

## **LE CHÂTEAU SUR LA FALAISE, MONTGENOUX, FRANCE.**

Josette Chapelle began the last day of her life in much the same way as she had for most of her short twenty years. Of course, it had only been in recent years she awoke with a hangover hammering at her skull, crumpled bedsheets and only a vague recollection of who the naked youth lying next to her was. Not that she considered herself to be a tramp. Josette Chapelle was a good girl from a good family. Her mother had died an excruciatingly long and painful death from cancer a few years earlier, and she had made her daughter promise she would not waste a second of her precious life for she would never know when her time was up. Josette had set out just to do that.

She worked hard as a maid in the Château and played even harder in her free time. She did not harm anyone and did not let anyone harm her. She would not leave her life with regrets, or disappointment like her mother had, fifty years of resentment spilling out as she writhed on her death bed, cancer ravaging her once beautiful body. Regrets of staying in an unhappy marriage, of love affairs imagined but not realised, journeys only a wisp of reality in her imagination. Her parting gift to her daughter was to make sure she knew she “owed nothing to anybody but herself.” By doing so, though, she had also unwittingly triggered a chain of events which would, ultimately, on that rainy day in France, mean her daughter would die.

As Josette went about her duties, whistling happily, she was meeting her friends later, and that held promises of another night of fun, laughter, gaiety and the unspoken possibility of another night of fumbling between the sheets with another nameless man. She knew she could not carry on like this forever, but for now at least, she was a young girl enjoying being young and she saw nothing wrong with it. She had been through enough in the last few months and she had made a promise to herself nobody would hurt her again. She knew also she was firmly in denial, ignoring something in the hope that by doing so it would disappear. There would be time later to deal with the ramifications of the mess she had gotten herself into. Just not yet. It would be better tomorrow.

Crossing the foyer, she tucked in a wisp of her hair which had fallen from her cap and winked cheekily at the man behind the reception desk. He winked back at her. If only, she allowed herself to think for the hundredth time. Even if he could be interested in somebody like her, he was so far out of her league it was not even funny. Still, a bit of harmless flirting never harmed anyone. She had found that only too well. She had taken a chance and it had worked out. Or had it? Why did she check her cell phone every chance she got? It taunted her, its blank screen never revealing any missed calls or texts.

She flashed him a smile as she pressed the ‘Call’ button on the elevator. He smiled back and went back to his business, no doubt instantly forgetting her. Josette hoped Madame would not be in her apartment today, she hated the way she watched Josette like a hawk. As if she was sure she would not do her cleaning properly, or worse, that she would steal something. Steal something! As if, Josette fumed. She was many things, but she was no thief. Madame looked at Josette in the same way as the other women who lived in the village where she lived, a mixture of jealousy and anger. Jealous because Josette was young and beautiful and angry that their husbands paid more interest in Josette than they did in the woman they were married to. None of which was Josette’s fault and she found she did not care about them at all. Not anymore. Her time was coming and she was determined she would have the last laugh. She would wipe the smile off all of their faces, starting with the wizened old Madame.

The elevator doors opened, and Josette stepped into the drawing room, as Madame insisted on calling it. Anyone else would call it Le Salon, or the office, but oh no, not Madame, who seemed to believe she was an English aristocrat, or something equally officious. Josette knew all about Madame, the real story, not the made-up one, she was born in a Marseille hovel, not Downton Abbey. Pulling her cleaning trolley behind Josette watched as the elevator doors closed, and she shut her eyes for a

moment, breathing deeply as she thought about just getting through the day so she could get back to her real life.

Josette flicked open her eyes and stepped forward into the room, struggling to pull the trolley wheels onto the plush carpet. Behind her she could hear Madame's precious birds squawking as they always seemed to do whenever they spotted Josette. Their piercing squeals were bad enough to deal with on the best of days, but excruciating when she did not feel her best. Without thinking about it her hand went to her stomach. She hoped she was not going to be sick again. She had felt ill for weeks and she was, frankly, tired of it. She glanced at her watch and wondered whether she would have time for a sneaky nap in the empty room downstairs? She probably could, knowing one of her friends would cover for her. All she needed was thirty minutes and she would be ready to face the rest of the day. Yes, she would whip around the room as fast as she could and then disappear for a while, that would make her feel better.

The birds squawked loudly as one of them pecked angrily at the bars of the cage. She was sure that Madame cared more about those horrible beasts than she did anything else. And the mess they made! Seeds and droppings everywhere! And despite Madame's devotion to them, she also seemed to have an aversion to seeing anything they expelled and would take it as a personal affront if they were not removed as soon as possible after being evacuated. Josette considered whether she should clean the area first in case Madame spotted it, but then she knew if she did she would only have to do the whole thing again after cleaning the rest of the apartment.

The trolley stuck again on the carpet, she tutted loudly as she pulled it once more. A shadow passed behind her causing her to get a start.

'Oh, it's you!' she gasped. 'You gave me a fright, why are you skulking in the shadows?'

There was no answer. Josette narrowed her eyes, trying to pierce the darkness. There was something wrong. The eyes were dark as if a fire burned in them.

'Are you all right?' Josette asked, her voice wavering. She did not know why, but she was suddenly afraid. Her gaze drifted towards the hand, focusing on the statue in it. She looked back to the eyes which seemed to bulge at her. She saw nothing in them but hate.

'What is this about? Why are you holding that?'

Before Josette knew what was happening, the heavy statue was crashing down on her skull. As the pain exploded in her brain, a white cloud descended upon young Josette Chapelle and her last thought was to wonder why she had not had more fun in her short, tragic life.