

A MODERN CATHAR

By

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Excerpt

Guy's fingers itched, making it mildly painful to touch the steering wheel. His feet itched as well as, hot and bloated, they pressed against the sides of his leather shoes. Jet lag didn't normally affect him quite so much; this time it left him slightly feverish. He wasn't going to allow himself to worry; they would soon arrive at their hotel.

He looked over at Julie. She had slipped her shoes off and looked cool and fresh as she sat Indian style in the passenger seat of the rented Peugeot. She smiled at him and grazed the back of her left hand lovingly along his cheek. She was such a trooper. She hadn't wanted to come to the southwest corner of France for their engagement honeymoon; she would have preferred Paris, St. Tropez or even Lyon, but she understood how important it was for him.

When he turned back to look at the road, there it was again, a kind of shift in his vision. It was as though the calm, country road lined with old Plane trees had disappeared. Guy shook his head to clear the fog. He hadn't slept well for weeks. Six years of accumulated non-stop studies, exams, a dissertation, the decision to get married next winter and then the excitement of taking a trip to France to see the place that had fascinated him most of his life had worn him out. Guy chuckled softly, it was no wonder he felt bloated, hot, itchy and sleep deprived!

"What's so funny, hon?" Julie asked.

"Nothing. It just feels so good to be on vacation. I've worked so hard."

Julie leaned over and gently kissed his neck. "That's right, baby," she said.

As Guy drove, he soaked in the countryside and his mind wandered, traveling back

through time, sifting through all that he had learned. Napoleon had ordered the Plane trees to be planted along many French roads so his soldiers had shade when marching off to war. At the time of the Cathars, there had only been rutted, dirt roads and sparse fields peppered with sagebrush-covered rocky outcrops. An offshoot of Christianity, the Cathar religion had sprung up in France, Italy and Spain during the eleventh century. Most of them had settled in Languedoc, which had been an independent principality ruled by the liberal and freethinking Counts of Toulouse.

The Cathars had existed in mediaeval times with very modern beliefs, much akin to Buddhists. The Cathars believed that the purpose of man on earth was to transcend matter and move towards the light. They believed in reincarnation, refused to eat meat and saw men and women as equal. They rejected the Catholic religion, sighting Rome's opulent, luxurious churches to be a sign that Catholics were more interested in power and materialistic affairs than bettering of the human soul.

Pope Innocent III found the Cathars to be a threat. Calling them heretics, he mounted a formal Crusade against them. In 1208, a war of terror began that killed five hundred thousand people. The Crusade effectively destroyed most of the Cathars.

It was said that before the last Cathar castle fell at Montségur, a Cathar priest escaped with *Le Tresor Cathar*. Some say it was a fortune in gold, some say it was the Holy Grail and others say it was a secret of the Knights Templar.

A loud honk brought Guy back to the present time. He looked in his rear view mirror, noted the hysterical hand gestures of the driver behind him and pulled over towards the shoulder, giving the big delivery truck room to pass. The second horn blast faded away as the truck disappeared over a hill. Guy heard the sound of hoof beats clattering behind him. He looked again in the rear view mirror and saw an old, luxurious carriage being drawn by four magnificent horses.

“What the heck?” Guy exclaimed.

“What, darling? What is it?” Julie asked.

When Guy looked again, a sleek, silver Lexus had replaced the carriage. The Peugeot rocked in its wake as it passed them.

Guy rubbed his eyes. “I’m really tired. I’m seeing things. Can you drive?”

They switched seats and Guy fell immediately into a deep and profound sleep.

He dreamed of a castle, high on the rocky outcrop of a mountain. He dreamed that he was on a large, strong warhorse. He was dressed in armor. His horse reared up. He cursed in an ancient language and brandished a sword. He saw a man tied to a stake with a pile of wood at his feet. He shouted, “Death! Death! Death!” A torch was thrown upon the pile of wood at the bottom of the stake where the man was tied. As the flames commenced to consume him, the man looked at Guy and calmly said, “I will see you in the afterlife.” A woman screamed “Noooo!” Guy woke with a start.

Shaken, he wiped the sweat from his brow. He noted the time on the car’s dashboard, 12:44. By his calculations, they would shortly arrive at the hotel.

Their hotel was at the base of the mountaintop of the last Cathar holdout, Montségur. During the Crusade’s siege, two hundred and twenty people had been burned alive in the castle’s courtyard. Guy had been precise when organizing their trip. He knew exactly how he wanted it to progress; beginning from the end of the Cathar movement, going back through time, castle by castle, soaking in the vestiges of the medieval sect he had spent six years studying at university. He was certain that, at Montségur, he would get a feel for the Cathar people who, even after a massive thirty-six-year long campaign of genocide against them, refused to give in to the Catholic Church and denounce their beliefs. At Montségur, there was an annual burning of effigies in the castle courtyard to commemorate the falling of the last Cathar holdout; he was excited to see this.

Guy and Julie spent the afternoon in the hotel's pool. Although he couldn't seem to shake his dream, he did his best to relax. His own family was of French descent by way of Canada. His grandfather had spoken of the Cathars, telling him bedtime stories from memory. His father had encouraged him to study Medieval History at Harvard, with a focus on the Cathar conflict. Perhaps he was too close to the subject and now, here he was, in the very place where it all happened. Of course it had an effect on him. Of course his dream stuck with him and his imagination conjured up ancient images.

At dinner, Guy felt much better. The cool water of the pool had eased the itching and swelling. He was able to relax and forget the past with the distraction of a French gastronomic meal of *fois gras*, *confit de canard* and a nice bottle of Coteaux du Languedoc.

That night, he dreamed of the Montségur castle perched on top of the mountain above them. He had caught glimpses of it that afternoon at the pool. In reality, it was bleak, austere and white. In his dream, the castle was teeming with life: colored banners flew from the towers; chickens raced underfoot, clucking noisily; peasant men carried produce in from the fields below; servant women baked in open earthen ovens; and elegant ladies examine bold colored bolts of cloth brought in by traveling merchants.

Guy strode amongst them, heading towards the interior courtyard of the castle. In the courtyard, he suddenly heard the scrape of metal upon metal, as though a sword was being pulled from its scabbard. He whirled around and saw a man in a suit of armor, wielding a sword, sitting astride a large, strong warhorse. The man cursed and lashed out at him with the flat of his blade. The blow felled Guy. A multitude of hands grasped him roughly and dragged him across the courtyard where he was then tied to a stake. People brought wood and piled it up at his feet. The large, strong warhorse reared up on its hind legs. The man sitting astride the horse cursed, brandished his sword and shouted, "Death! Death! Death!" Guy felt a calm in the center of his being. He opened his mouth to speak to the man on the warhorse. As

his words left his mouth, they became a large cloud of fog that enveloped him, keeping the heat of the fire from consuming him. Through this fog, he saw the man on the warhorse galloping away down the dirt road that led out of the castle. A woman screamed in terror.

Guy sat bolt upright in bed, gasping for breath, his fingers shaking as he felt his body, certain that he would find charred flesh. His skin felt cool and smooth. He turned and saw Julie sleeping peacefully next to him.

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