

The background of the poster is a cinematic scene. In the center, a tall, cylindrical stone tower with battlements stands on a grassy field. To its left, the ruins of a larger stone building are visible. In the foreground, a man and a woman in modern clothing are looking towards the tower. Other people are scattered in the distance. The sky is dark and cloudy, suggesting a storm or a dramatic atmosphere. The scene is framed by stone pillars on the left and right sides.

hunter's moon

CHARLOTTE
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Screaming Dreams

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Dedication

For the Linton Society

Author's Note

Like many books, this novella was inspired by a real place. You can find the hamlet of La Salle on a map of France, if you look very, very carefully. Maurs and Conques also exist, as does the region's fame for chestnuts.

Chez Chataigne is also based on a real house. I went there with certain members of the Linton Society for a most enjoyable expedition. In fact, this novella was sketched out one night as I sat on Jenny's bed.

Of course, the cottage is not really called Chez Chataigne, there was no murder, there are no ghosts, and it is perfectly safe to walk the wooded lanes at night. Well, one of those statements is true, maybe even two of them.

Chateau La Salle does exist, although not under that name. I wouldn't recommend try to find it though. Why not? Read on...

Chapter 1

‘Those with the greatest awareness have the greatest nightmares.’

— Mahatma Ghandi

Jenny stood before the door, unable to remember how long she’d been standing there.

It’s a dream, she thought confidently. Of course it’s a dream. Why else would I be in the middle of a forest in my pyjamas?

She looked up at the looming dark castle walls and a full moon creeping over the battlements. Knowing it was a dream didn’t make her feel any safer – one of the downsides to psychic abilities. Dreams weren’t always just dreams.

Is this what will happen, she thought, or what *has* happened?

Her body moved of its own volition, her mind trapped inside, as if it was just there for the ride. She watched her hand reach out to the door and felt the rough wood beneath her fingertips. She pushed, but it didn’t move. She tried again, but still nothing.

She dropped her hand and stepped back. The lock clicked and the door swung outwards. She felt the rush of wind as something indistinct raced past her. She whirled around to see a shadow disappearing into the forest, skimming along the ground on all fours, as if with deadly purpose. She shuddered, her flesh chilled and her mind fearful.

Her body turned and walked through the doorway as her mind shouted to flee. More shadows moved around inside, shadows of men. She walked between them, as if part of an unconscious choreography. When she passed too close to one, an icy coldness brushed over her skin.

Jenny had no idea where she was but her feet carried her forward as if following a familiar path. She crossed the

courtyard, heading towards another closed door. As she approached the door opened and a shadow stepped out. His features were obscured in the gloom but the eyes seemed to glimmer, cold and wet like moonlight on a still pond.

She passed the shadow without missing a step and walked through the door with only inches to spare before it shut behind her. The stone felt cold through her socks as she made her way down narrow winding stairs to a corridor.

Turn back, she urged herself, but her feet kept placing themselves one after the other. Doors lined the corridor, but Jenny's eyes were drawn to the furthest one, where she instinctively knew they were destined. She stopped outside. Firelight flickered through the cracks in the wood. She could hear murmured voices beyond.

Turn away. It's not too late. We don't have to...

Jenny's hand rose towards the door, but it swung inwards before she could touch it. She stepped through and looked around the room. It was large and gloomy. The floor was bare earth. Sconces burned with sulphurous yellow flames and the smoke-stained stone walls curved up to form a domed ceiling.

There were several long, thin tables of dark wood in the room, all at different heights and angles. Crude machinery had been secured to some of them. Jenny forced herself not to consider what purpose the rusty levers and oiled gears might serve.

Yokes with chains hung from the walls and there were several three-legged stools with seats in the shape of a pyramid. Among the tables, braziers burned, many with long iron rods thrust into them.

Movement at the far end of the room drew her gaze. Dark shapes stood before a large fireplace where flames licked hungrily up towards an enormous spit. The figures of men were gathered in a semi-circle. In their shadowy faces, their eyes gleamed coldly, every gaze fixed on one of their number, a hunched figure. Jenny's feet moved her so she could get a better view. Kneeling before the hunched figure was a young girl, little more than a shadow, but somehow seeming more solid than those crowded around her. Her eyes shone too, but with fire and defiance.

Her mouth moved and the hunched figure answered, but the voices were no clearer to Jenny than when she had

been on the other side of the door. She concentrated, but couldn't make out the words.

The figure swept his arm around and a blade gleamed in the firelight. The girl lifted her head, staring boldly upwards, yet she shrank back when he bent menacingly towards her. As he drew closer, the girl's gaze slipped past him and met Jenny's eyes.

'M'aide.' The girl's lips formed the words, yet the voice sounded as if the speaker stood next to Jenny, whispering in her ear. 'Help me. Before the Hunter's Moon lights the land.'

Jenny wanted to turn, to look, but her body ignored such mental commands. She faced rigidly forward as two shadows grabbed the girl's arms and the hunched figure leaned closer.

The girl's screams were as muffled as the other voices. Jenny tried to turn her head, to look away, but she kept staring. The girl's body slumped to the floor, her lips moving faintly, uttering her final words.

The figure raised his hand and the shadows around him exalted. Clenched in his palm was the girl's heart, a brilliant red in the surrounding gloom. It steamed and quivered.

Jenny cried out, her mind finding her voice. As one, the shadows turned and rushed for her. The hunched figure led them, reaching for her with dark talons dripping with blood.

Wake up! she screamed at herself. Wake up!

A dozen pairs of dead, hungry eyes pinned her to the spot.

Wake up!

It was all Jenny could do to throw her hands over her head as a bitter cold and the stink of carrion engulfed her.

'Wake up. Jenny, wake up. You're dreaming, and you're embarrassing me.'

Jenny's eyes snapped open, terror still burning in her breast. Then the real world gradually resolved itself. She was on a plane and her friend, Steve, was staring at her.

'Jesus, you really scared me!' he said, slumping with relief. 'I thought you were having a fit or something.' She stared around, worried that other passengers might have noticed her, but no one was looking in their direction.

'Sorry, it was just a nightmare,' Jenny mumbled.

'Thank god for that. I thought you were going to come blurting out with some more crap like...'

He faltered and looked embarrassed.

Like before the accident, Jenny silently finished. Steve took on an air of forced cheerfulness.

'Well, a week in the Auvergne will sort those nightmares – there won't be time for them with all the cocktails I'll make you, Jen.'

The plane hit the runway with a jolt and Steve gripped the seat rests, his face suddenly ashen. As they juddered along, he looked at Jenny and tried to laugh through gritted teeth. 'I hate these things, you know.'

'I know,' Jenny said soothingly.

Steve practically sprinted off the plane when the doors opened. A warm afternoon greeted them, unusually clement for October.

'So, how's Darren?' Steve teased as they retrieved their luggage.

Jenny sighed. 'I told you, we went on one date and that was it.'

'One date with me would never be enough.' Steve winked and Jenny rolled her eyes.

'Don't you ever get tired of being turned down?'

'Not when it comes to you, Jen.' His grin was so wide, she almost believed him.

'You might have better luck with Eleanor. She's just split up with her most recent fling.'

'Really?' Steve fell quiet, pondering.

Eleanor and Reece were waiting for them outside the airport. Eleanor squealed as she ran over and threw her arms around Steve. Reece followed her, wearing a welcoming smile. Jenny hugged him, noticing that his puppy fat had turned to muscle since she'd last seen him. His arms weren't bulging like Steve's, but his t-shirt was tight across his chest. She couldn't help glancing up and down his new physique approvingly, but he blushed heavily.

All that body, and still shy, Jenny thought wryly. Before she could say anything, Eleanor squeezed between them and hugged Jenny tightly.

'Wonderful to see you, Jen,' she gushed. Then she linked her arm with Jenny's and led her towards the car, away from Reece. The gesture was not lost on Jenny.

Eleanor was much the same as ever – tall and willowy, in stark contrast to Jen’s smaller frame. “Little and large” Steve had always called them. Eleanor was all flowing blonde hair and tiny, pert breasts while Jenny was dark, serious, all hips and curves.

Well, if Eleanor’s set her sights on Reece, there goes any chance I’ll have, Jenny mused sadly.

‘So what’s this place like then?’ Steve asked as they slung their bags in the back of the hired blue Citroen.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Reece replied. ‘It’s at the top of this little hill up a winding road.’

‘But there’s a bar or something nearby, right?’ asked Steve.

‘No,’ pouted Eleanor, glaring at Reece. He shrugged.

‘You all saw the online brochure. It was marketed as “peaceful”. But that’s what we wanted, wasn’t it? To make our own fun?’

Eleanor’s lips twitched into a smile and Jenny guessed what fun she was planning. Seeing Steve’s black look, Jenny added, ‘Plenty of time to make our own cocktails then?’ He brightened instantly.

‘We’ve already got some local wine for tonight, and there’s a local liqueur made from chestnuts,’ Reece commented.

Steve pulled a face but seemed placated and they climbed into the car. Jenny had expected him to be more nervous of getting into a car with Reece after his jitters on the plane, but she was pleased he seemed relaxed. It would not bode well if they argued this early into the trip. As it was, she had her doubts whether four old friends, now living completely different lives, would rub along together for a week in a remote farmhouse.

Reece concentrated hard on driving on the *wrong* side of the road. He ignored the babble running between Eleanor and Steve. Occasionally he glanced in the mirror at Jenny. He had noticed at the airport that she’d filled out a little bit, looked a lot healthier. At university she’d often looked gaunt and ill. Now, with a little more flesh on her face, she looked extraordinarily pretty. Her dark hair was no long tangled and tied up, but shiny and well-kept. And Reece couldn’t deny that the extra weight gave her a more impressive cleavage, but he made no comment, sure that

Steve would already have done so.

The only thing that concerned him was that her face was pale as she stared out the window, and her lips were pressed together. He worried that something had upset her.

‘So how’s the insurance business?’ Eleanor asked Steve.

‘Alright. Dull, mostly. But Jen’s been promoted to management.’

‘Congratulations!’ enthused Eleanor. Jen nodded absently, her gaze barely leaving the window.

‘How’s the gallery?’ Steve asked Eleanor in return.

‘Oh, it’s fabulous! They haven’t exhibited any of my work, but at a show the other evening I met an art dealer who knows someone whose brother runs a gallery that might be looking for some new artists. So, fingers crossed!’

Feeling Eleanor’s eyes on him, Reece smiled encouragingly. The way she had watched him intently since they arrived unnerved him.

‘What about you, Reece? Are you happy working in the travel agents?’ Steve’s made no effort to disguise his pity for Reece, whom he considered to be stuck in an uninspiring job.

‘It’s not bad actually. I get all sorts of deals, such as cheap plane tickets to France,’ he added meaningfully. ‘Plus when I’m not busy, I can work on my poetry. A couple of pieces are being published in a book for a local arts festival.’

‘Oooh, poetry. That’s so romantic,’ Eleanor said with wide eyes. Reece ignored her. He still remembered her tirade of how dull Robert Browning was, just before she realised he had entered the room. Her back-peddalling had been painful to behold.

‘Maybe you could write me a poem?’ she asked hopefully.

‘Maybe. I’ll see if inspiration strikes. Perhaps something about the beautiful French countryside to commemorate our trip?’ He caught Eleanor’s disappointed expression before she had time to hide it and he felt bad, even though he’d meant to discourage her.

‘Well,’ offered Steve, ‘I think that there are poets and there are real men who can actually talk to women without having to write it down.’

‘Ouch!’ Reece glanced in the mirror and grinned, but the comment was a little close to the bone.

As Eleanor began talking animatedly to Steve, Reece

returned his full attention to the road. After another mile or so, he swung the car sharply into a wooded country lane, nearly moving over to the wrong side of the road by mistake. He stiffened with embarrassment, but no one had noticed.

Concentrating hard, he allowed the conversation to wash over him. They were approaching a picturesque bridge over a river. Where the bridge ended, two large rocks flanked the road, as if marking a gateway. Beyond them, small cliffs the height of a house rose up on either side, creating a small ravine.

As the car approached the standing stones, the sun disappeared behind the cliffs. They passed from late afternoon sun into shadow and that was when it hit him. Reece felt as if he had driven into a wall of icy water. His breath caught in his throat, gooseflesh exploded all over his body and his vision blurred. He panicked, unable to see straight. His knuckles went white gripping the steering wheel, trying desperately to keep the car on the road. He felt like he was suffocating.

Time slowed. Eleanor's babble turned into a drawn-out drone of noise. The roar of the engine became a mechanical heartbeat that made his eardrums vibrate painfully. Panic coursed through Reece and he thought the car might stall, imprisoning him in this icy bubble forever. His jaw was frozen, his fingers numb. He wanted to scream but his throat was locked tight. He felt eyes on him, eyes outside the car as if someone was leering in, but he was unable to turn his head to see.

Then, as suddenly as it had come, the unpleasant sensation passed, as if they had emerged on the other side of a waterfall. Noise speeded up, control returned to his limbs and fiery blood pumped the cold from his skin. Reece reacted instantly. He slammed his foot down on the brake and jerked the car to the side of the road. He sat there breathing heavily, sweat dampening his skin.

'Reece? Are you okay?' Eleanor was staring at him. He turned his head slowly, his eyes trying to focus. She seemed troubled and confused, and he knew instinctively she had not experienced what he had. In the mirror he saw Steve looking equally puzzled, while Jenny stared at him with something akin to fear.

'Yeah, I'm okay,' Reece said shakily. 'Just a little faint. Must be the heat.'

‘Want one of us to take over?’ Steve asked.

‘No, it’s fine.’

‘Are you sure?’ Steve sounded distinctly uneasy, but Reece simply stared around, trying to comprehend what had happened. They were pulled up in the shadow of the cliffs, the scenery around them was green and lush, and through the open window he could hear birdsong above the gentle hum of the idling motor.

‘I said, are you sure?’ Steve asked again. This time, the quaver in Steve’s voice drew Reece’s attention and he cursed inwardly.

Of course, Reece thought, the crash. I must have scared him shitless, even if I was the one driving this time.

‘No, I’m fine. Seriously.’ Reece spoke with all the confidence he could muster.

Steve frowned at him, but then relaxed. ‘Okay then.’

‘Can we go now? Please?’ Jenny asked timorously. She looked even paler than before and was shaking slightly. For a moment, Reece thought it might be the effect of his driving, but her wide, dark eyes hinted otherwise.

She felt it too, he thought. And why not? She predicted the last crash.

‘Don’t worry, Jen,’ Steve said, putting his arm around her. ‘A slow comfortable screw against the wall will cure your carsickness.’

‘Eeww! I hope you’re taking about the cocktail, Steve,’ Eleanor said with a giggle. Steve grinned, and even Jenny gave a weak smile.

Reece turned back to the wheel. Now was not the time to ask Jenny if she’d felt anything.

Maybe I did just imagine it, he thought as he pulled off. Maybe it was just passing from sun into shade like that. Maybe Jenny really is carsick.

Yet for the rest of the drive his skin did not warm beneath the sun and his knuckles stayed white, gripping the wheel.

‘It so good to be out of the car,’ Jenny said, stretching. Her queasiness was eased by the fresh air but she still felt chilled.

Steve gathered their bags. ‘I know what you mean. I feel like I’ve been cooped up for hours – first an airport, then a plane, now the car.’

‘That’s nothing,’ boasted Eleanor. ‘When I did long-haul

to New York it was a fourteen hour flight. Let me tell you just how uncomfortable...’

Jenny let them wander away as she stood and considered their home for the next week. Behind her was the carport, nothing more than two small walls and a larger one with a sloping metal roof. In front of her, up a small incline, was the cottage. Reece had chosen well. West-facing, its stones glowing a warm pink in the evening sun. Built on the side of a hill meant that the closest wall was longer than the other, giving it a charming, lopsided character. Picking up her bags, Jenny followed the path which curved left before sweeping around to approach the house from the front. An old willow tree dominated the grass. With a central door and two windows either side, the willow’s cascading branches put Jenny in mind of a lock of hair falling over the face of a wide-eyed child. Reaching the cottage, Jenny caught sight of a blue camper van tucked behind the tree.

Reece appeared behind her and Jenny beamed at him. ‘I love it.’

‘Good, isn’t it? Just come onto our books. The owners live in the farm across the road and have only just finished renovating it. We always keep prices low for the first six months until a location is established, so I thought we should take advantage of it.’

As Jenny followed him inside, she saw the small name plaque on the wall.

‘What does “Chez Chataigne” mean?’ she asked.

‘I think it translates as Chestnut Cottage. Like I said, this region’s a big producer of chestnuts.’

Inside the house was every bit as charming as the exterior. There were three good sized bedrooms. Jenny had been allocated the double on account of her being the first to pay the deposit. As well as a four-poster bed with a mosquito net pinned around it, there was a chair, a wardrobe, and a mirror. The floor was flagged, the walls white-washed so it appeared light and spacious.

‘You ought to have this, Reece,’ she insisted, as she gazed around. ‘I mean, you found this place.’

‘That’s okay. I’m not a guy who takes up much space.’ He winked. Jenny frowned, uncertainly. It sounded like an innuendo, but she’d never heard Reece even tell a rude joke.

Maybe he’s got some new confidence to go with that new

body, she thought wryly.

He coughed, then continued awkwardly, 'Plus it's got a dressing table, which is a girl thing. It was either you or Eleanor and I didn't think...' He glanced down uncomfortably.

And you didn't think she would take it quite the right way if you offered her the double bed, Jenny concluded.

'Thanks. I love it,' Jenny said, leaning over to kiss him lightly on the cheek. Reece looked up, grinning and she laughed.

Dumping her bags, Jenny followed Reece through the rest of the house. Her room had two doors. One led into a tiny square hall with the front door on the left, stairs leading to the attic on the right and a door straight ahead into the sitting room. The walls were a combination of whitewash and rustic stonework and a large fireplace dominated one wall, a tiny wood-burning stove nestled in it. A large rug lay over the bare flagstone floor. There was a desk, bookshelves, a small battered sofa and a large table in the middle with five mismatched chairs. Leading off the sitting room was Reece's single room as well as the twin room that was already covered in Eleanor's clothes.

There was a decent sized bathroom, a small pantry and washing up area and then a long, thin kitchen with another large table with wooden benches. A final door linked Jenny's room to the kitchen. Everything was perfect.

'Where are you sleeping?' Jenny asked Steve as he wandered into the kitchen.

'Got my own private little love shack for all them hot French birds,' he replied lasciviously.

Reece translated. 'He's in the camper van.'

'Don't look like that, Jen. I requested it. Reece was telling me over Skype how we'd have to draw straws for it, but I said: "Hey! Sign me up for that!" It's going to be awesome.'

'Well, as long as you're okay with it,' Jenny said, thinking guiltily of her lovely, large room.

Steve gave her a conspiratorial glance. 'If you're worried about that big double room of yours, Jen, you could, you know, offer to share it...'

Before Jen could think up a witty reply, Eleanor sauntered in and asked, 'So, what are we going to do now?'

'Well I don't know about you lazy buggers, sitting

around in the French countryside all day, but I've only had plane food today and I'm starving. The first thing we're going to do is cook,' announced Steve.

'And make cocktails?' asked Jenny with a wry smile.

'Oh, yeah!' said Steve enthusiastically.

'Cocktails!' cried Eleanor with a high-pitched squeal of excitement.

Steve and Eleanor found the alcohol cupboard and began sorting through it. While Reece laughed at their antics, Jenny went to stand at the front door and take in the view. The evening air was sweet and fresh and she breathed deeply. Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned, only to find she was alone.

'Hello?' She stepped back inside but the footsteps stopped. She listened and frowned, but could only hear Steve's voice and Eleanor's laughter. She returned to the view.

You're just tired, she thought. Besides, they sounded like they were coming from the attic and everyone's in the kitchen.

The sun was setting, tingeing the hilltops orange while the valleys were deep indigo shadows. Feeling relaxation creep through her, Jenny examined the rest of the isolated cottage grounds. There was a small orchard of no more than half a dozen trees, an oval swimming pool with a few chairs and recliners around it, and a platform of a barbecue.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' asked Reece coming to stand next to her.

'I already said I loved it once. Now you're just digging for compliments,' Jenny answered with a grin. Reece smiled and they shared an easy silence for some time. Then Reece asked a question which darkened the mood.

'You felt it too, didn't you? At the bridge?'

Jenny stiffened, thinking of the cold, the nausea and the fear she had experienced before Reece had pulled over. She kept her voice light. 'At the bridge?'

'Yeah. What my gran would've called "a moment". Like when the lights go out suddenly, or in a nightmare where you can't move or wake yourself. A waking dream, or a psychic moment, like when you told Steve...'

Jenny cut him off. 'I felt carsick, certainly. Really badly. It was probably just that.'

'Oh.' Reece lapsed into silence. Jenny stared resolutely at the valley, but the back of her neck prickled. She turned slightly, expecting to see Reece staring at her, but his gaze was on the horizon. Her head was drawn around to the stairs. In the lengthening shadows, they ascended into a dark void above.

'Is that the attic?' she asked. Reece followed her gaze.

'I think it must be. Want to find out?'

Jenny didn't but Reece was already heading towards the first step. His hand groped blindly in the gloom until he found the light switch. A solitary bulb flicked on but barely illuminated even half the stairs. The door at the top remained in shadow.

'Shall we?' Reece gestured for Jenny to go first and she did so reluctantly. As she ascended, a coldness seeped through her skin into her bones. The hairs on her arms stood up and each footfall sent a jolt of nausea through her body. She thought of turning back, but halfway up it felt as if something had lassoed her guts and was tugging her onwards.

'Maybe we shouldn't...' Forcing words out made her jaw ache.

'What harm can it do?' Reece's voice sounded casual but she thought she detected an uneasiness to it. Yet she couldn't turn and look. Her neck muscles were locked, fixing her eyes on the door ahead.

Her flesh tingled as if a thousand icy needles pressed against her skin. Her hand moved of its own volition, reaching for the handle. She couldn't pull away or prevent it closing around the cold metal. She shuddered as she turned the handle. The mechanism gave a grating squeak then it stopped.

'Locked,' she commented. Her hand tried again.

A scream of pure terror cut through the air, driving through Jenny's eardrums like a dagger. It broke the spell and she wrenched her hand away. She turned to Reece who had paled to grey. The scream came again, before breaking into a sob. Recognising Eleanor's voice, Jenny sagged with relief.

'What's she done this time?' Reece murmured with a mixture of good humour and relief.

They hurried down the stairs and were approaching the kitchen just as Eleanor was racing out. They found Steve

pressed against the sink, standing on tiptoes and staring at the open oven door. From the blackened interior, spilling onto the floor like a wriggling waterfall, was a slew of worms, maggots and beetles. Jenny gasped and backed away, certain she could hear the squelch of tiny mucosal bodies squirming against each other. The mass bulged and undulated, moving across the floor seemingly with one mind.

‘Don’t let them get away!’ Eleanor squealed from behind the bathroom door. ‘Get rid of them! What if they crawl into my bed? What if they...?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ soothed Reece retrieving a broom. ‘They’re only bugs. They can’t harm you. The house is old, this stuff just happens. Get a dustpan, will you?’ he asked Steve who tiptoed uncomfortably round the writhing mass. Jenny watched the little bodies tumbling and turning, tiny black legs kicking in the air, as beetles fought against Reece’s broom. She swallowed hard, a sour taste in her mouth. She fetched a bin-bag, holding it at arms length as Steve deposited the squirming creatures inside

‘What should I do with them?’ Reece asked when the last of the creatures was in the bag.

‘Take them away and dump them far from the house,’ came Eleanor’s strangled voice from the bathroom. ‘And not just outside the window or something. They might come back.’

Steve took the bag outside and Jenny coaxed a waxy and pale Eleanor out of her refuge.

‘It’s fine, they’re all gone,’ Jenny soothed. ‘I’m going to clean out the oven while Reece goes to see if he can find take-away pizza or something. Why don’t you go with him? I’ll make Steve have cocktails ready for when you get back.’

‘Okay,’ Eleanor said, throwing a tentative glance at the kitchen before hurrying into the living room. Jenny did not miss the bright, almost triumphant smile Eleanor gave Reece as he picked up the car keys, setting Jenny’s mind to wondering just how scared Eleanor had really been.

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