



Excerpts from  
**CITY OF SECRETS**  
One Woman's True-life Journey to the Heart  
of the Grail Legend  
Patrice Chaplin

**DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

While the events and conversations described in this book are true, the names of most individuals have been changed to protect their identities.

Emilio Aldecane, local football trainer  
Maria Carmen Aragon, member of the society

Lauren Bacall, legendary movie actress who worked with Patrice on the (unfinished) film of *Harriet Hunter*

Antonio Barres, Catalan film-maker  
Abbé Bieil, director of the seminary of St Sulpice  
Abbé Bigou, priest  
Monseigneur Billard, Bishop of Carcassonne  
Dr Bosch, psychiatrist  
Henri Buthion, owner of Saunière's properties

Emma Calvé, opera singer  
Quim Carreras, priest  
Clara Mascaro, local (Catalan) actress

Jean Cocteau, film director  
Aaron Cohen, member of the Sephardic group in Los Angeles  
Pep Colomer, artist  
Noël Corbu, one of the subsequent owners of Saunière's properties

Pep Dalmas, partner of Joan Puig  
Marie Denarnaud, Saunière's maid at Rennes-le-Château

Umberto Eco, world-famous novelist  
Salvador Espriu, writer  
Eva, the cleaning woman at the Residencia Internacional hotel

the Frenchwoman (Maria Tourdes; Mme Mathieu)

Monsieur Garcia, a Parisian taxi driver, neighbour to PC  
Geli, the cathedral organist (José's cousin)  
Zelman Goldstein, American associate of José's Cabbala Centre  
Señora Guilini, member of the society

Ingrid, German who'd lived in America, high initiate, Cabbala expert

José, custodian of the society  
Juli, organist and canon (one of Jose's ancestors)  
Max Kander, journalist and broadcaster

Moshe Lazar, world-famous Ladino scholar  
Josep Luma, ex-Churchman, accountant

Manolo, night concierge at the Residencia Internacional hotel  
Roger Mathieu, 'man of letters', husband of Maria Tourdes  
Dr Mir, psychiatrist

Paco, medical student  
Joséphin Péladan, founder of order of the 'Rose et Croix du Temple et du Graal'  
Josep Pla, Catalan writer  
Rafael Pons, businessman  
Joan Puig, partner of Pep Dalmas

Rosa Quintana, proprietress of the Caldes spa

Germa Ruis, owner of the bookshop

Quico Sabater, Catalan resistance fighter and and political activist  
Julien Sacaze, French writer on the Rosicrucians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Abbé Saunière, priest  
Alfred Saunière, Abbé Saunière's brother  
Gérard de Sède, author  
Lucia Stilman, heiress  
Señora Sureda, friend of Maria Tourdes

Dr Vidal, heart surgeon in Girona

## Prologue

I took a room in the Hotel Centro, the last of the old places still left. It had housed my love for José, soothed my pain, given me hope. Since the last century little had changed. The spacious, old-fashioned bathrooms, the pedestal sinks decorated with china cupids, the huge lofty rooms, peeling paint, mosaic floors, had remained due to lack of money or a desire for an authentic time which had gone. My room, pale green with lace curtains, made the light soft. For a moment there was the thrilling damp atmosphere I remembered from the first winter when I was his fiancée.

He tapped on the door, punctual and polite, and suggested we eat locally in Girona. His embrace was as always, but fast, as though someone was waiting for him. We crossed the bridge to the square with the restaurants and he went automatically into the Casa Marieta, one of the family-run businesses where the three waitresses still wore yellow and were kind and motherly. Not surprisingly, the place was filled with regulars. The owner had married the fourth waitress, tiny, perfectly shaped, nicknamed 'Snow-White'. She had a wonderfully optimistic attitude that went no deeper than the pale perfection of her skin. I asked why we hadn't gone to Cal Ros or one of our other favourite places. 'They've all changed now,' he said.

It was 1972, and Girona had indeed changed. The chain shops from France and England had replaced many of the Catalan businesses. A local café had become an English pub. The clothes were the same as anywhere else, and the young were learning English. Something had gone out of José, a light, a flame. He'd been instrumental in getting the Fontana d'Or gallery established, and I was surprised to hear he was no longer there.

'They are short-sighted and have no vision.' I took it he meant the money people at the municipality. The new mayor and he did not get on.

While I'd been in Los Angeles and New York selling my books for films, writing scripts, making a documentary, he had lost the fight to keep his position and had even considered leaving the city. But he'd recently found something bigger and more glorious.

He seemed preoccupied and finished his food quickly. Then he asked about the boys. I didn't tell him much about my life except that I never stayed away in the US for more than three weeks at a time – whatever the deal – as I needed them to have security.

'The Jews were here in medieval times. They brought skill and brilliance to this city. They were the craftsmen, doctors, jewellers, lawyers and teachers, and brought wealth and quality of life to the whole province. It was known as the Golden Age. The Jewish mystics in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were born here.' He described them as the heart of Cabbala, the secret

teaching involving Jewish mysticism and theosophy. 'I want to restore this, our heritage, and build a Jewish site, a centre of Cabbala.'

He took me back to the Roman stone wall opposite his mother's apartment on the carrer de la Força. All I could see was what had always been there, a high stone wall, part of this ancient narrow street continuing up the hill without a gap until out of sight there was a stairway leading to a drinking fountain with an animal's head. He tapped the wall. 'There is nothing behind here.'

I said I'd never thought about it one way or the other.

'No one has,' he said. 'It's never been questioned. Everyone thinks behind this wall is the next passageway and those buildings up there.' He pointed to some visible walls. 'They have no ability for mathematics in this town. And behind here ...' he walked further up the Calle Forsa and slapped more stone. '... is an eighth-century street. And I will open it up.'

For once I had no questions. Except one: 'Do you still love me?'

He took me back down to the arch at the bottom of the street and we curved under it, through the tunnel, up the stairs around the crumbling wall as we had earlier that day. The entrance to the wasteland was through a broken piece of wall covered with high, tough weeds. The ground was full of rubbish, dirt, dust, weeds and was used by tramps, the homeless, prostitutes and ownerless dogs. The wall along the carrer de la Força kept it private. Who would want to be here anyway? He said occasionally there was the sound of digging in the night. 'They came here, an old man and his son, to dig for the treasure of the Jews.'

He pointed to a high stone building with an open terrace at the top, and above I could see a timber-beamed underside of the flat roof. 'That is one of the oldest and best houses in Girona. It belongs to Maria Carmen Aragon, the most cultivated woman in the city.'

I thought 'best' was doubtful. The smell rising in the heat from the desolate area was terrible.

To one side, trees hid broken steps to a lower level of further desolation, paved with uneven stones. The rest of the surrounding stone buildings in disrepair seemed closed and dark, with an occasional shuttered window in a smashed façade beyond a wall.

'This was a flourishing area of twenty-four houses and a courtyard.'

What was left of them was hard to define. This wasteland had been the courtyard where the great Rabbinic scholar Nachmanides had, through Cabbala, pierced reality as we know it. José said the Jews were expelled in 1492 and the area had been closed by order of the Church ever since.

'How did you find it?'

He paused. 'I lived opposite as a child but did not know it was there. There were stories, more legends, passed down through generations.'

So I asked how he would restore it, and he said by raising money. And he mentioned a sum which I thought was high for the municipality.

'Oh, no, they're not having this. It will be privately owned.' He sat in the dust and held a piece of stone, rolling it around in his hand. 'This is what it is.'

'Is?'

'What they're all looking for. The mystery. It's here.'

He seemed older in an obvious way, but there was something else as he looked at me. I thought it might be sorrow. He was still absolutely beautiful.

I first saw José years ago on the stairs of the old Residencia Internacional hotel. I looked at him, he at me, then we both carried on walking, he up to the bar and I to the main door. It didn't seem too much to me, but then I wasn't aware in those days just how important a look can be. I travelled further south for more adventures with my friend Beryl, and he did whatever he did which I didn't find out till much later. Beryl and I were fifteen, it was May 1955, and we had all our lives ahead of us. We took the roads as they came, as long as things were new and different to where we'd been. That's all we asked.

Girona, a pre-Roman city about forty miles inland from the Costa Brava, had a vast old quarter with a much-visited cathedral, Arab baths and monumental churches. Bells rang across this forest of stone every fifteen minutes, day and night. The cobbled alleys and crumbling stairways, the deep arches leading to unexpected courtyards, were all stone, medieval or pre-Roman. Parts of the original city wall still stood as clumps of stone covered with weeds and thousands of years old. The buildings, huge buttresses of Roman craft, leaned together across the strip of street leaving only a shine of brilliant sky. The stone made the town echo and enhanced all sound. Only the bells were free as they tolled high above the buildings. Girona holds on to its atmosphere and makes sure the past is there always, solid, unconquered by decay. It was said the stones had a magnetism that drew certain people back time and time again. I believe it. Carcassonne has the same legend and I've heard it's to do with the ley lines. At certain points across the earth the energy builds up and creates a pull, a pulse, and in these places unusual and mystical things can happen.

Beryl and I were Bohemians and wore rope Roman sandals you could buy in London's Charing Cross Road for three and sixpence, and very tight, black drainpipe trousers. Our black sleeveless tops were lopsided, handmade, falling apart. Our nails were painted black and we wore beautifully applied white lipstick. We dressed the same as we did when dancing all night to trad jazz at Cy Laurie's club in Soho, or Sidney Bechet's in Paris. In Girona that first time, the Spanish had never seen anything like it. They hadn't seen many foreigners. Tourism hadn't even begun. The women threw round prickly things that stuck to our hair, the kids, stones, and the men, glances long and curious. They were more concerned with what was underneath our extraordinary clothes. Beryl wore gold hoop earrings, mine were dangling silvered chandeliers. We put on a huge amount of make-up – the longest task of the day was getting that on. Brigitte Bardot kiss-curls covered our ears, and our hair was streaked with gold dust that in certain climates turned green. In the evening we wore white fisherman's sweaters reaching our knees,

also bought in Charing Cross Road. And the obligatory black duffel coats, the pockets filled with make-up and Coty perfume. Beryl was indeed beautiful, which made being her friend difficult. I didn't compete, even at fifteen I knew that was a mistake, but I certainly tried to be always at my best. I wanted to be a gypsy. My father didn't consider that a career, but I knew I'd travel. I had a great love of life in those days.

We came from Albany Park, in Kent. No description really fitted that place, so housing-estate will do. Most of it was pre-Second World War, a lot of bungalows, and there were no scandals except what Beryl and I provided with our appearance. I was dying for the fabulous, the superb. Before long we hitched a lift to Barcelona and then south to Casteldefels, which consisted then of two hotels. We didn't eat much because we didn't have any money, but we were filled with a lovely shivery excitement. We danced as we breathed – if there weren't clubs and dancehalls, then in the streets. In Paris people had thrown us money, which was better than working in bars, modelling and sometimes begging. And we had the big one on our side – youth – but we didn't even consider that. Ageing, like death, was a process that didn't happen to us.

Over the next few months, I sometimes thought of Girona, its strong skyline with the cathedral and the church of St Felix, and oddly an ordinary house with a rather grand tower that stuck up incongruously amidst the ancient buildings. They said it belonged to a Frenchwoman.

When I set foot in Girona the second time I knew I was where I should be. It took the second arrival to capture me, and once that happened I had no desire to move again.

They were lighting fires at the edge of the old quarter, and the sky was violet and flashing with huge flat stars. The sun was up there too, setting behind the last bridge in a blaze of scarlet rage. The narrow streets were full of music, perfume, the smell of wood smoke. The church bells chimed as though for a celebration and all the lights of the city came on, hundreds of yellow eyes. It was a true welcome.

Beryl said we should work in a club. We'd say we were eighteen, so where was the problem? There was no language difficulty – not pouring drinks. Our Spanish was limited. *Guapa* – beautiful, *dinero* – money, *rubia* – blonde, *morena* – dark. That way we missed a lot of indelicate talk.

Cal Ros, the smart restaurant excelling in regional delicacies, was already filling up. It was a clamorous night, everybody on the street, the bars full. There was a definite feeling of fiesta and yet it was just another evening for them.

We turned into the alley beside the Cal Ros restaurant and two men came towards us. One was Luis, a cathedral guide I'd met the previous time, the other shorter one was his friend.

We exchanged names, shook hands. The friend wore a blue shirt and dark patterned pullover. He had a persuasive voice and even on such an insignificant occasion his speech was salted with irony. He was alive in every part of him, the opposite of anything I'd encountered in Albany Park, and he wasn't afraid to show it. He said there was a film director in town and maybe Beryl and I should apply for roles. After all it was a coincidence. The director arrives, then we arrive. Coincidences should never be dismissed. The next week he'd be shooting a sequence up near the cathedral. The director's name was Jean Cocteau.

'He wants a ballet dancer.'

'That's me,' I said immediately.

'Yes, you look as though you should be a ballet dancer, but can you dance? Luis for example is a born writer but has never written a word.' He clapped his hands, dismissing mere talent.

Luis spoke fluent English, and his friend bits of everything. He laughed a lot, but it was attractive. When we said good-bye I knew where I'd seen him. He was the man on the stairs of the Residencia Internacional hotel.

Suddenly all the radios played the haunting Spanish song that we thought was a flamenco chart buster. It was in fact an advertising jingle. The music was full of the melancholy and desire that the south conjured up. I thought it announced the beginning of a huge and deathly passion. How right I was.

Before the Romans arrived, Girona was an Iberian trading centre. The first known inhabitants, at least 5000 years ago, were Iberians living in the Catalan country village of Ullastret. The Phoenicians settled in Girona province, leaving artefacts and sacrificial stones. The Greeks left a settlement along the Catalan coast named ‘Ampurias’, a Spanish translation of the Greek name ‘Empuries’. Then came the Romans, who built a large part of what is now the old quarter. Charlemagne marched into the city and left his influence, as did Napoleon III. Girona won the Moorish invasion, but lost against Franco in the Civil War.

They all left something.

Believed to have begun as a simple pagan temple for the Romans, the cathedral is now predominantly Gothic. Near the altar is Charlemagne’s chair. A museum houses masterpieces from every century, including the much-visited ‘Tapestry of the Creation’. With its disproportionately large nave, the fact the building stands up at all is a miracle.

And there were other settlements not yet rediscovered, but their presence added to the force of the atmosphere.

Perhaps because so many cults and religions have flourished there, no one of them is remembered exceptionally. Historical finds occur frequently, giving evidence of much older civilizations. Girona celebrates its past with fiestas, legends, ritual and theatre. The only sign of what has been so important there, and then completely forgotten, is the stones.

I think Beryl and I, as we walked on that magical evening through these unimaginable streets, sensed the imprint of some of this, although we knew nothing of its outer knowledgeable form and could not have put any of it into words.

They remembered us with pleasure at the Residencia Internacional hotel, which couldn’t be said for a lot of places we revisited. Manolo, the night concierge, got out the drinks and Eva, the cleaning woman, ran down the stairs to welcome us as though it was an occasion. It was the first time I’d felt important anywhere.

‘Who needs a St Christopher medal?’ said Beryl. ‘This place has all the luck we need.’

And then José was there, and asked if we were runaways. He looked as though he could handle a drama. I explained our career was travelling, and that we were making our way to Bohemia in mid-Europe.

‘Why?’

‘Because we’re Bohemians.’

‘I’m sure Bohemians dance exquisitely. There’s a fiesta tonight. I’ll take you.’

Eva told me later that José thought I was twelve. He did ask how we had got our passports so young. I’d persuaded my father that Beryl and I were going to do a language course in Paris at a youth centre. It was the only way we could get passports under age. I was the one with the ideas, and Beryl went along with them and shared the consequences.

For the fiesta we wore skirts, but that didn’t mean we were dressed right. The skirts were tight, with slits at the side. When the wolf whistles started, so did the insults. The women thought we were whores, the men hoped we were. All that quietened down when José caught up with us. He commanded respect.

The chirp of insects, the delicious breeze from the south, the distant music, the Mediterranean night, thrilled me to the bone. All the joyous things were there. Life promised me that night I’d be happy.

We learned to dance the *paso doble* and the traditional *sardana* – both the ‘long’ and the ‘short’. Lamb was the speciality of the region and we had cutlets, salad, and a caramel custard with a burnt sugar top. We ate plenty because we were never sure when we would eat again. Luis was there and he gave me an old piece of sculpture he’d found in the garden behind the cathedral. It was flat, smooth and brown with horns and was apparently an ancient animal head. José gave him a knife and he etched my name and the date on the stone. Luis was well in with the cathedral and had asked permission to open one of its properties as a bar, selling postcards and reproductions of the cathedral’s treasures. Then when he’d got enough money he’d write full-time. José wasn’t exactly quiet but I got no impression of what he did, who he was.

On the way back I saw the Catalan trees like up-flung umbrellas, blue grey in the night light. The road, a mere strip, was hard and warm, and Beryl and I walked without shoes. All of it was beautiful. I wasn’t in love that night, I just felt part of life, flowing with it, full to the brim. The champagne helped, and José was no slouch at pouring a drink.

‘If only it could stay like this,’ said Luis suddenly.

‘If only,’ said José.

We walked together, the four of us – harmonious, good friends now, at our best.