

# THE DEAD PRINCE

By Matthew Reilly

## THE OLD WATCHER

**Mont St Michel,  
France, 1454**

Every day for three months, from sun-up to sundown, the old monk watched De Christo as he worked.

This was unusual. All the other inhabitants of the island monastery—monks, nuns and townsfolk— preferred to spend their time gawking at the royal visitors present at the Mount.

But all the while De Christo worked in the cathedral, the ancient monk never let him out of his sight. Bald and hunched and gnarled, his name was Brother Michael, and he was the caretaker of the great cathedral.

Every day he would sit in the front pew and watch as De Christo hammered and planed, rebuilding the flame-scarred structure. Granted, the cathedral of Mont St Michel contained some of the most valuable Catholic relics in all of Europe—including a great wooden cross suspended above the altar from the ceiling which supposedly contained a splinter from the actual Cross of Christ, golden chalices and silver torch-holders. Brother Michael was protecting the silverware.

Every day this happened. Every day, that is, until the morning the Crown Prince's body was found crucified on the great wooden cross above the altar.

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## THE BODY

The prince's death-pose almost perfectly resembled Christ's. He had been *nailed* to the gigantic wooden ornament.

And as De Christo—a battle-hardened veteran of the just-finished war—had quickly deduced from the dead prince's bloody wrist-wounds, he had been alive when this had been done to him.

That the Crown Prince of France—the *Dauphin*—had been murdered on the grounds of the monastery would normally have been enough to send the Abbott of Mont St Michel into a blind panic.

But this was worse. Much worse.

Because the King was on his way to Mont St Michel.

He would be here in two days.

Whence he would discover that his first-born son and heir to the throne of France was dead.

## THE INVESTIGATOR

Fortunately for De Christo, he had been away from the Mount when the murder had taken place—he had taken two day's leave to visit Bayeux, to see some old friends. He had returned to the monastery on the Monday morning that the body had been found.

Truth be told, this was both fortunate *and* unfortunate.

Fortunate, because he was not a suspect.

Unfortunate, because the Abbott asked him—as an impartial outsider, as a former army commander, and now as the Royal Architect—to find the killer.

De Christo didn't much like the idea of peering behind the

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curtain of life at Mont St Michel—every monastery had its secrets—but he also knew that the King, his friend, would demand an explanation of the killing.

‘I will need complete freedom of action,’ De Christo said to the Abbott.

‘You shall have whatever you ask, Master Builder.’

‘Then let us view the scene of the crime.’

Moments later, De Christo was standing in the cavernous cathedral, beneath its soaring ceiling.

He saw the Crown Prince still hung high, hands spread wide, head limply bowed.

Then he examined every corner of the cathedral—but found nothing of note.

But then, high up near the ceiling at the side of the cathedral, he saw a small balcony. Its rear door was ajar.

After a few minutes’ climbing, De Christo stood on that very same balcony, gazing out over the entire cathedral. It was a splendid view.

His feet crunched on something.

He looked down: and saw several tiny pebble-like stones, each orange in colour. They looked like the crushed pebbles used in some of the paths in the monastery’s gardens.

‘Hmmm,’ he said.

He returned to the Abbott down in the nave. ‘Has anyone left the Mount this morning?’

‘No,’ the Abbott said. ‘The gate records show that not a soul has left the island. It was the first thing I checked.’

‘Which means our killer is still among us,’ De Christo said. ‘Still on the island. Lord Abbott: seal off the Mount. From now on, no-one enters. No-one leaves.’

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## **THE ISLAND MONASTERY**

How the Dauphin and his entourage came to be at Mont St Michel was a matter of history. After 116 years of bloody warfare with the English—a war which would later become known as The 100 Years War—all of France was celebrating.

And Mont St Michel—the spectacular monastery-cathedral perched high on its own island out in the centre of the Gulf of San Malo, so high that it was visible for twenty miles in every direction—was to be the focal point of the post-war celebrations.

Three times during the hostilities, the island monastery had held out against English sieges, once against the vicious Henry V himself.

But those sieges had left their scars and at the conclusion of the war, the monastery was in need of substantial repair. And so at great expense, the King had sent his Royal Architect, Robert De Christo to repair the monastery's battered fortifications and rebuild its fire-scarred cathedral.

And now the King was coming to inspect his works. As an envoy, he sent the Dauphin and his two brothers, the Princes Louis and Phillip (and their respective hangers-on) to the island monastery a week ahead of him.

But as De Christo was to discover, the Dauphin and his travelling retinue had been very naughty boys during their time at Mont St Michel.

## **THE CARETAKER**

De Christo set up his investigation office in the refectory. It comprised a desk and two chairs—one for him and one for each witness he interrogated.

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The first witness he called was old Brother Michael, the ancient caretaker of the cathedral, the monk who had watched De Christo at work for the past three months.

‘The world is a better place for that filthy rogues’s passing,’ Brother Michael spat through his toothless mouth. ‘Dauphin or not, he shall tremble before the Lord when he is judged!’

*Ah-ha.* De Christo thought. *This could be a very short investigation indeed.*

‘Why do you say that?’ he asked.

‘The Dauphin was a brat. Of the most spoilt kind. He drank to excess, he blasphemed with abandon and he was utterly wanton in his depravities.’

De Christo nodded at that. The young Dauphin’s sexual appetites were well known. It was not uncommon for a rural noble to discover a few months after a visit from the Dauphin that one of the servant girls was with child.

‘We are all sinners in our own way, Brother Michael. Was he worthy of death for those sins?’

Brother Michael leaned forward, lowered his voice. ‘For what he did whilst he was here at the Mount, he should burn in Hell, Master Builder. He—’ the old man seemed pained to say it—‘*deflowered* some of the younger nuns here at the abbey.’

De Christo looked up from his notetaking. ‘He *what?*’

Brother Michael’s eyes had filled with tears. Hawkish and protective he may have been, but a murderer he was clearly not. Besides, the crucifixion of the Dauphin had required strength and Brother Michael was incapable of such an exertion.

De Christo tried another line. ‘You live in an apartment adjoining the cathedral, do you not, Brother?’

‘I do.’

‘And you cherish your cathedral, do you not? After all, you

watched me like a hawk for the whole time I was working in it.’

‘I love that cathedral, Master Builder,’ the old monk said. ‘It is a most sacred place, blessed by the Archangel Michael himself. Indeed, I cherish it.’

‘If you cherish it so, and knowing how diligently you watch over it,’ De Christo said, ‘how did it come to be that you did not witness the murder of the Crown Prince in your precious chapel?’

Brother Michael scowled. ‘We all must sleep sometime. It was while I slept that the crime took place. My brothers will vouch for my whereabouts last night.’

*Just as you will vouch for theirs, no doubt,* De Christo thought. ‘Thank you, Brother Michael. That will be all for now.’

## **SISTER MADELENE**

The young nun sat before De Christo, sobbing. It had only taken one question for her to break down.

Like many of the young nuns at the Mount, she was a country girl of little education, for whom the cloisters of a monastery like Mont St Michel offered at least some kind of life.

‘Yes! I did it!’ she cried. ‘I gave myself to him! He gave me wine, muddling my senses. Then he confused me with his clever tongue—he told me that the King of France is only king because God wills it. And since he was to be the next King of France, he had been chosen by God. And since *he* desired my body, that meant *God* desired that I give it to him. And so I lay with him and Sister Arabelle.’

‘You lay with him *and* Sister Arabelle? At the same time?’ De Christo coughed.

‘Yes...’ the young Sister Madelene seemed unsure if this was

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an unusual thing to do. ‘While his brothers lay with Sisters Phillipa and Margarita on the other side of the Crown Prince’s bedchamber—’

She bowed her head with shame, her voice trailing off.

De Christo—who had seen many things in his life—swallowed.

‘So it was...an orgy?’ he said.

‘Yes.’

‘How many nuns were present?’

‘Four.’

‘And how many of those nuns engaged in the debauchery?’

‘All did, my Lord.’

‘And how many of the Dauphin’s people were there?’

‘Only three. He and his two brothers. Well, on the first occasion.’

‘There was *more* than one time?’ De Christo asked.

‘Three nights ago, the Dauphin invited we four to his bedchamber, where we partook in the depravities. On the second occasion, it was myself and Sister Arabelle only—shared between the three princes. And on the third night, last night, it was the largest gathering of all—twelve nuns, the three princes and two of their young stewards.’

De Christo could only stare.

‘How did you feel afterwards?’ he managed to ask.

She bowed her head. ‘I felt terrible, sire. Filthy. Like he had used his wiles to convince me to engage in the most wanton desires of the flesh.’

‘Were you enraged?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you feel powerless?’

‘Yes.’

‘Enraged and powerless enough to kill the Crown Prince?’

The young nun looked away. ‘No...’ she said softly, almost wistfully.

Her tone made De Christo pause. But before he could say anything, she went on.

‘I liked it, Master Builder,’ she said. ‘All my life I have wondered about the pleasures of the flesh and now I know them. They are delicious and delightful and I do not know why they are veiled in so much shame and guilt.’

She looked up at De Christo, her simple eyes wide. ‘The truth is, I was not enraged at all, Master Builder. I liked it.’

## **THE SECOND-IN-LINE**

The young Prince Louis slouched in the chair opposite De Christo as if he didn’t have a care in the world. And perhaps he didn’t, as he was now the Dauphin, the next-in-line to take the throne.

‘You want to know if I killed my brother?’ Louis smirked. ‘So I could be King.’

‘The thought had crossed my mind,’ De Christo said.

‘I would be lying if I said the thought hadn’t crossed mine too at various times in the past,’ Louis said. ‘But no. I didn’t kill him this time. I have witnesses who can vouch for my whereabouts last night.’

‘Who?’

‘A gentleman does not reveal such things,’ the prince smirked again.

‘You were lying with a nun?’ De Christo said simply. ‘You are some gentleman.’

The prince sat bolt upright. ‘How did you—?’



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‘Don’t underestimate me, Your Highness.’

‘And don’t underestimate me, Master Builder,’ the prince snapped. He stood up, walked to a nearby cupboard, where he grabbed a terracotta drinking bowl.

He spoke as he filled the pale orange bowl with water from a flask: ‘You would be wise to choose your words carefully. For if you falsely accuse me now, when my father is dead and I am King, you shall end your days in a cell with only rats and your own screaming for company.’

He gazed evenly at De Christo as he drank.

‘So you were with one of the nuns last night?’ De Christo went on.

‘Two of them, actually,’ the prince grinned. ‘In my chamber. Sisters Arabelle and Margarita. The three of us had been with the others before we decided to adjourn to my bedchamber.’

‘You left the greater orgy?’

‘We did. And believe me, from what I saw, my dear departed brother, the Crown Prince, was very much alive and...active...when we left.’

De Christo gazed long and hard at the insolent young man who was now next-in-line to be King.

The prince kicked back his chair, stood. ‘Good luck with your investigation, Master Builder.’

### **THE ASSISTANT**

De Christo questioned another dozen or so monks and nuns that afternoon, including the Abbott himself. No leads arose.

At dusk, he stepped out onto the great balcony overlooking the sweeping Gulf of San Malo.

He was joined by the Abbott. ‘Any luck?’

‘None so far.’

De Christo saw some monks crossing a courtyard below them, carrying their water bowls for the night. Among them, he saw old Brother Michael talking to a much larger young monk, a veritable giant of a man.

‘Who is that?’ he asked. ‘The monk Brother Michael is speaking to.’

The Abbott said: ‘Why, that is Brother Barnabas. He is a mute and a simpleton. But a most devoted soul—almost as devout as Brother Michael. They make a fine pair—Brother Barnabas worships old Brother Michael, parrots his every word. Indeed, he aids Brother Michael in his duties as caretaker of the cathedral.’

‘He is the *assistant* caretaker of the cathedral?’ De Christo said.

‘Yes. Brother Michael did not mention this?’

‘No, he didn’t...’ De Christo eyed the gigantic Brother Barnabas. ‘Could this man have committed the crime?’

‘Brother Barnabas!’ the Abbott exclaimed. ‘No! He is a most gentle giant. Strong but withdrawn, quiet as a mouse. I cannot even begin to imagine the obscenity that could rouse Brother Barnabas to anger, let alone murder.’

De Christo frowned. ‘Hmm. Still, I think I shall question him tomorrow.’

## **THE WALK**

Exhausted from his day’s investigations, De Christo decided to take a walk around Mont St Michel—to examine some of the places he had heard about.

He went to the cathedral—and gazed up at the cross upon which the Crown Prince had been crucified.

Looked up at the high balcony on which he had found the small

orange pebbles from the gardens.

Then he descended into the complex, whence he came to the Crown Prince's bedchamber.

It was smaller than he had imagined—a lot smaller. A canopied bed, a sitting chair, a window. Barely big enough to hold seven people pressed close together.

Seven people only.

But Sister Madelene had said—

*Wait a moment*, De Christo froze at the realisation. 'Oh De Christo! You fool! You assumed that it all happened *here!*'

## ILLUMINATION

De Christo charged into the nuns' dormitories. Some of the nuns squealed at the sight of a man in their midst, but De Christo ignored them. 'Where is Sister Madelene!' he shouted. 'Where is she!'

Sister Madelene stepped forward. 'Yes, Master Builder?'

'Last night. The third orgy,' he said. 'It did not take place in the Crown Prince's bedchamber, did it?'

'Well, no...' Sister Madelene flushed red.

'Because the prince's bedchamber was too small to accommodate seventeen lustful young bodies—twelve nuns, three princes and two stewards, if I remember correctly. So! Where did this third orgy take place?' De Christo asked, even though he now knew the answer.

Sister Madelene averted her gaze.

'Where did this third congress take place!' he demanded.

The young nun swallowed. 'It took place in the cathedral, sire. All around the altar. By the light of many candles. There were naked bodies everywhere, engaged in every form of sexual

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congress both natural and unnatural; writhing forms splayed all about the holy area, on the steps, on the floor, with the Crown Prince *on* the altar itself lying with Sister Phillipa; Sister Phillipa moaning in ecstasy.'

De Christo saw the scene in his mind—but in his mind's eye, he also saw the individual who had watched it all from the balcony high above the cathedral.

An individual carrying an orange terracotta water bowl—presumably having gone to get more water in the dead of night—only to hear a noise in the cathedral—then going to the balcony to investigate—and witnessing the depraved scene.

Witnessing the Crown Prince himself defiling an altar of God.

At which sight, he dropped his bowl in shock, breaking it. The killer had managed to sweep up nearly all of the orange shards of the broken bowl, but not all of them.

Then he must have waited for the fornicators to leave the cathedral, waited for the Crown Prince to fall behind.

So he was big enough to overpower the prince.

Strong enough to nail him to the cross and hoist it high.

And passionate enough, devout enough—and dull-minded enough—to kill *the Crown Prince of France* for his display of gross disrespect on an altar of the Lord.

De Christo heard the Abbott's voice in his head: '*I cannot even begin to imagine the obscenity that could rouse Brother Barnabas to anger, let alone murder.*'

'I think I can imagine it now,' De Christo said aloud.

The King would arrive two days later.

Of course, riders had already brought him the news of his son's death. Upon his arrival, De Christo told him everything—of the

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orgies, the murder, and the killer: the gigantic halfwit, Brother Barnabas.

The King took the news in an odd way. He asked to see the killer.

Brother Barnabas was brought to him. The King appraised the devout simpleton closely.

No-one dared speak.

The King gazed at the silent Brother Barnabas.

Then he said softly: 'This man is to be allowed to live. My son debased himself on an altar of the Lord. Sadly for my son, the eyes of God were watching.'

The twelve nuns who had partaken in the depravities were reprimanded by their seniors, but they were also forgiven—and given the choice of a pure life henceforth or leaving the holy orders.

Eight of them repented and stayed. But four of the disgraced women—all of them younger nuns, among them Sister Madelene—chose to leave the abbey.

As for De Christo, one week later he would leave Mont St Michel, too, never to return.

**THE END**