her hand.

Alice kneels down on the ground and leans her cheek and shoulder against the rock for support. Then, with a flutter of excitement, she pushes her fingers deep into the dark, blind earth. Straight away, she knows her instincts are right and that she's got something worth finding. It is smooth and slimy to the touch, metal not stone. Grasping it firmly and telling herself not to expect too much, slowly, slowly she eases the object out into the light. The earth seems to shudder, reluctant to give up its treasure.

The rich, cloying smell of wet soil fills her nose and throat, although she barely notices. She is already lost in the past, captivated by the piece of history she cradles in the palms of her hands. It is a heavy, round buckle, speckled black and green with age and from its long burial. Alice rubs at it with her fingers and smiles as the silver and copper detail starts to reveal itself underneath the dirt. At first glance, it looks to be medieval too, the sort of buckle used to fasten a cloak or robe. She's seen something like it before.

She knows the danger of jumping to conclusions or of being seduced by first impressions, yet she can't resist imagining its owner, long dead now, who might have walked these paths. A stranger whose story she has yet to learn.

The connection is so strong and Alice is so absorbed that she doesn't notice the boulder shifting on its base. Then something, some sixth sense, makes her look up. For a split second, the world seems to hang suspended, out of space, out of time. She is mesmerised by the ancient slab of stone as it sways and tilts, and then gracefully begins to fall towards her.

At the very last moment, the light fractures. The spell is broken. Alice throws herself out of the way, half tumbling, half slithering sideways, just in time to avoid being crushed. The boulder hits the ground with a dull thud,

sending up a cloud of pale brown dust, then rolls over and over, as if in slow motion, until it comes to rest further down the mountain.

Alice clutches desperately at the bushes and scrub to stop herself slipping any further. For a moment she lies sprawled in the dirt, dizzy and disorientated. As it sinks in how very close she came to being crushed, she turns cold. *Too close for comfort*, she thinks. She takes a deep breath. Waits for the world to stop spinning.

Gradually, the pounding in her head dies away. The sickness in her stomach settles and everything starts to return to normal, enough for her to sit up and take stock. Her knees are grazed and streaked with blood and she's knocked her wrist where she landed awkwardly, still clutching the buckle in her hand to protect it, but basically she's escaped with no more than a few cuts and bruises. *I'm not hurt*.

She gets to her feet and dusts herself down, feeling a total idiot. She can't believe she made such a basic mistake as not securing the boulder. Now Alice looks down to the main campsite below. She's amazed – and relieved – that nobody in the camp seems to have seen or heard anything. She raises her hand, is about to call out to attract someone's attention when she notices that there's a narrow opening visible in the side of the mountain where the boulder had been standing. Like a doorway cut into the rock.

It's said these mountains are riddled with hidden passages and caves, so she's not surprised. And yet, Alice thinks, somehow, she knew the doorway was there, although there's no way of telling from the outside. She knew. *Guessed, more like*, she tells herself.

She hesitates. Alice knows she should get somebody to come with her. It is stupid, possibly even dangerous, to go in on her own without any sort of back-up. She knows all

the things that can go wrong. But she shouldn't have been up here working on her own anyway. Shelagh doesn't know. And besides, something is drawing her in. It feels personal. It's her discovery.

Alice tells herself there's no sense disturbing them all, getting their hopes up, for no reason. If there is anything worth investigating, she'll tell someone then. She won't do anything. She just wants to look.

I'll only be a minute.

She climbs back up. There is a deep depression in the ground at the mouth of the cave, where the stone had stood guard. The damp earth is alive with the frantic writhing of worms and beetles exposed suddenly to the light and heat after so long. Her cap lies on the ground where it fell. Her trowel is there too, just where she left it.

Alice peers into the darkness. The opening is no more than five feet high and about three feet wide and the edges are irregular and rough. It seems to be natural rather than man-made, although when she runs her fingers up and down the rock, she finds curiously smooth patches where the boulder rested.

Slowly, her eyes become accustomed to the gloom. Velvet black gives way to charcoal grey and she sees that she is looking into a long, narrow tunnel. She feels the short hairs rise on the back of her neck, as if to warn her that there is something lurking in the darkness that would be better left undisturbed. But that's just a childish superstition and she brushes the feeling away. Alice doesn't believe in ghosts or premonitions.

Squeezing the buckle tightly in her hand, like a talisman, she takes a deep breath and steps forward into the passageway. Straight away, the smell of long-hidden, subterranean air envelops her, filling her mouth and throat and lungs. It's cool and damp, not the dry, poisonous gases of a sealed cave she's been warned about, so she guesses

there must be some source of fresh air. But, just in case, she rummages in the pockets of her cut-offs until she finds her lighter. She flicks it open and holds it up to the dark, double-checking that there is oxygen. The flame gutters in a breath of wind, but it does not go out.

Feeling nervous and slightly guilty, Alice wraps the buckle in a handkerchief and pushes it into her pocket, then cautiously steps forward. The light from the flame is weak, but it illuminates the path immediately in front of her, throwing shadows on the jagged grey walls.

As she moves further in, she feels the chill air curl around her bare legs and arms like a cat. She is walking downhill. She can feel the ground sloping away beneath her feet, uneven and gritty. The scrunch of the stones and gravel is loud in the confined, hushed space. She is aware of the daylight getting fainter and fainter at her back, the further and deeper she goes.

Abruptly, she does not want to go on. She does not want to be here at all. Yet there is something inevitable about it, something that is drawing her deeper into the belly of the mountain.

After another ten metres the tunnel comes to an end. Alice finds herself standing at the threshold of a cavernous enclosed chamber. She is standing on a natural stone platform. A couple of shallow, wide steps directly in front of her lead to the main area where the ground has been levelled flat and smooth. The cavern is about ten metres long and perhaps five metres wide, clearly fashioned by the hands of men rather than by nature alone. The roof is low and vaulted, like the ceiling of a crypt.

Alice stares, holding the flickering single flame higher and bothered by a curious prickling familiarity that she cannot account for. She is about to descend the steps when she notices there are letters inscribed in the stone at the top. She bends down and tries to read what is written.

Only the first three words and the last letter – N or H maybe – are legible. The others have been eroded or chipped away. Alice rubs at the dirt with her fingers and says the letters out loud. The echo of her voice sounds somehow hostile and threatening in the silence.

P-A-S A P-A-S . . . Pas a pas.

Step by step? Step by step what? A faint memory ripples across the surface of her unconscious mind, like a song long forgotten. Then it is gone.

'*Pas a pas,*' she whispers this time, but it means nothing. A prayer? A warning? Without knowing what follows, it makes no sense.

Nervous now, she straightens up and descends the steps, one by one. Curiosity fights with premonition and she feels the goosebumps on her slim bare arms, from unease or the chill of the cave, she cannot say.

Alice holds the flame high to light her way, careful not to slip or dislodge anything. At the lower level, she pauses. She takes a deep breath and then takes a step into the ebony darkness. She can just make out the back wall of the chamber.

It's hard to be sure at this distance that it isn't just a trick of the light or a shadow cast by the flame, but it looks as if there is a large circular pattern of lines and semi-circles painted or carved into the rock. On the floor in front of it there is a stone table, about four feet high, like an altar.

Fixing her eyes on the symbol on the wall to keep her bearings, Alice edges forward. Now she can see the pattern more clearly. It looks like some sort of labyrinth, although memory tells her that there is something not quite right about it. It's not a true labyrinth. The lines do not lead to the centre, as they should. The pattern is wrong. Alice can't account for why she's so sure about this, only that she is right.

Keeping her eyes trained on the labyrinth, she moves

closer, closer. Her foot knocks something hard on the ground. There is a faint, hollow thump and the sound of something rolling, as if an object has shifted out of position.

Alice looks down.

Her legs start to tremble. The pale flame in her hand flickers. Shock steals her breath. She is standing at the edge of a shallow grave, a slight depression in the ground, no more than that. In it there are two skeletons, once human, the bones picked clean by time. The blind sockets of one skull stare up at her. The other skull, kicked out of place by her foot, is lying on its side as if turning its gaze away from her.

The bodies have been laid out, side by side, to face the altar, like carvings on a tomb. They are symmetrical and perfectly in line, but there is nothing restful about the grave. No sense of peace. The cheekbones of one skull are crushed, crumpled inwards like a mask of *papier mâché*. Several of the ribs of the other skeleton are snapped and jut out awkwardly, like the brittle branches of a dead tree.

They cannot harm you. Determined not to give in to fear, Alice forces herself to crouch down, taking care not to disturb anything else. She runs her eyes over the grave. There is a dagger lying between the bodies, the blade dulled with age, and a few fragments of cloth. Next to it, there is a drawstring leather bag, big enough to hold a small box or a book. Alice frowns. She's sure she's seen something like it before, but the memory refuses to come.

The round, white object wedged between the claw-like fingers of the smaller skeleton is so small that Alice nearly misses it. Without stopping to think if it's the right thing to do, quickly she takes her tweezers out of her pocket. She stretches down and carefully eases it out, then holds it up to the flame, softly blowing the dust away to see better.

It's a small stone ring, plain and unremarkable, with a

round, smooth face. It, too, is oddly familiar. Alice looks more closely. There's a pattern scratched on the inside. At first, she thinks it's a seal of some kind. Then, with a jolt, she realises. She raises her eyes to the markings on the back wall of the chamber, then back to the ring.

The patterns are identical.

Alice is not religious. She does not believe in heaven or hell, in God or the Devil, nor in the creatures that are believed to haunt these mountains. But, for the first time in her life, she is overwhelmed by a sense of being in the presence of something supernatural, something inexplicable, something bigger than her experience or comprehension. She can feel malevolence crawling over her skin, her scalp, the soles of her feet.

Her courage falters. The cave is suddenly cold. Fear catches in her throat, freezing the breath in her lungs. Alice scrambles to her feet. She should not be here in this ancient place. Now, she's desperate to get out of the chamber, away from the evidence of violence and the smell of death, back to the safe, bright sunlight.

But she's too late.

Above her or behind her, she cannot tell where, there are footsteps. The sound bounces around the confined space, ricochets off the rock and stone. Someone is coming.

Alice spins around in alarm, dropping the lighter. The cave is plunged into darkness. She tries to run, but she is disorientated in the dark and cannot find the way out. She stumbles. Her legs go from under her.

She falls. The ring is sent flying back into the pile of bones, where it belongs.

II

Los Seres

Southwest France

A few miles to the east as the crow flies, in a lost village in the Sabarthès Mountains, a tall, thin man in a pale suit sits alone at a table of dark, highly polished wood.

The ceiling of the room is low and there are large square tiles on the floor the colour of red mountain earth, keeping it cool despite the heat outside. The shutter of the single window is closed so it is dark, except for a pool of yellow light cast by a small oil lamp, which stands on the table. Next to the lamp is a glass tumbler filled almost to the brim with a red liquid.

There are several sheets of heavy cream paper strewn across the table, each covered with line after line of neat handwriting in black ink. The room is silent, except for the scratch and draw of the pen and the chink of ice cubes against the side of the glass when he drinks. The subtle scent of alcohol and cherries. The ticking of the clock marks the passage of time as he pauses, reflects, and then writes again.

What we leave behind in this life is the memory of who we were and what we did. An imprint, no more. I have learned much. I have become wise. But have I made a difference? I cannot tell. Pas a pas, se va luènh.

I have watched the green of spring give way to the gold of summer, the copper of autumn give way to the

white of winter as I have sat and waited for the fading of the light. Over and over again I have asked myself why? If I had known how it would feel to live with such loneliness, to stand, the sole witness to the endless cycle of birth and life and death, what would I have done? Alas, I am burdened by my solitude stretched too thin to bear. I have survived this long life with emptiness in my heart, an emptiness that over the years has spread and spread until it became bigger than my heart itself.

I have striven to keep my promises to you. The one is fulfilled, the other left undone. Until now, left undone. For some time now, I have felt you close. Our time is nearly come again. Everything points to this. Soon the cave will be opened. I feel the truth of this all around me. And the book, safe for so long, will be found also.

The man pauses and reaches for his glass. His eyes are smudged with memory, but the *Guignolet* is strong and sweet and it revives him.

I have found her. At last. And I wonder, if I place the book in her hands, will it feel familiar? Is the memory of it written in her blood and her bones? Will she remember how the cover shimmers and shifts its colour? If she undoes the ties and opens it, careful so as not to damage the dry and brittle vellum, will she remember the words echoing back down the centuries?

I pray that at last, as my long days draw to a close, I will have the chance to put right what once I did ill, that I will at last learn the truth. The truth will set me free.

The man sits back in his chair and puts his hands, speckled

brown with age, flat on the table in front of him. The chance to know, after so very long, what happened at the end.

It is all he wants.

III

Chartres

Northern France

Later that same day, six hundred miles to the north, another man stands in a dimly lit passageway under the streets of Chartres, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

His palms are sweaty, his mouth is dry and he's aware of every nerve, every muscle in his body, even the pulse in the veins at his temples. He feels self-conscious and light-headed, although whether this is down to nerves and anticipation or the after-effects of the wine, he can't tell. The unfamiliar white cotton robes hang heavy on his shoulders and the ropes made out of twisted hemp rest awkwardly on his bony hips. He steals a quick glance at the two figures standing in silence on either side of him, but their hoods conceal their faces. He can't tell if they are as edgy as he or if they have been through the ritual many times before. They're dressed the same, except their robes are gold rather than white and they have shoes on their feet. His feet are bare and the flagstones are cold.

High above the hidden network of tunnels, the bells of the great Gothic cathedral begin to chime. He feels the men beside him stiffen. It's the signal they've been waiting for. Immediately, he drops his head and tries to focus on the moment.

'*Je suis prêt,*' he mumbles, more to reassure himself than as a statement of fact. Neither of his companions reacts in any way.

As the final reverberation of the bells fades to silence, the acolyte on his left steps forward and, with a stone partially concealed in the palm of his hand, strikes five times on the massive door. From inside comes the answer. *Dintrar.* Enter.

The man half-thinks he recognises the woman's voice, but he has no time to guess from where or from when, because already the door is opening to reveal the chamber that he has waited so long to see.

Keeping step with one another, the three figures walk slowly forward. He's rehearsed this and knows what to expect, knows what is required of him, although he feels a little unsteady on his feet. The room is hot after the chill of the corridor and it is dark. The only light comes from the candles arranged in the alcoves and on the altar itself, setting shadows dancing on the floor.

Adrenalin is coursing through his body, although he feels strangely detached from the proceedings. When the door falls shut behind him, he jumps.

The four senior attendants stand to the north, south, east and west of the chamber. He desperately wants to raise his eyes and take a better look, but he forces himself to keep his head down and his face hidden, as he has been instructed. He can sense the two rows of initiates lining the long sides of the rectangular chamber, six on each side. He can feel the heat of their bodies and hear the rise and fall of their breathing, even though nobody is moving and nobody speaks.

He's memorised the layout from the papers he was given and as he walks towards the sepulchre in the middle of the chamber, he's aware of their eyes on his back. He wonders if he knows any of them. Business colleagues, other people's wives, anybody might be a member. He can't help a faint smile reaching his lips, as he allows himself

for a moment to fantasise about the difference his acceptance into the society will make.

He's brought sharply back to the present when he stumbles and nearly falls over the kneeling stone at the base of the sepulchre. The chamber is smaller than he imagined from the plan, more confined and claustrophobic. He had expected the distance between the door and the stone to be greater.

As he kneels down on the stone there is a sharp intake of breath from someone close to him, and he wonders why. His heart starts to beat faster and when he glances down he sees that his knuckles are white. Embarrassed, he clasps his hands together, before remembering and letting his arms drop to his side, where they are supposed to be.

There is a slight dip in the centre of the stone, which is hard and cold on his knees through the thin material of his robe. He shuffles slightly, trying to get into an easier position. The discomfort gives him something to focus on and he is grateful for that. He still feels dizzy and he's finding it difficult to concentrate or to recall the order in which things are supposed to happen, even though he's gone over it time and time again in his mind.

A bell begins to ring inside the chamber, a high, thin note; a low chanting accompanies it, soft at first, but quickly growing louder as more voices join in. Fragments of words and phrases reverberate through his head: *montanhas*, mountains; *Noblesa*, nobility; *libres*, books; *graal*, grail . . .

The Priestess steps down from the high altar and walks through the chamber. He can just make out the soft shuffle of her feet and imagines how her golden robe will be shimmering and swaying in the flickering light of the candles. This is the moment he has been waiting for.

'*Je suis prêt,*' he repeats under his breath. This time he means it.

The Priestess comes to a standstill in front of him. He can smell her perfume, subtle and light under the heady aroma of the incense. He catches his breath as she leans down and takes his hand. Her fingers are cool and manicured and a shot of electricity, almost of desire, shoots up his arm as she presses something small and round into the palm of his hand, then closes his fingers over it. Now he wants – more than anything he’s ever wanted in his life – to look at her face. But he keeps his eyes down on the ground, as he has been told to do.

The four senior attendants leave their positions and move to join the Priestess. His head is tipped back, gently, and a thick, sweet liquid slides between his lips. It is what he is expecting and he makes no resistance. As the warmth sweeps through his body he holds up his arms and his companions slip a golden mantle over his shoulders. The ritual is familiar to the witnesses and yet he can sense their unease.

Suddenly, he feels as if there is an iron band around his neck, crushing his windpipe. His hands fly up to his throat as he struggles for breath. He tries to call out, but the words won’t come. The high thin note of the bell starts to toll once more, steady and persistent, drowning him out. A wave of nausea sweeps through him. He thinks he’s going to pass out and clutches the object in his hand for comfort, so hard that his nails split open the soft flesh of his palm. The sharp pain helps him not to fall. He now understands that the hands on his shoulders are not comforting. They are not supporting him, but holding him down. Another wave of nausea overwhelms him and the stone seems to shift and slide beneath him.

Now his eyes are swimming and he cannot focus properly, but he can see that the Priestess has a knife, though he has no idea how the silver blade came to be in her hand. He tries to stand, but the drug is too strong and has already

taken his strength from him. He no longer has control over his arms or legs.

'*Non!*' he tries to shout, but it is too late.

At first, he thinks he's been punched between the shoulders, nothing more. Then a dull ache starts to seep through his body. Something warm and smooth is trickling slowly down his back.

Without warning, the hands let him go and he falls forward, crumpling like a rag doll as the floor comes up to meet him. He feels no pain as his head hits the ground, which is somehow cool and soothing against his skin. Now, all noise and confusion and fear are fading away. His eyes flicker shut. He is no longer aware of anything other than her voice, which seems to be coming from a long way away.

'*Une leçon. Pour tous,*' she seems to be saying, although that makes no sense.

In his last fractured moments of consciousness, the man accused of giving away secrets, condemned for talking when he should have kept silent, holds the coveted object tight in his hand until his grip on life slips away and the small grey disc, no bigger than a coin, rolls on to the floor.

On one side of it are the letters *NV*. On the other is an engraving of a labyrinth.

IV

Pic de Soularac Sabarthès Mountains

For a moment, everything is silent.

Then the darkness melts. Alice is no longer in the cave. She is floating in a white, weightless world, transparent and peaceful and silent.

She is free. Safe.

Alice has the sensation of slipping out of time, as if she is falling from one dimension into another. The line between the past and present is fading now in this timeless, endless space.

Then, like a trap door beneath the gallows, Alice feels a sudden jerk, then a drop and she is plummeting down through the open sky, falling, falling down towards the wooded mountainside. The brisk air whistles in her ears as she plunges, faster, harder towards the ground.

The moment of impact never comes. There's no splintering of bone against the slate grey flint and rock. Instead, Alice hits the ground running, stumbling along a steep, rough woodland track between two columns of high trees. They are dense and tall and tower above her so she can't see what lies beyond.

Too fast.

Alice grabs at the branches as if they will slow her, stop this headlong flight towards this unknown place, but her hands go straight through as if she's a ghost or a spirit. Clumps of tiny leaves come away in her hands, like hair

from a brush. She cannot feel them, but the sap stains the tips of her fingers green. She puts them up to her face, to breathe in their subtle, sour scent. She cannot smell them either.

Alice has a stitch in her side, but she cannot stop because there is something behind her, getting steadily closer. The path is sloping sharply beneath her feet. She is aware that the crunch of dried root and stone has replaced the soft earth, moss and twigs. Still, there is no sound. No birds singing, no voices calling, nothing but her own ragged breathing. The path twists and coils back on itself, sending her scuttling this way and that, until she rounds the corner and sees the silent wall of flame which blocks the path ahead. A pillar of twisting fire, white and gold and red, folding in on itself, its shape ever shifting.

Instinctively, Alice puts up her hands to shield her face from the fierce heat, although she cannot feel it. She can see faces trapped within the dancing flames, the mouths contorted in silent agony as the fire caresses and burns.

Alice tries to stop. She must stop. Her feet are bleeding and torn, her long skirts wet, slowing her down, but her pursuer is hard at her heels and something beyond her control is driving her on into the fatal embrace of the fire.

She has no choice but to jump, to avoid being consumed by the flames. She spirals up into the air like a wisp of smoke, floating high above the yellows and oranges. The wind seems to carry her up, releasing her from the earth.

Someone is calling her name, a woman's voice, although she pronounces it strangely.

Alais.

She is safe. Free.

Then, the familiar clutch of cold fingers on her ankles, shackling her to the ground. No, not fingers, chains. Now Alice realises she is holding something in her hands, a book, held together with leather ties. She understands that

it is this what he wants. What *they* want. It is the loss of this book that makes them angry.

If only she could speak she could perhaps strike a bargain. But her head is empty of words and her mouth incapable of speech. She lashes out, kicks to escape, but she is caught. The iron grip on her legs is too strong. She starts to scream as she is dragged back down into the fire, but there is only silence.

She screams again, feeling her voice struggling deep inside her to be heard. This time, the sound comes rushing back. Alice feels the real world rushing back. Sound, light, smell, touch, the metallic taste of blood in her mouth. Until, for a fraction of a second, she pauses, enveloped suddenly by a translucent cold. It is not the familiar chill of the cave, but something different, intense and bright. Within it, Alice can just make out the fleeting outline of a face, beautiful, indistinct. The same voice is calling her name once more.

Alais.

Calling for the last time. It is the voice of a friend. Not someone who means her harm. Alice struggles to open her eyes, knowing that if she could see, she could understand. She cannot. Not quite.

The dream is starting to fade, setting her free.

It's time to wake up. I must wake up.

Now there's another voice in her head, different from the first. The feeling is coming back to her arms and legs, her grazed knees that sting and her scuffed skin sore where she fell. She can feel the rough grip on her shoulder, shaking her back to life.

'Alice! Alice, wake up!'

THE CITÉ
ON THE HILL



CHAPTER 1

Carcassona



JULHET 1209

Alaïs jolted awake, bolt upright, her eyes wide open. Fear fluttered in her chest, as a bird caught in a net struggles to be free. She pressed her hand against her ribs to still her beating heart.

For a moment, she was neither asleep nor awake, as if some part of her had been left behind in the dream. She felt she was floating, looking down on herself from a great height, like the stone gargoyles that grimaced at passers-by from the roof of the cathedral church of Sant-Nasari.

The room came back into focus. She was safe in her own bed, in the Château Comtal. Gradually, her eyes became accustomed to the dark. She was safe from the thin, dark-eyed people who haunted her at night, their sharp fingers clawing and pulling at her. *They cannot reach me now.* The language carved in the stones, more pictures than words, which meant nothing to her, all vanished like wisps of smoke in the autumn air. The fire too had faded, leaving only a memory in her mind.

A premonition? Or a nightmare only?

She had no way of knowing. She was afraid of knowing.

Alaïs reached for the night-curtains, which were hung around the bed, as if by touching something substantial she would feel less transparent and insubstantial herself. The

worn cloth, filled with the dust and familiar smells of the castle, was reassuringly coarse between her fingers.

Night after night, the same dream. All through her childhood, when she had woken in terror in the dark, her face white and wet with tears, her father had been at her bedside, watching over her as if she was a son. As each candle burned down and another was lit, he whispered of his adventures in the Holy Land. He told her of the endless seas of the desert, the curve and sweep of the mosques and the call to prayer of the Saracen faithful. He described the aromatic spices, the vivid colours and the peppery taste of the food. The terrible brilliance of the blood-red sun as it set over Jerusalem.

For many years, in those hollow hours between dusk and dawn, as her sister lay sleeping beside her, her father had talked and talked, setting her demons to flight. He had not allowed the black cowls or the Catholic priests to come near, with their superstitions and false symbols.

His words had saved her.

‘Guilhem?’ she whispered.

Her husband was deeply asleep, his arms flung out claiming ownership of most of the bed. His long dark hair, smelling of smoke and wine and the stables, was fanned across the pillow. Moonlight fell through the open window, the shutter pinned back to let the cool night air into the chamber. In the gathering light, Alaïs could see the shadow of rough growth on his chin. The chain Guilhem wore around his neck shimmered and glinted as he shifted position in his sleep.

Alaïs wanted him to wake and tell her that everything was all right, that she didn’t have to be afraid any more. But he did not stir and it did not occur to her to wake him. Fearless in all other things, she was inexperienced in the ways of marriage and cautious with him still, so she contented herself with running her fingers down his smooth,

tanned arms and across his shoulders, firm and broad from the hours spent practising with sword and quintain for the Joust. Alaïs could feel the life moving beneath his skin even as he slept. And when she remembered how they had spent the early part of the night, she blushed, even though there was no one there to see.

Alaïs was overwhelmed by the sensations Guilhem aroused in her. She delighted in the way her heart leapt when she caught unexpected sight of him, the way the ground shifted beneath her feet when he smiled at her. At the same time, she did not like the feeling of powerlessness. She feared love was making her weak, giddy. She did not doubt she loved Guilhem and yet she knew she was keeping a little of herself back.

Alaïs sighed. All she could hope was that, with time, it would become easier.

There was something in the quality of the light, black fading to grey, and the occasional hint of birdsong from the trees in the courtyard, which told her that dawn was not far away. She knew she wouldn't go back to sleep now.

Alaïs slipped out between the curtains and tiptoed across to the wardrobe that stood in the far corner of the chamber. The flagstones were cold under her feet and the rush matting scratched her toes. She opened the lid, removed the lavender bag from the top of the pile, and took out a plain, dark green dress. Shivering a little, she stepped into it, threading her arms into the narrow sleeves. She pulled the material, slightly damp, over her undershift, then fastened the girdle tightly.

Alaïs was seventeen and had been married for six months, but she had not yet acquired the softness and sway of a woman. The dress hung shapelessly on her narrow frame, as if it didn't belong to her. Steadying herself with her hand on the table, she pushed her feet into soft leather slippers and took her favourite red cloak

from the back of the chair. Its edges and hem were embroidered with an intricate blue and green pattern of squares and diamonds, interspersed with tiny yellow flowers, which she had designed herself for her wedding day. It had taken her weeks and weeks to sew. All through November and December she had worked at it, her fingers growing sore and stiff with cold as she hurried to have it finished in time.

Alaïs turned her attention to her *panièr*, which stood on the floor beside the wardrobe. She checked her herb pouch and purse were there, together with the strips of cloth for wrapping plants and roots and her tools for digging and cutting. Finally, she fixed her cloak firmly at her neck with a ribbon, slipped her knife into its sheath at her waist, pulled her hood up over her head to cover her long, unbraided hair, then quietly crept across the chamber and out into the deserted corridor. The door closed with a thud behind her.

It was not yet Prime, so there was nobody about in the living quarters. Alaïs walked quickly along the corridor, her cloak swishing softly against the stone floor, heading for the steep and narrow stairs. She stepped over a serving boy slumped asleep against a wall outside the door to the room her sister Oriane shared with her husband.

As she descended lower, the sound of voices floated up to meet her from the kitchens in the basement. The servants were already hard at work. Alaïs heard a slap, closely followed by a yell, as an unlucky boy started the day with the cook's heavy hand on the back of his head.

A scullion came staggering towards her, struggling with a massive half-barrel of water he had drawn from the well.

Alaïs smiled. '*Bonjorn.*'

'*Bonjorn, Dame,*' he answered cautiously.

'Here,' she said, going down the stairs before him to open the door.

'*Mercé, Dame,*' he said, a little less timid now. '*Grand mercé.*'

The kitchen was alive with hustle and bustle. Great billows of steam were already rising from the huge *payrola*, the cauldron, hanging on a hook over the open fire. An older servant took the water from the scullion, emptied it into the pot, and then shoved the barrel back at him without saying a word. The boy rolled his eyes at Alaïs as he headed out and back up to the well once more.

Capons, lentils and cabbage in sealed earthenware jars stood waiting to be cooked on the big table in the centre of the room, together with pots containing salt mullet, eel and pike. At one end were *fogaça* puddings in cloth bags, goose paté and slabs of salted pork. At the other, trays of raisins, quinces, figs and cherries. A boy of nine or ten was standing with his elbows propped on the table, the scowl on his face making it clear how much he was looking forward to another hot and sweaty day at the turnspit, watching the meat roast. Next to the hearth, the brushwood was burning fiercely inside the dome-shaped bread oven. The first batch of *pan de blat*, wheat bread, was already standing on the table to cool. The smell made Alaïs hungry.

'May I have one of those?'

The cook looked up, furious at the intrusion of a woman into his kitchen. Then he saw who it was and his bad-tempered face creased into a cock-eyed smile revealing a row of rotten teeth.

'*Dame Alaïs,*' he said with delight, wiping his hands on his apron. '*Benvenguda.* What an honour! You've not come to visit us for quite some time. We've missed you.'

'*Jacques,*' she said warmly. 'I wouldn't want to get in your way.'

‘In my way, you!’ he laughed. ‘How could you ever be in my way?’ As a child, Alaïs had spent a great deal of time in the kitchen, watching and learning, the only girl Jacques had ever allowed across the threshold into his male domain. ‘Now, Dame Alaïs, what can I get you?’

‘Just a little bread, Jacques, some wine too, if you can spare it?’

A frown appeared on his face.

‘Forgive me, but you’re not going down to the river? Not at this time of day, unaccompanied? A lady of your position . . . it’s not even light. I hear things, stories of . . .’

Alaïs laid a hand on his arm. ‘You are kind to concern yourself, Jacques, and I know you have my best interests at heart, but I will be fine. I give you my word. It’s nearly dawn. I know exactly where I’m going. I’ll be there and back before anyone even notices I’ve gone, really.’

‘Does your father know?’

She put a conspiratorial finger to her lips. ‘You know what he does not, but please, keep it our secret. I will take great care.’

Jacques looked far from convinced, but feeling he’d said as much as he dared, he did not argue. He walked slowly over to the table and wrapped a round loaf in a white linen cloth and ordered a scullion to fetch a jar of wine. Alaïs watched, feeling a tug at her heart. He was moving more slowly these days and he was limping heavily on his left side.

‘Is your leg still giving you difficulty?’

‘Not much,’ he lied.

‘I can dress it for you later, if you like. It doesn’t look as if that cut is healing as it should.’

‘It’s not so bad.’

‘Did you use the ointment I made for you?’ she asked, knowing from the expression on his face that he had not.

Jacques spread his podgy hands in a gesture of surrender.

‘There is so much to do, Dame – all these extra guests, hundreds once you count the servants, *écuyers*, grooms, ladies-in-waiting, not to mention the Consuls and their families. And so many things are difficult to find these days. Why only yesterday, I sent—’

‘That’s all very well, Jacques,’ said Alais, ‘but your leg won’t get better on its own. The cut’s too deep.’

She suddenly realised that the noise level had dropped. She glanced up to see the entire kitchen was eavesdropping on their conversation. The younger boys were propped on their elbows at the table, staring open-mouthed at the sight of their quick-tempered master being told off. And by a woman.

Pretending not to notice, Alais dropped her voice.

‘Why don’t I return later to do it, in return for this?’ She patted the loaf. ‘It can be our second secret, *oc?* A fair exchange?’

For a moment, she thought she had been over-familiar and presumed too much. But, after a moment’s hesitation, Jacques grinned.

‘*Ben,*’ she said. Good. ‘I will come back when the sun is high and see to it. *Dins d’abord.*’ Soon.

As Alais left the kitchen and climbed back up the stairs, she heard Jacques bellowing at everybody to stop gawping and get back to work, pretending the interruption had never happened. She smiled.

Everything was as it should be.

Alais pulled open the heavy door that led into the main courtyard and stepped out into the newborn day.

The leaves of the elm tree that stood in the centre of the enclosed courtyard, under which Viscount Trencavel dispensed justice, looked black against the fading night. Its branches were alive with larks and wrens, their voices warbling shrill and clear in the dawn.

Raymond-Roger Trencavel's grandfather had built the Château Comtal, more than a hundred years ago, as the seat from which to rule his expanding territories. His lands stretched from Albi in the north and Narbonne in the south, to Béziers in the east and Carcassonne in the west.

The Château was constructed around a large rectangular courtyard and incorporated, on the western side, the remains of an older castle. It was part of the reinforcement of the western section of the fortified walls that enclosed the Cité, a ring of solid stone that towered high above the river Aude and the northern marshlands beyond.

The *donjon*, where the Consuls met and significant documents were signed, was in the southwest corner of the courtyard and well guarded. In the dim light, Alaïs could see something propped against the outside wall. She looked harder and realised it was a dog, curled up asleep on the ground. A couple of boys, perched like crows on the edge of the goose pen, were trying to wake the animal up by flicking stones at it. In the stillness, she could hear the regular dull thud, thud of their heels banging against the wooden railings.

There were two ways in and out of the Château Comtal. The wide arched West Gate gave directly on to the grassy slopes that led to the walls and was mostly kept closed. The Eastern Gate, small and narrow, was tucked between two high gate towers and led straight into the streets of the *Ciutat*, the Cité, itself.

Communication between the upper and lower floors of the gatehouse towers was only possible by means of wooden ladders and a series of trap doors. As a girl, one of her favourite games was to scramble up and down between the levels with the boys from the kitchen, trying to evade the guards. Alaïs was fast. She always won.

Pulling her cloak tightly about her, she walked briskly across the courtyard. Once the curfew bell had rung, the

gates barred for the night and the guard set, nobody was supposed to pass without her father's authorisation. Although not a consul, Bertrand Pelletier occupied a unique and favoured position in the household. Few dared disobey him.

He had always disliked her habit of slipping out of the Cité in the early morning. These days, he was even more adamant that she should stay within the walls of the Château at night. She assumed her husband felt the same, although Guilhem had never said so. But it was only in the stillness and anonymity of the dawn, free from the restrictions and limitations of the household, that Alaïs felt really herself. Nobody's daughter, nobody's sister, nobody's wife. Deep down, she had always believed her father understood. Much as she disliked disobeying him, she did not want to give up these moments of freedom.

Most of the night-watch turned a blind eye to her comings and goings. Or, at least they had. Since rumours of war had started to circulate, the garrison had become more cautious. On the surface, life went on much the same and although refugees arrived in the Cité from time to time, their tales of attacks or religious persecution seemed to Alaïs nothing out of the ordinary. Raiders who appeared from nowhere and struck like summer lightning before passing on were facts of existence for any who lived outside the safety of a fortified village or town. The reports seemed no different, neither more nor less, than usual.

Guilhem didn't seem particularly perturbed by the whisperings of a conflict, at least not so far as she could tell. He never talked to her of such things. Oriane, however, claimed that a French army of Crusaders and churchmen was making ready to attack the lands of the Pays d'Oc. Moreover, she said the campaign was supported by the Pope and the French King. Alaïs knew from experience that much of what Oriane said was intended only to upset

her. Nonetheless her sister often seemed to know things before anybody else in the household and there was no denying the fact that the number of messengers coming in and out of the Château was increasing by the day. It was also undeniable that the lines on their father's face were deeper and darker, the hollows of his cheeks more pronounced.

The *sirjans d'arms* on guard at the Eastern Gate were alert, although their eyes were rimmed with red after a long night. Their square silver helmets were pushed high on their heads and their chain-mail coats were dull in the pale dawn light. With their shields slung wearily across their shoulders and their swords sheathed, they looked more ready for bed than battle.

As she got closer, Alaïs was relieved to recognise Bérenger. When he identified her, he grinned and he bowed his head.

'*Bonjorn*, Dame Alaïs. You're up and about early.'

She smiled. 'I couldn't sleep.'

'Can't that husband of yours think of something to fill your nights?' said the other with a lewd wink. His face was pockmarked and the nails on his fingers were bitten and bleeding. His breath smelled of stale food and ale.

Alaïs ignored him. 'How is your wife, Bérenger?'

'Well, Dame. Quite back to her usual self.'

'And your son?'

'Bigger by the day. He'll eat us out of house and hearth if we don't watch out!'

'Clearly following in his father's footsteps!' she said, poking his ample belly.

'That's exactly what my wife says.'

'Send her my best wishes, Bérenger, will you?'

'She will be grateful to be remembered, Dame.' He paused. 'I suppose you want me to let you through?'

'I'm only going out into the *Ciutat*, maybe the river. I won't be long.'

'We're not supposed to let anybody through,' growled his companion. 'Intendant Pelletier's orders.'

'Nobody asked you,' snapped Bérenger. 'It's not that, Dame,' he said, dropping his voice. 'But you know how things are at present. What if something was to happen to you and it came out that it was I who let you pass, your father would—'

Alaïs put her hand on his arm. 'I know, I know,' she said softly. 'But really there's no need to worry. I can take care of myself. Besides . . .' – She let her eyes slide sideways to the other guard, who was now picking his nose and wiping his fingers on his sleeve – 'what trials I might face at the river could hardly be worse than those you endure here!'

Bérenger laughed. 'Promise me you will be careful, è?'

Alaïs nodded, opening her cloak a fraction to show him the hunting knife at her waist. 'I will. I give you my word.'

There were two doors to negotiate. Bérenger unbolted them in turn, then lifted the heavy beam of oak securing the outer door and pulled it open just wide enough for Alaïs to slip through. Smiling her thanks, she ducked under his arm and stepped out into the world.