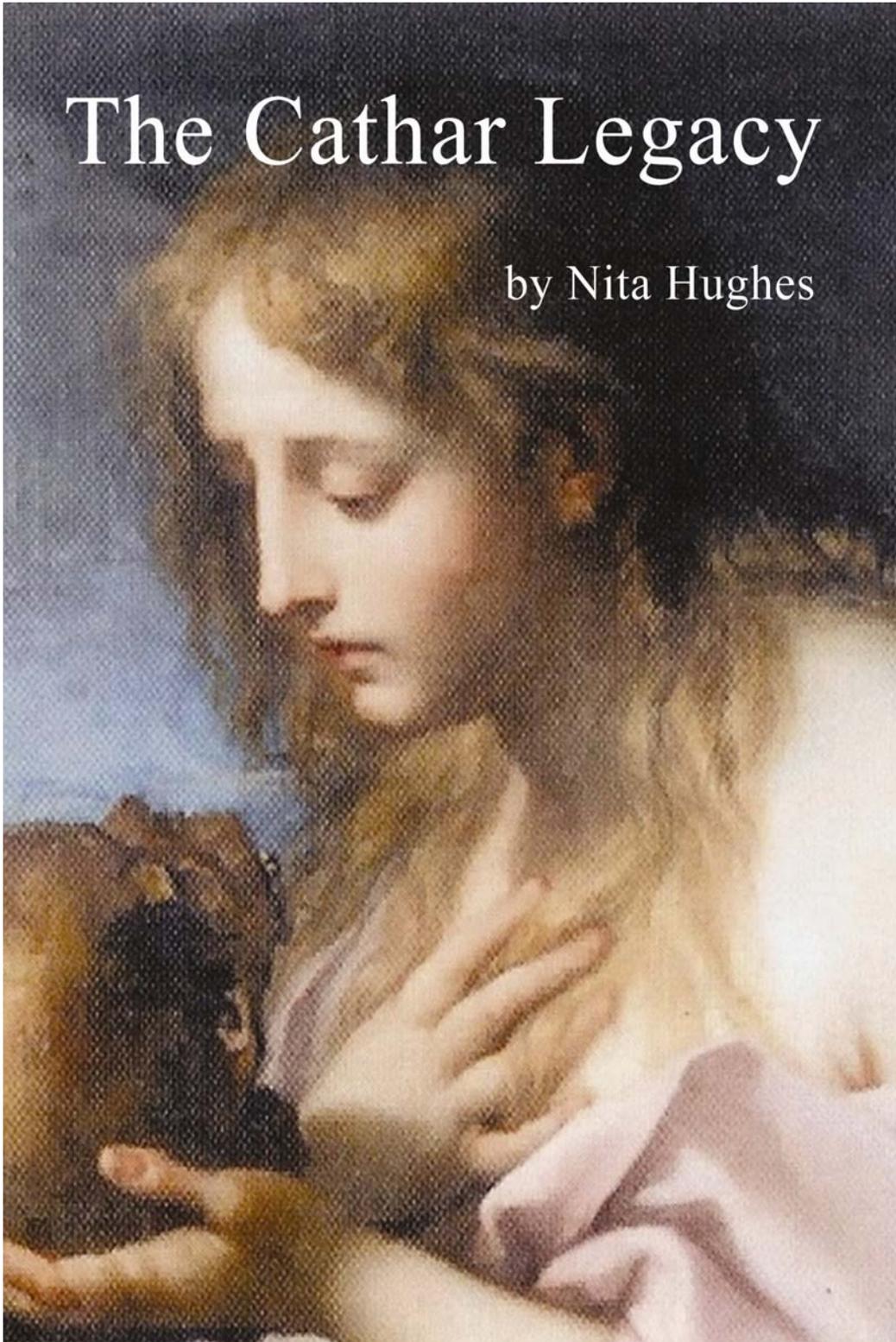


The Cathar Legacy

by Nita Hughes



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ISBN: 1-4116-6430-2

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ONE



Mon Dieu! Let it be so! Pierre de Lahille's silent mantra strengthened with every cautious step. An icy chill ran down his spine at the magnitude of their hidden treasure, described in the records of the Inquisition as: "...so powerful as to transform the world."

Shouldering a hunting rifle which was too massive for his diminutive form, he glanced around before nearing his destination. One hand shielded the misty glare of the watery-gray dawn as he scrutinized the landscape. As with much of France's Department of Aude, profuse outcrops of rock, like the granite ribs of massive dinosaurs, dotted a land barren of all but an isolated tree, thorny shrubs and silent hills. Pierre remained motionless until he felt assured that no human, no movement, no sounds, nothing but the sigh of his own breath penetrated the area surrounding his sanctuary.

Before his final approach, he turned, allowing a smug grin of satisfaction in acknowledgement of his tactics. His careful steps atop brambles and brush effectively obscured his footprints. He shrugged as if to dismiss the irony in assuming such tactics. *How was it, he wondered, that a quiet research scientist, an aging academic whose physical pursuits rarely ventured beyond turning the pages of a book or petting his arthritic cat, should be traipsing the countryside like Inspector Poirot on a dangerous mission?*

Entering a stand of shrubbery, he made his way through the spindly trees and knotted tangle of berry canes. Careful not to break a twig, he parted what appeared to be an impenetrable thicket which concealed a pile of boulders. Exercising great care, he moved the largest one, giving thanks for his anemic frame as he lowered himself into the stygian depths of his secret sanctuary.

As he landed on the floor of the cave, he shed his cumbersome raincoat and his gun. In spite of the damp chill of the cavern, rivulets of sweat, like stalactites weeping, dripped relentlessly down his face, triggered by the realization that, God willing, his discovery could result in the world's most critical turning point. So honored was he to be part of such an undertaking, that he rarely allowed himself time to dwell on the inherent dangers.

He shook his head, as if to release a disquieting uneasiness, stopping for a moment to aim his flashlight at all sides of the cavern. Seeing nothing but the granite folds of millennia of geologic upheavals which had formed impenetrable fortress walls, he felt reassured. His breathing slowed to match the silence of centuries, confident that, even in an area known to be honey-combed with caves, no one knew of this unique subterranean universe.

Its location, deep in the south of France in a section of Aude not yet given over to grapevines, was secluded enough that even long time residents of neighboring villages hadn't discovered it. To avoid exciting any curiosity, Pierre had taken great care to disguise his wanderings by carrying a hunting rifle and bringing home proof of his pseudo-avocation.

Diligence was second nature to him, honed to such a degree that he knew his colleagues described him as anal. His focus on precision, however, had always assured success in all he undertook. Today was different. The knowledge of how close he was to unveiling something phenomenal had eroded his certainty that he had prepared for every possible contingency. A nature so long imbedded in scholarly deliberation, leading to precise conclusions, obviously hadn't provided immunity to the corrosive impact of fear. Hyperventilating, his clammy hands underscored his apprehension.

To quell such emotions, he turned his thoughts to his team, letting out a sigh of relief as he anticipated their excitement when he disclosed his discovery. Comparisons of his manuscript with the other three manuscripts—one per team-member—should provide the litmus test as to whether his discovery was the linchpin that would unlock their message. Much of the text of his manuscript had seemed meaningless until he found a tracery of the word “light” threaded throughout.

Thinking of his teammates surprised reaction to such ‘enlightenment’ brought each of their personalities to mind. He smiled, remembering the skepticism he had felt at such disparate individuals ever having come together. Dana Palmer, feisty American photographer; Eric Taylor, reserved British writer; Professor William Marty, respected French historian; and Veronique Alexandre, brilliant archeological researcher at the University of Toulouse. On the surface, all had certain logical credentials. But logic had played no part in their discovery of the manuscripts.

An explosive guffaw escaped as it dawned on Pierre that, as earth-shattering as the news of the treasure would be, the treasure hunters' provenance would be equally beyond belief. Should they— could they— reveal their thirteenth century commitment to return in the twenty-first century to unearth the secret of the Cathars? Pierre's reclusive soul hoped they would never have to explain how they had succeeded when six hundred years of the Catholic Church's zealous efforts to find the treasure had come to naught. Revealing what they found and who found it would stretch the limits of rational explanation.

Certainly it had required more than logic to erode his resistance to accepting what Dana described as “woo-woo”. Ultimately each, in their own way, had experienced a dramatic recall of their Thirteenth Century lives as Cathars. A Christian group— whose practices emulated the teachings of Christ— the Cathars were labeled “heretics” by the Catholic Church and destroyed.

Each of the team members had vowed to protect the treasure—then and now. Ultimately, the serendipity of their team’s reunion and their improbable success in finding the treasure had extinguished Pierre’s lingering skepticism.

So perilous had been their discovery of the four scrolls that, once achieved, their elation had known no bounds. An initial impulse of: “wow, let’s get this into the hands of the world’s best scientists fast,” was paramount until Veronique extinguished their excitement. “Do you really believe, now that we have possession of the manuscripts, that we, or they, are in any less danger?”

Pierre shivered, not from the impact of the cavern, but from the chilling images of the Inquisition. Given the Church’s 600 year vendetta to eradicate heretics and locate their treasure, what methods would they use now to possess it? Fear threatened to overcome him at the recognition that, rather than a folie a deux, theirs was a folie a cinq: the belief that five people could prevail against the power of such an adversary. The Vatican’s massive resources, unlimited wealth and powerful alignments created such a formidable foe as to make any optimism on the part of their team seem juvenile.

Pierre felt his esophagus tighten, sealing away his breath at the knowledge that they had no alternative but to proceed with a quest that went beyond time and beyond rationality. As a gasp broke free, his airflow resumed and his thoughts sought a more reassuring avenue as he began a review of the safeguards they had chosen. .

Soon after the discovery of the four scrolls, as each closely examined the one assigned to them, they met with the same stumbling block: a complete inability to decipher meaning from their individual scroll. Pierre smiled as he recalled that it was Dana, the least analytical of the team, who felt the secret lay hidden within an enigmatic combination of all four manuscripts. Relief grew as they acknowledged her insight, but so did frustration. Heads shook in bewilderment as they labored to discover the mysterious lynchpin needed to decipher the manuscript’s treasure.

It was this key that Pierre felt certain he had discovered. His “Eureka” moment had taken place as he’d recalled an old manuscript a scientist in Scotland had sent him. As was true for most ancient parchments, it turned out to be a “palimpsest”, a parchment which had been overwritten by subsequent scholars eager to reuse the precious linen. Reading through the lines, so to speak, had painstakingly revealed the skeleton of many layers of overwritten parchment disguising the ancient wisdom of the Scotsman’s original Druid text.

Immediately Pierre’s thoughts had turned to: *Could their manuscripts have been overwritten, either randomly or with purpose? Might the connection come to light through a careful filtering of all overlaid lines? Would such close scrutiny—ideally with the aid of a particle accelerator—clearly reveal a message able to change the world?*

His team’s dictum to keep their discovery hidden, limited his willingness to request the use of a particle accelerator. But, once again, it was a comment of Dana’s that prompted him to consider something that he did have access to: the use of digital cameras, processing techniques, ultraviolet and infrared filters which could give some idea of whether or not such layering enshrouded the message. Even a limited application of such techniques to his manuscript alone was enough to hint at the enormity of the message contained in the combined scrolls.

Pierre’s shoulders lifted and fell with each deeply drawn breath as he contemplated the bombshell the four manuscripts would reveal. Getting the four

manuscripts together, however, would present a daunting task, given the teams' agreement that having it fall into the wrong hands was far too dangerous a risk. For now, each team-member had chosen a failsafe hiding place for "their" manuscript. Shining his flashlight behind him, each shadow deepened his awareness of how foolhardy such measures may prove.

And yet, destiny having dictated their success thus far convinced him of the logic that they would prevail. Girding his resolve, Pierre entered the largest cavern of the cave. His scrutiny reassured him that this vast space appeared to be a dead-end. It actually had a couple of rather obvious auxiliary tunnels which, should any pursuer investigate, would lead to dead-ends. Only he knew the cave's secrets. He moved to the far right-hand corner of the large cave and, with great effort, pushed away a large slab of stone that had completely concealed a miniscule crawlspace. Claustrophobic in dimension, entry could barely be traversed even by someone as slight as he. He recalled how painstaking his careful stocking of supplies—digital cameras, lenses, microscopes, notebooks, and lanterns—had been.

By far his most difficult task had been the delicate unfolding of the fragile parchment in order to create a digitized copy. Being able to examine the text on his computer had allowed for easier and repeated examination without destroying the original manuscript. Even so, he smiled, he couldn't resist a periodic examination of the original, as much to assure him that it was real as to inspire him to persevere with his soul's mission—to translate it for the world.

Repeating his practiced technique, he extended his flashlight safely in front of him as he crawled, belly flat against the ground, pushing his hunter's case carefully so as not to injure the laptop computer it contained. He knew by now the location of even the smallest protrusion of rock. He continued for approximately seven yards straight ahead, then one turn to the left and a drop down of about four feet to a flat area where he could stand. His flashlight illuminated a small cave within a cave, its circumference measuring approximately seven by ten feet, with a ceiling height of little more than five feet. He trusted that, should anyone ever discover the tunnel, none would explore an entry only navigable by one as diminutive as.... He smiled, remembering Dana's nickname for him: "Yoda". She confessed that, from the moment she met him, she thought of him as the elfish character in the Star Wars' films. Her comment was softened as she had assured him that it wasn't just his stature, but her awareness that within resided strength, wisdom and an element of eternal endurance.

He was glad Dana couldn't see how fragile such qualities felt as he anxiously darted his flashlight across the ground, searching for any sign that an intruder had penetrated his inner sanctum. The shallow coating of pristine dust restored his confidence. Pierre moved to the right hand edge of the confining space, an area he'd designated as his "office". He grasped a shard of rock, lifted it, and swept away the rubble and dust that covered a miniscule opening to his "vault", directly below. He gently drew out the second hunter's case which rested within. Empty of a brace of pheasants, it held an airtight canister which protected mysteries more seductive than any Holy Grail. He withdrew his manuscript from its enclosure, his gestures as loving as an embrace. It had become a ritual that, before he began work on the translation of the computerized version, he would bless the actual document, its mysterious author and his soul's special vow to protect it.

As he let his gaze linger, Pierre thought of how many so-called ancient treasures he had examined in his time. Most had turned out to be, at best, worthwhile relics of the past, now exhibited in the world's museums. His stare held a mix of adoration and bewilderment at the awareness that his manuscript, united with the other three, would reveal a message of far greater value than that of the Rosetta stone. The equipment he had sequestered beneath the canister facilitated a limited scrutiny of the barely legible text, a curious mix of Greek blended with something more akin to astrological signs. He sighed with satisfaction as he reconfirmed that elements within the text may lead to the manuscript's long-sought translation breakthrough. .

However, a complete confirmation of the message seemed to require juxtaposition with the other three manuscripts. But how, he wondered? Having all four persons and four scrolls assembled in the same place would prove a perfect target for their enemies. He sighed, remembering that the others had agreed to keep theirs under lock and key until he had completed his painstaking examination. What his manuscript offered thus far were tantalizing hints of the treasure's power along with their team's limitations.

He had started with his limited access to scientific methods of analysis, exploring a method of accomplishing even a basic translation of his manuscript's text. Stymied he'd turned to more esoteric methods—Gematria and other alchemical formula. His recent "ah ha" came at the confirmation that, to decipher the message, they would need all four manuscripts. He was eager to validate this theory.

As he opened his computer, inserted his crucial floppy disc and stared, his fear that it all might be a dream evaporated. His resounding "Yes!" filled the space so emphatically that he expected a rain of dust dislodged by the echo. The teasing footprints of references to 'light' were a clear indication; but they couldn't be fully understood without the other manuscripts. He scrupulously returned the scroll to its cylinder, relief at this first clue flooding him after weeks of muttering: "Merde!"

His cat-at-the-cream smile faded as his flashlight dimmed. Fading light or not, Pierre made certain the manuscript was well hidden and his disc and computer reinserted into its bubble wrap jacket inside the hunting case. He had completely disguised the entry, precise in replacing a jury-rigged trigger mechanism which guaranteed that, should anyone penetrate his miniscule sanctuary, their skeleton would remain to guard it. Confident of his manuscript's safety, he inched his way back through the narrow passageway, his thoughts grappling with the enigma of how they could compare all four parchments without compromising the scrolls—or their lives.

Emerging into the larger cavern, he put his boulder-sized issue aside to restore an actual boulder. Once in place, it revealed no hint of a continuation of the cave. Pierre donned his rain cloak, re-confirming that he'd obscured any trace of dusty footprints as he backtracked out of the large cavern and made his way toward the entry. Turning, he froze in place, held his breath and lowered his flashlight. He knew its fading light was too faint to account for the bright illumination in front of him. Pierre stared, disbelieving, at the thin stream of daylight piercing the bramble barrier that blocked the opening to the cave. His heart began to pound, knowing the pains he'd taken to draw the brush securely across the entry, cautious never to allow for a microscopic crack to betray the cave's presence.

He extinguished his dimming flashlight and strained to catch any sound. Making use of the light from the entry, he cautiously approached. He ran his palm across the wall until it met with the reassuring touch of his hunting rifle, propped a few feet inside the entry to the cave.

Allowing for what seemed ages—but was less than half an hour—and without any evidence of sound outside, he concluded that somehow he hadn't replaced the cave's covering securely, or that a strong gust of wind had blown just enough brush aside to allow for the shaft of light to enter the cave. Even so, gun cocked and ready for the unexpected, he made his cautious exit.

Using one hand to balance the rifle and the other to shield his eyes from the glare of daylight, he eased through the brush covering the entrance, and raised his head—only to be met with a blow that propelled him into darkness far more impenetrable than that of the deepest cave.

(End of preview ... please visit www.CatharLegacy.com for more information.)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nita Hughes was for many years a Vice President for Security Pacific Bank (Bank of America). As a global executive in the International Private Banking division, she provided financial advice to high net worth clients in Asia, South America, and Europe.

Nita draws on diverse passions, including her love for the South of France, speaking, singing, and traveling. Her writing includes contributions to books on autism, corporate training, and marketing.

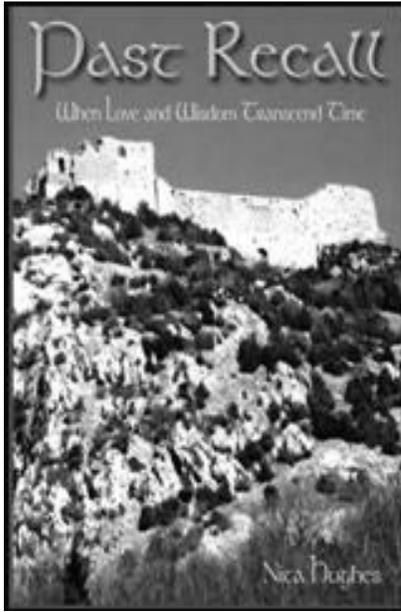
When not involved in her personal pursuits, she is a partner with [*Hughes Associates*](#), a team of professionals committed to helping entrepreneurs and artists profit from their creative endeavors.

Nita lives with her husband Douglas on the Hawaiian island of Maui.

For more information, visit the author's websites at:

www.PastRecall.com - or - www.CatharLegacy.com

A PREQUEL TO THE CATHAR LEGACY



In the novel, *Past Recall*, Nita Hughes blends an ancient story of terrifying persecution with a vision of hope for the world today.

The tale is told by a woman photographer who unexpectedly discovers information from the past about a spiritual secret, a treasure so coveted that an entire culture was massacred in an attempt to own it.

Her search for answers propels the characters of this romantic thriller through time as history threatens to repeat itself.

We are introduced to Clotilde and Jean de Mirepoix, devout Cathars in 13th century France. Their world of growing enlightenment is being extinguished by a reign of terror. Clotilde and Jean seek refuge in Montsegur, a Cathar sanctuary thought to be impregnable. But their safety fades in importance as they attempt to secure the Cathar treasure, described in the archives of the Catholic church as “*so powerful as to change the world.*” Vowing to safeguard the treasure throughout time, their souls commit to return and unveil it at “worlds end”.

Now that time has come, as photographer Dana Palmer and writer Eric Taylor collaborate on a story whose secret may provide the world’s salvation-or its destruction. For more information, or to order the book online, visit the author's websites at:

www.PastRecall.com - or - www.CatharLegacy.com

Discover *The Cathar Legacy*

In the 13th century, the Cathar treasure ... *“so powerful as to transform the world”* ... ignited the Inquisition. Eight hundred years later, it now puts photographer Dana Palmer and writer Eric Taylor in peril.

On assignment in France for a series on the Cathars, Dana and Eric discover the sacred manuscripts in an ancient cave. Recalling a mission beyond time, they reunite with Pierre, Professor Marty and Veronique to undertake the urgent task of translating the powerful message hidden in the parchments.

Peril heightens as Pierre vanishes. Having segregated the manuscripts among their associates, the duo learns the danger of such a choice as they discover that the translation cannot be achieved linearly. Without all four manuscripts, and all four of the team, there is no hope of unraveling the encrypted code.

At every turn Dana and Eric are check-mated by the Overseer. Head of the enigmatic “Q” project, his mission is to assure, at any price, the Church’s ends. Fear escalates as Dana undertakes a trip to Marseille to photograph Mary Magdalene sites and discovers the long lost relics of Jesus. She is kidnapped when her enemies align with a demagogic coalition of clergy and a US Senator attempting to apply the science of stem cell research to clone DNA from the bloodline of Jesus ... *to create their own Second Coming.*

Unless Dana and Eric’s team can decipher the prophecies of the manuscripts in time, the treasure, in the wrong hands, will lead the world to Armageddon.

Praise for *Past Recall*

“This exceptional novel captured me from the first few pages. It blends 13th century secrets of the Cathar religious movement in Southern France with a very modern conspiracy as an American woman with unrealized connections to the past races frantically across time to reclaim earthshaking manuscripts.”

~ Alexander Reed, author of *A Tote of Travel Tales*

“A compelling romantic mystery. Its magnetic narrative treats us to spiritual wisdom and historical fact. Nita Hughes’ mystical passion informs, entertains and inspires readers, while providing an antidote for a problematic future.”

~ Karen Horowitz, co-author of *Witness to Illness*