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JAMES ROLLINS

MAP OF BONES

**BONUS MATERIAL
INCLUDED**

"A SPIRALING, HIGH-OCTANE ADVENTURE"
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JAMES ROLLINS

MAP of BONES

A Σ SIGMA FORCE NOVEL

 HarperCollins e-books

TO

ALEXANDRA AND ALEXANDER

MAY BOTH YOUR LIVES SHINE AS

BRIGHTLY AS ALL THE STARS

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The precision of any fiction is a reflection of the facts presented. As such, while truth may sometimes be stranger than fiction, fiction must always have a foundation of truth. To that end, all the artwork, relics, catacombs, and treasures described in this story are real. The historical trail revealed within these pages is accurate. The science at the heart of the novel is based on current research and discoveries.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Altar of Eden

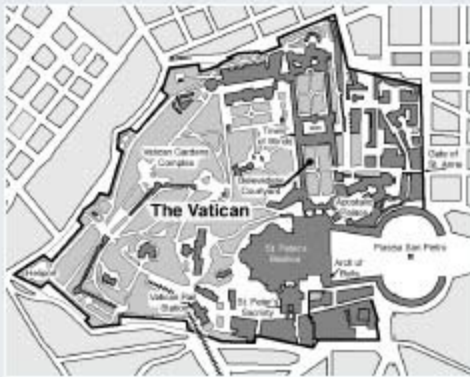
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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

THE MEDITERRANEAN



THE VATICAN



The holy relics were granted to Rainald von Dassel, Archbishop of Cologne (1159–67), following Emperor Barbarossa’s sacking of the city of Milan. Such a treasure was granted to the German Archbishop for his aid and chancellorship in service to the current Emperor. Not all were content to see such a treasure leave Italy...not without a struggle.

—From *L’histoire de la Sainte Empire Romaine*

(The History of the Holy Roman Empire), 1845,

HISTOIRES LITTÉRAIRES

PROLOGUE

MARCH 1162

THE ARCHBISHOP'S men fled into the shadows of the lower valley. Behind them, atop the winter pass, horses screamed, arrow-bit and cleaved. Men shouted, cried, and roared. The clash of steel rang as silvery as a chapel's bells.

But it was not God's work being done here.

The rear guard must hold.

Friar Joachim clutched the reins of his horse as his mount slid on its haunches down the steep slope. The loaded wagon had reached the bottom of the valley safely. But true escape still lay another league away.

If only they could reach it...

With his hands clenched on the reins, Joachim urged his stumbling mare down to the valley's bottom. He splashed across an icy brook and risked a glance behind him.

Though spring beckoned, winter still ruled the heights. The peaks shone brilliantly in the setting sun. Snow reflected the light, while a billow of rime-frost flagged off the peaks' razored tips. But here in the shadowed gorges, snowmelt had turned the forest floor into a muddy bog. The horses slogged up to their fetlocks and threatened to break a bone with every step. Ahead the wagon was mired just shy of its axles.

Joachim kicked his mare to join the soldiers at the wagon.

Another team of horses had been hitched to the front. Men pushed from behind. They must reach the trail coursing along the next ridgeline.

“Ey-ya!” yelled the wagon master, snapping a whip.

The lead horse threw its head back and then heaved against the yoke. Nothing happened. Chains strained, horses chuffed white into the cold air, and men swore most foully.

Slowly, too slowly, the wagon dragged free of the mud with the sucking sound of an open chest wound. But it was moving again at last. Each delay had cost blood. The dying wailed from the pass behind them.

The rear guard must hold a little longer.

The wagon continued, climbing again. The three large stone sarcophagi in the open wagon bed slid against the ropes that lashed them in place.

If any should break...

Friar Joachim reached the foundering wagon.

His fellow brother, Franz, moved his horse closer. “The trail ahead scouts clear.”

“The relics cannot be taken back to Rome. We must reach the German border.”

Franz nodded, understanding. The relics were no longer safe upon Italian soil, not with the true pope exiled to France and the false pope residing in Rome.

The wagon climbed more quickly now, finding firmer footing with each step. Still, it trundled no faster than a man could walk. Joachim continued watching the far ridge, staring over his mount’s rump.

The sounds of battle had settled to groans and sobbing, echoing eerily across the valley. The ring of swords had died completely, signaling the defeat of the rear guard.