Chapter 1

Like dust before a whirlwind, sparks swirled around the densely packed square of Toulouse. They flared into tiny fires on scattered bits of straw. Bystanders nervously stamped the crackling flames to ashes with their rough boots. Twelve fires, officially kindled, stirred by the wind, rushed up their piles of tinder and up the oil-soaked bodies—twelve fires represented all the hazard the city could risk on a dry June afternoon. Angry voices added a rainless thunder to the dry wind. The crowd's hostility and fear seemed to fan the flames.

"Well might the inhabitants of Toulouse worry about fires. Drought had struck the land. The roofs of houses whose owners could not afford slate or tile were covered with thatch that had grown ruffled and brittle under the hot sun of southern France. And all the south of France seemed burned more than usual for the season. Dry and barren lay the land under the oppression of the interdict which Pope Innocent III had placed on the County of Toulouse.

Leaves from the scattered trees rattled against the paving stones, seeming to echo the restless anger, the churning frustration of the people. Faces and voices in the crowd betrayed the apprehension trembling in the hearts of the onlookers at the first public burning of heretics in Languedoc.

Amid the crowd, a boy stretched in his brown tunic and loose leggings, trying to see the terrible spectacle. The first smell of burning clothing and scorched flesh had made him hide his nose in the sweaty, oily scent of live people pressing around him.

But now he must look again. Some irresistible force drove him to stand on tiptoe to see for himself. Suddenly the wind caught the flames, swirling a column of smoke high into the air.

Walter Murat trembled, sensing how little separated was his own family from the fate of the twelve dissenters bound to the stakes in the square. True, only one of the men was a Waldensian. True, the other eleven were members of the city's Cathari settlement. But Waldenses would suffer now with all the others rejecting the claims of the Roman Church and its ruler. And now that Count Raymond of Toulouse had succumbed to pressure and sworn allegiance to the Catholic faith, promising to banish all heretics from his domain, their hope of help from him had vanished.

Walter looked away from the flames, sickened. In his mind he compared Count Raymond with those who had just died at the stake.

Raymond had changed his religion because of political pressures. The twelve men had given their lives for what they believed. No interdict, no excommunication, issued by the pope had weakened their determination. They knew that the God they served was not a puppet in the hands of human authorities.

Soon there was not much left to see. A wave of relief that it was over flooded Walter. And yet, strangely, he felt proud, proud of Brother Marcus and his faithfulness.

Suddenly the dry wind seemed cold, and Walter thrust his hands deep into his sleeves and drew his arms close about his body. Was it his imagination, or did he see suspicion in the eyes of several shabbily dressed men to the left? They kept watching him. Did the old priest nearby guess about his connections with the Waldensians? Walter felt his back stiffen, and he stared straight ahead at the three officials pushing their way through the crowd to the stone steps in front of the church.

The crowd grew silent as one officer beat with his sword on the decorative stone.

"Let it be known that any persons showing sympathy to heretics will share in their condemnation," he read from a document in his hands. "Neither food nor lodging nor comfort in flight must be offered to the enemies of the Church. The Count has ordered in this decree given in the year 1209, June 17, that anyone following heretical beliefs must leave his territory. And by the power given him by our lord, the pope, the legate has ordered that lands and possessions of heretics will be given to those who destroy them or cause them to flee from Toulouse."

Walter glanced quickly around him. He could feel the hysteria of fear sweeping the crowd with an instant chill.

"Listen, my good folks, to what we say!" the soldier shouted as the people murmured their reactions. "We must rid our province of the disease of unbelief that eats away the fatness of the land. We must destroy the wolf which snatches lambs from the true fold, lest the flock be scattered and devoured by these children of the devil."

Walter saw a nobleman climbing up to join the other officials. "Let those of us in authority add our strength to the voice of the Church and our King Philip of France," he said. "Let us deliver up to the courts those condemned by the Holy Roman Church. And when they have been destroyed, our land will again flourish under the blessing of God and of His vicar on earth."

Somewhere in the crowd a cheer began. Walter sensed a false note in the voices, and he knew that hundreds of people responded only out of fear that someone might mark them as heretics.

Soon the crowd began to scatter. Walter joined a group of peasants shuffling down the narrow street to the city gate. Slowly they trudged along the paved road, past the Count's castle, past his private estates, past the scattered villages.

Looking at their somber faces, Walter wondered what it must be like to be a peasant, bound to the land with no chance of change and no freedom to build an independent life. Suddenly he stopped in the road. "Why, I, too, am a peasant," he thought, glancing at his own rough clothing and wooden shoes. Did not people call the Waldenses the Poor Men of Lyons? Had not his father and others of the Brethren chosen to give all their goods to the oppressed and suffering and left their homes in order to spread the gospel?

Now with their own hands, men like his father - who had been wealthy - worked for the simple needs of their families. Walter knew his father and mother often faced troubles as desperate as the peasants did during drought or famine. But somehow he had never felt deprived and helpless. He had never felt before that he was one of them.

But the large homes, the riches, the fine clothing, and the possibility of human honor were far away. With the threat of banishment hanging over them, his family shared the weakness of the poor. They would receive no more consideration than the masses of serfs at the mercy of their landlords.

"I, too, am a peasant," Walter told himself again. And with new sympathy he looked at the sorrowful faces, the stooping shoulders, of his companions.

What were they feeling now? Did they secretly wish to be free from the burdens the Church had put on them? Did they hunger for the comfort of God's promises? Maybe some of them didn't even understand who God was? The landlords had treated them like work animals, barely feeding them, and pushing them to labor as much as their bodies would permit.

"I wonder," Walter thought, "do they even dream that Someone loves them and is planning salvation for them? planning a life for them far better than even that of the nobility?" Suddenly he felt a thrill as he realized what he was thinking. "I must be more than a believer," he thought. "I must be a doer of Christ's words. God is calling me in a

special way. I must be a preacher of the Word if I am to be fully obedient to God."

Cautiously he fell into step with an old man wearing a leather jerkin and sabots so worn that they rattled like thin nutshells. "We witnessed an awful sight today," Walter said, pausing to see the effect of his words on the old man.

"Ah!" muttered his companion, his gaze fixed on the dusty ground beneath him. "Ah, yes." He glanced up quickly, then hurried his lagging steps.

"I have never seen men burned before," Walter continued. "It is the first time in Languedoc, I hear. But did you notice how much courage the heretics had?"

The old man's eyes met his, and a suppressed fire flashed. "They showed no remorse for their beliefs. They must have a peace within that makes even death sweet."

"What are their beliefs? Do you know?" Walter asked.

The old man shook his head. "I have met only one of the Poor Men of Lyons. But I do know that such burnings are sure to spread. When lords begin to burn loyal subjects because they separate from the corruption of the Church, no good can come of it."

"Then you don't approve of the Church's actions?" Immediately Walter wondered if he had said too much. The old man shrugged.

"He is more afraid than I am to speak out today," Walter concluded. He cleared his throat. Now was his chance to bring up the idea of studying with the old man. "Though parting from the wickedness of the Church might mean death by burning, the peace of God is worth every sacrifice. The Scriptures can give you God's peace to be your own, my friend," he told the old peasant.

The lined face brightened. "Scriptures, you say? But I cannot read. Look at me - a simple man. I do not even understand the Latin of the mass I hear each week."

Walter reached to grip the calloused hand. "You do not need to know Latin. I will notice where you turn in to your home. Another evening I will come to read the Scriptures to you if you wish."

The hardened hand tightened around Walter's fingers. Then the youth slipped ahead a few hurried paces as though looking for someone else in the crowd. But he watched the old man carefully and saw him shuffle up the lane to a cottage at the end of the next village.

The words of a Waldensian hymn ran through his mind, and the grimness of the day's experience in the city seemed far away and unreal.

Men still desired to know about God. And with the Scriptures in his own hands, he could satisfy their hunger.

"But you must be careful, Walter," he reminded himself. "The very rocks and walls listen for heresy these days. And once a Waldensian is discovered, he has little chance to witness. Nowadays, a heretic is a heretic. Albigensians, Humiliati, Paulicians, Cathari, Poor Men of Lyons - it makes no difference now. We will all suffer together."

Walter knew that it would be difficult for the Church, even with Count Raymond on its side now, to dispossess all the dissenters. As he neared his own village of St. Isabelle, he scanned the hills ahead. Across the south of France, all the way to the Pyrenees in the southwest and to the Alps toward Italy, Albigensian communities crowded one against another. And many people in high position in Languedoc were known to be believers in the Cathari religion. Rumors had circulated that the Cathari had initiated Count Raymond's own sister into their most secret rites.

At last Walter reached home. The village seemed unusually quiet. Walter swung open the door of his cottage. Chilly darkness poured out, for the hearth fire had died down. His mother was not at home.

After a moment Walter decided to check with their neighbor, Madame Arnaud. Maybe his mother had left a message for him with her.

Madame Arnaud came to her door, tears streaming down her thin cheeks, her hands trembling. "Come in, child," she murmured, wiping her eyes. "Your mother has been with the family of Brother Marcus. Ah, they need her comfort, I know."

The neighbor woman fluttered about her fire, fanning embers that would not flare up on the new wood she had just put in. A blackened pot swung dizzily as her unsteady hands moved it closer to the heat.

"Do not bother, Madame," Walter said. "I am not hungry."

Madame Arnaud turned abruptly, obviously relieved. "I am not hungry either," she said. "I have heard that the legate has sent out officers to search for the leaders of our Brethren. Who knows what might happen next if—"

She paused, and Walter heard a stirring on the graveled walk outside. Someone was running up it. A hesitant rapping sounded at the door. Both of them sucked in their breath at once. Walter knew that Madame Arnaud was as frightened as he was.

A second later her daughter Mathilde slipped into the room and closed the door quickly behind her. "The whole village is talking," she

started, then paused to catch her breath. "There is rumor that some of the legate's men are asking questions around the manor. More than one person we know would be ready to testify against us if given a promise of remission for all his sins."

"But we are law-abiding citizens!" Madame Arnaud exclaimed.

Walter couldn't help smiling. Her indignant protest had no meaning now.

Instantly she realized the futility of her statement. She twisted her hands in her skirt. "Alas! The only law that men are required to obey these days is the law of the Church!"

"Do not fret so, Mother," Mathilde cautioned. "Of all times when we must keep our wits, now is the time."

"If only the men would stop their preaching for a while!" Madame Arnaud thought aloud. "Whenever they preach to anyone, they attract attention. The Church has forbidden all preaching except by its clergy."

"We cannot—" Walter started to speak.

"But there is so much hatred, so much jealousy," Madame Arnaud interrupted him. "We have prospered more than our neighbors have. Today they have burned our leader. Tomorrow many will come like vultures to have a part in our ruin! What prevents them from burning all of us tomorrow?" she demanded in a high-pitched voice. "You children do not realize the danger! You will suffer along with your parents, or the Church will take you away from us forever!"

Walter drew in his breath. "We are not children, Madame. I am fourteen, and Mathilde is nearly fifteen years old. We are old enough to share whatever comes to our families."

"They may force you to recant!"

"Ah, Mother, you misjudge us." Trying to reassure her, Mathilde encircled her mother with her arms.

How little Madame Arnaud was like his own mother, Walter mused. He wondered how Mathilde's mother would bear up under the persecutions ahead.

"If it were not for your father, Mathilde—" Madame Arnaud did not finish what she had started to say.

A disturbance down the alley of their village interrupted Walter's thoughts. He hurried to the door and peered out. His scalp tingled with what he saw. Quickly he turned to Mathilde, struggled to keep the terror from his voice, and exclaimed, "Armed men are searching the miller's cottage, and a band of Church deputies is coming this way."

"The Scriptures!" moaned Madame Arnaud. "Alas, my husband has forbidden copies of Scripture in his chest. Quickly, children! Help me destroy them. We must burn them at once!"

"Burn them?" Walter cried. "Not our precious Scriptures that have taken weeks to copy! We must not destroy them!"

"But if they find them—" Her voice ended in a whisper.

She had already dropped to her knees before the chest, rummaging through her husband's papers.

Walter paused only a moment. The valuable Scripture copies were not the only evidence in the house that would convict them. Even without them, their families would still be in danger.

"Give them to me!" The authority in his voice surprised him. "Men are starving for God's Word."

"I will not have them in my house. They will send us all to the stake! Into the fire with them, Mathilde. Think of your father. Think of your future!"

Mathilde shuffled the manuscripts into a tight bundle and tied a stout cord about them. "Walter, you will be able to get away before the deputies get here," she whispered, thrusting the package into Walter's hands.

He shoved them underneath his tunic, feeling a lump tighten in his throat. He nodded. "The window?" Mathilde opened the shutters on the rear window and looked in both directions. "I don't see anyone in the orchards or gardens. Run by the pasturelands. God be with you!"

Madame Arnaud stepped in his way. "But I promised your mother— What shall I tell your mother? How will I answer for your safety?"

"My mother will trust me in God's care," Walter answered. "God will preserve His Word." Quickly he scrambled out the low window.