

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN "The Church of Saint-Anne dates back to the eleventh or twelfth century," Jenny said, her voice echoing softly in the dim interior. "I know it's somewhat challenging to see, but if you look closely, you can still appreciate some of the original wall paintings." The waning autumn afternoon light struggled to penetrate the heavy gloom that enveloped the cracked stone walls of the small church. As Hazel took a step forward, her foot caught on a broken floor tile. She muttered a characteristically irreverent comment, but Jenny, undeterred by the blasphemy, continued her explanation, "These paintings, though faded by centuries, are still treasures worth valuing. Remember, we are just across from the house of George Sand here in Nohant, and tomorrow we will visit the Maison. Soon, we'll move to our accommodations in the nearby village of Saint Chartier. Take your time viewing the paintings while I contact the hotel." With that, she glided into the encroaching darkness, the soft rustle of her movements almost ghostly. Hazel fished her mobile phone from her pocket and flicked on the flashlight, its weak beam slicing through the dim interior. With renewed focus, she and Belinda cautiously navigated the confined space, the other members of their group fading like phantoms into the shadows. The lingering stillness, was punctuated only by the shuffle of 52 feet on the ancient stone floor and the occasional hushed whisper of awe as the group examined the faint, peeling images that adorned the walls. Time passed imperceptibly, and as if sharing an unspoken understanding, the group gradually made their way to the door, stepping into the churchyard now shrouded in almost complete darkness. As they moved toward the waiting charabanc the sky stretched above them, a vast canopy of deep indigo. Without warning, a shrill scream pierced the tranquil silence of the village. Their hearts pounding, the group froze except for Belinda who instinctively moved toward the source of the cry. She collided with Mrs. Alice, who was now in a panic, still screaming in terror. Hazel quickly switched on her phone's flashlight again, the beam illuminating the ground before her. There, lying portentously at her feet, was a single black leather glove...its ominous presence a chilling token of the unknown lurking in the shadows. The pool of light widened to encompass the body of Mr Henry at the foot of a memorial cross.