

Capable of Murder



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Praise for Capable of Murder

Mr Kavanagh managed to do what one of my favorite authors, M C Beaton, does so well, incorporate humor within the confines of a credible mystery.

Mary Lynn, author of 'Dear Cari'.

This is a must-read book. It is definitely recommended.

Nancy Madison, author of 'Clues to Love'.

Twists and turns abound keeping the reader from guessing the killer early on. If you are looking for a light, entertaining mystery to get lost in for a few hours, Capable of Murder is an excellent choice.

Tracy Farnsworth

If you like to read puzzling mysteries set in eerie old houses with hidden rooms and endangered damsels in distress – with a helping of horror and a dash of girlish romance, plus a surprise ending to haunt you – then you will enjoy this book.

Joan Riley

It owes much to the classic English village mystery, with its reclusive older resident and the suspicious cast of characters, including the somewhat dense village constable. It's fun and worth searching for.

Barbara Franchi

There are splashes of excellent local color and descriptions. The writing is very visual ... There are some very good descriptions and metaphors.

The first meetings of Belinda and Jacob are funny, involving spilled coffee, bumped heads, torn clothes, seeds, and nudity. There are delightfully loopy minor characters ... light mystery for a rainy afternoon.

eBook Reviews Weekly

This is a short, fast paced book, the pages seem to turn themselves.

The story itself is well plotted ... I finished the book quickly, keen to see what would happen next and find out the identity of the murderer.

It has a little twist at the end too, which I'm very partial to.

I did enjoy the book and if you like old-fashioned whodunnits with an amateur sleuth, you'll enjoy this too.

Annette Gisby author of 'Silent Screams'.

About the author

Brian Kavanagh has many years' experience in the Australian Film Industry in areas of production, direction, editing and writing. His editing credits include *The Chant Of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *Odd Angry Shot*, *The Devil's Playground*, *Long Weekend*, *Sex Is A Four-Letter Word* and the recent comedy, *Dags*.

He received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Australian Film Editors Guild and an Australian Film Institute award for Best Editing for *Frog Dreaming*. His first feature film which he produced and directed, *A City's Child*, won an AFI award for actress Monica Maughan and was screened at the London Film Festival as well as Edinburgh, Montreal, Chicago and Adelaide, where it won the Gold Southern Cross Advertiser Award for Best Australian Film.

Website: <http://beekayvic.tripod.com>

Also by Brian Kavanagh:

The Embroidered Corpse

Capable of Murder

One

The buff coloured envelope was addressed to her, Miss Belinda Lawrence, in thin spidery handwriting as though a tipsy insect had dipped its legs in ink and waltzed across the envelope. Belinda gave a tiny cry.

‘Great-aunt Jane!’ Normally they only exchanged cards at Christmas.

The letter was brief and to the point.

“Dear Belinda, I would appreciate it if you would come down to the cottage this weekend. I have something of interest for you.

Yours, Jane Lawrence.”

It was years since Belinda had been to the tiny West Country village. She felt guilty for not having visited her aunt more frequently, although to be honest, aunt Jane had never really given any indication that she would welcome visits from Belinda – the opposite, really, thought Belinda as she prepared for bed that evening. She sat brushing her silky black hair, making plans to talk to David, her boss, in the morning. She had some holidays due to her and would welcome a break. She could take Friday off, spend the weekend down in Bath and visit aunt Jane at the same time.

As she settled down in bed and switched off the light, Belinda wondered what could be so important that her aunt would not divulge it in a letter but must tell her face to face.

Great-aunt Jane lived in Milford, a small village outside of Bath, and it was there some years ago that Belinda, freshly arrived from Australia as an eager nineteen-year-old, had tracked down her father's aunt.

'What do you want?' the old lady had said suspiciously as she peered around the weather-beaten door.

Belinda had been startled at her appearance and greeting, as she had written to her great-aunt advising her that she would call that day.

'Aunt Jane?' she enquired hesitantly, 'I'm your great niece, Belinda Lawrence. Did you get my letter?'

The old lady eyed her up and down as though suspecting her of being an imposter, then nodded abruptly and stepped back to allow Belinda to enter the house.

The first thing she noticed was the bone-chilling cold. Shuffling along on a walking stick, her tall figure stooped and the hem of her long skirt trailing on the floor, her aunt led the way into a long narrow room that ran the length of the back of the house. There she sank down into a worn armchair before a tiny ineffectual fire, pointing at a nearby chair for Belinda to sit down. Belinda sat tentatively on the edge of the seat under the eagle eye of the old woman, whose grey hair splayed out around her sharp features.

'So you're Robert's child.' She took in Belinda from the top of her head to her toes.

The visit wasn't a great success, but before Belinda left she had coaxed the old lady into a grudging familiarity. She never visited her aunt again, feeling that the old lady had not exactly welcomed her, but had sent a Christmas card and was surprised when in the

New Year one was returned to her. They had exchanged cards over the last few years and although the greetings never went beyond “best wishes” Belinda sensed that behind these few words her great-aunt had cherished this one contact with a now vanished family.

Belinda chuckled to herself as she recalled that one meeting with aunt Jane, and found herself looking forward to this new visit. As the InterCity train rushed westwards as though it too actively sought the calm green of the Somerset hills, Belinda sank back further into her seat. The hazy morning light grew stronger and snow-covered fields flashed past as the speeding train snaked its way between small villages and distant manor houses.

The warmth of the carriage and the gentle rocking lulled Belinda into a half-sleep, and with a start she opened her eyes as the train slowed to a halt at Reading. The usual handful of dark-suited businessmen alighted, to be replaced by an equal number of duplicates. They were joined by elderly women and the odd back-packer, disorientated and wild-eyed from the turmoil of arrival at Heathrow airport.

As the train drew away from the platform, Belinda became aware of a pair of denim-clad, strong male lower limbs, as their owner leant forward to deposit a canvas bag on the case-rack above. With a loud sigh and a thump, the man dropped heavily into the seat next to Belinda.

‘Whew. Just made it,’ he gasped, his broad chest heaving as he drew his breath in deeply. ‘That bus from Oxford seems to take longer each time.’

Belinda drew back from him as his arm encroached on her space. She smiled a silent reply and transferred her gaze to the passing fields. But she was only too aware of her new companion’s presence. It wasn’t only that he was big, but his great padded waterproof jacket added to the impression that he was a young giant. He seemed somehow to sprawl in the seat, and his legs, with their muddied boots, appeared too large for the space provided by the railway company.

The steward appeared in the carriage with his trolley of coffee and sandwiches. Belinda reached for her purse and fumbled for some cash as she called to the steward.

‘Coffee, please.’

Her young companion dropped his magazine and also ordered coffee, which he paid for with a twenty-pound note. The steward handed over the plastic cups with their plastic seal and, grumbling about big spenders, gave the young man his change. Belinda slid her fingernails under the lid but it wouldn’t budge.

‘May I help?’ the man enquired, reaching across to grasp the plastic container.

‘No, I can manage.’ But she couldn’t and reluctantly let the cup go into his strong grasp. He took the lid in his powerful fingers and in one swift movement removed it. In doing so he tipped the cup on its side, allowing the contents to shoot up in the air and over Belinda’s skirt.

Belinda let out a shriek and leapt to her feet. At the same time the man jumped up, and their heads met

with a resounding thump. They both fell backwards into their seats. She clutched her head with one hand and attempted to mop up the hot coffee now saturating her best woollen skirt.

‘You clumsy oaf,’ she cried, ‘look what you’ve done.’ He was rubbing his forehead and had a pained expression on his face. He glanced down at the sodden skirt.

‘I’m terribly sorry. Here, let me help you.’ He reached into his pocket and produced a grubby handkerchief that he brushed over Belinda’s skirt. She pushed his hand away and rose unsteadily to her feet.

‘Stop that. You’re making it worse. Why did you have to sit next to me, when you had the whole train to choose from?’

Belinda brushed past him and hurried down the passageway.

The paper towel and cold water in the washroom did little to remove the coffee but at least she had mopped up most of it and she hoped that by the time she arrived at her aunt’s it would have dried and that her coat would hide the stain.

She stepped out into the carriage and walked back to her seat. The man had vanished and the space next to her was taken by an elderly woman who was intent on her knitting. Belinda took her place and the woman smiled vacantly at her and returned her attention to the clicking needles. Belinda sank back and glanced at her new companion.

‘What happened to the young man?’ asked Belinda.

The needles faltered for a moment.

‘Young man?’ The woman’s expression was one of bewilderment.

‘The young man who was sitting here?’ continued Belinda. A look of mild anguish passed over the woman’s face as though she could barely recall what a young man was. Abruptly she shook her head.

‘No, no,’ she muttered, dismissing the suggestion that she knew any young man. Her needles raced into action again, her thoughts already returning to knitting patterns. Belinda turned to glance around the carriage but all that met her eye were the crowns of various heads engrossed in newspapers or travel guides.

As Belinda left the station at Bath to make her way along Pierrepont Street, the grace of the Georgian city gradually seduced her, and all anger and annoyance evaporated as she proceeded into what Samuel Pepys described as “the prettiest city in the kingdom”. Soon the town, shimmering gold in the pale sunlight, lay behind Belinda as her taxi sped towards the village of Milford. In a few minutes they were passing open green fields where patches of snow lay melting in the warmth of the West Country air, but the sun that had greeted her in Bath weakened beneath a battery of threatening clouds.

Suddenly the car turned off the main road and drove down a short hill until it came to crossroads where four cottages stood, one on each corner. The taxi halted outside a large grey stone two-storey cottage that stood a little apart from the others.

‘That was the village, that was,’ said the driver as he hauled himself from the car, ‘the only other sign of life is the local pub at the bottom of the hill.’ He pointed down past the front of aunt Jane’s house towards the

peaceful jade hills that rolled away as far as the eye could see.

Belinda took her overnight bag from the taxi, paid the driver and stepped up to the door by the walled garden, which led to the back of the house. This was the way that she had entered the cottage all those years ago but this time the door did not yield to her. Try as she may the rear entrance remained securely locked. Belinda stepped back onto the road and inspected the cottage.

The front of the house faced down the hill and overlooked a large garden area that stretched the length of the slope, down almost to the pub. The side of the building blended into the wall that bordered the property and the back of the cottage faced up the hill towards the other dwellings in the village. Behind the house was a walled kitchen garden. The one small window in the otherwise blank wall abutting the road was firmly shut and wooden shutters prevented her from peering into the interior.

A little past the cottage set into the high wall was a huge wooden door that Belinda supposed led into the front of the house. She made her way down the steep hill towards it and with great effort managed to turn the handle.

With a screech of rusted metal as though surprised by the unforeseen intruder, as well as complaining at the prospect of future activity, the heavy garden gate swung open.

Belinda stepped gingerly on to the garden path. It was clear that her aunt had given up any attempt at keeping the garden under control. Weeds, long and tentacled, shrubs and the chaotic limbs of trees

frustrated her progress. The sun slid behind a dark cloud and a sudden sharp wind shook the bare branches of the intertwining trees.

A shiver of fear ran through Belinda as she struggled along the path, slipping almost to her knees on the moss-covered stones.

The facade of the large cottage stretched up before her as she picked her way through the untamed plants. The slate-grey stone of the building darkened in the diminishing light and from the distance came a low rumble of thunder. Belinda's reflection sped in erratic liquid manoeuvres across the uneven glass of the shrouded windows.

Dead leaves blew across the decaying stone slabs that formed the terrace. The cottage was bigger than she recalled, the front door reaching almost to the level of the first floor windows.

Belinda dropped her bag and rapped her arrival on the great doorknocker. The sound thundered in her ears but brought no reaction from the resident of the house. The door handle rattled loosely in her hand.

'Aunt Jane? Are you there? It's Belinda.'

The splatter of raindrops on the stone was her only reply. She stepped back and looked up to the windows of the first floor. Something dark and cunning moved on the terrace balustrade and Belinda turned in fright to face it.

A gross grey rat scuttled for cover.

Tiny hairs on Belinda's neck moved. The rustic silence seemed unnatural after the London clamour. Rapidly she beat upon the door, again calling to her aunt.

The door gave a sudden click and, with surprising ease, swung back noiselessly on its hinges.

Belinda hesitated on the doorstep. 'Why would she write, invite me down, and then go away?' she asked herself. She was racked with indecision. The light from the garden extended only a few feet into the hall. A wave of dusty, malodorous air spewed out. Belinda swallowed hard and peered into the blackness.

'Aunt Jane? Are you there?'

Her voice sounded dry and querulous in the dominant stillness of the ancient house. 'I wish I'd never come,' she muttered to herself, while silently cursing her great-aunt.

At a shriek from above she whirled about to see a large bird swoop down from the rooftop to settle on a tree branch. It watched her intently with a hostile eye. In its beak it held a small furry animal that struggled to break free of the vice-like grip. Minute drops of bright vermilion blood flowed from the bird's beak and fell to colour the ash-grey terrace stone.

A shock of revulsion forced Belinda to step backwards. Before she realised it she was standing in the entrance hall. The gloom stretched before her, menacing and enigmatic. Shrugging off her apprehension Belinda slid her hand along the wall until it connected with a heavy brass light switch.

'She's probably gone shopping in Bath. Country people never lock doors,' Belinda said loudly, more to hear the comfort of her own voice than to explain her aunt's absence.

The dim light from the inadequate bulb high against the ceiling cast a faint illumination over the hall. Belinda recalled that on the left side was a large

drawing room. On the right was an unused dining room, where stacked boxes vied for space with overcrowded, over-ornate furniture.

Belinda made her way slowly to the rear of the hall where a door leading to the back section of the house stood squarely in the middle of the wall. She remembered from her previous visit that the back lower-ground floor consisted of the long sitting room where her aunt had entertained her, a small entrance hall from the rear door, a kitchen and bathroom. There was a narrow staircase that led upstairs.

The door opened reluctantly with heavy creaks from unoiled hinges. Belinda grimaced. Aunt Jane obviously never used the front of the house.

The smell strengthened as she stepped into the long room and she fumbled for her handkerchief to hold over her nose. The shuttered window filtered a weak light into the musty chamber and Belinda moved tentatively towards it.

A small table crashed to the floor as she bumped into it but she reached the window, flung back the shutters and opened the window, gulping in the fresh air as she did so. Feeling a little refreshed, she inspected the room. The chill air infiltrated even her heavy winter coat and she turned to the fireplace to stir the ashes. They did not respond to the probing of the poker and Belinda realised that the fire had been dead for some time.

‘Surely she’d have a fire in the middle of winter.’

But the dank air declared this was not so.

The room appeared much as she remembered it. Against the wall there was a divan that looked as though it had been used as a bed. The chairs that she

and her aunt sat in when they first met were in their place and a cup and saucer stood on a small table next to her aunt's chair. Belinda took the cup and inspected it. The dregs of the milky tea were covered with a layer of dust.

The shiver of fear returned and Belinda sensed that there might be an unpleasant reason for her aunt's unexplained absence.

'She may be ill in bed,' thought Belinda, glancing up to the ceiling.

She had never been upstairs, and a tremor of dread made her shiver more violently. Belinda crossed the long room to a door that she remembered led into the back hall and the staircase. The stench increased as she pulled the door towards her and she heard tiny sounds of scattering feet.

'Rats!'

The stench and the prospect of vermin made Belinda hesitate but she was determined to find her aunt. She moved tentatively across the hall, her hands held searchingly before her. Her foot caught on something solid and she stumbled and felt herself falling.

With a scream she plummeted onto the grimy floor.

Her hand slid in a sticky substance. Stunned, she fought to catch her breath. She lay dazed for a moment, her head on the floor.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the imperceptible light from the other room Belinda realised that only inches away, her aunt Jane's deathly glazed eyes stared accusingly out of her decaying face.

Two

The police carried aunt Jane's body bag to the waiting police van, and the coffee, percolated by a young constable to mask the smell of death, had warmed Belinda and helped overcome her shock. It was to be some days before she remembered clearly the hours between finding the body of her aunt and Inspector Jordan questioning her. She had answered automatically those questions – how little she knew of her aunt – the letter requesting her presence – her arrival and discovery of the body. A police doctor had recommended a sedative and Belinda, when eventually free of the police questions, checked into a hotel in Bath and spent a disturbed night with vague nightmares of rodents and giant birds tearing at flesh.

Still bewildered the next morning, she called at the police station as requested before returning to London.

'It appears your aunt had been dead for over a week. The doctor puts the time of death as no later than last Saturday.'

Belinda shuddered. The thought of the rats violating her aunt's body filled her with revulsion. She turned pale and Inspector Jordan hurriedly poured her a glass of water.

'It must have been a shock to you, Miss.'

Belinda's glance to him indicated that she felt this to be an understatement. She took a tentative sip of the water and wondered if the medicine chest attached to the police station wall would stretch to a stiff brandy.

'Have you any idea ... how she ...?'

Jordan shrugged. 'Tripped on the stairs most likely. At that age, you know?' He splayed his hands before him. 'There is a nasty gash on the head and a few broken bones, so it's almost certain that's how it happened. There are paint marks on her walking stick and corresponding dents on the balustrade where it struck the wood as she fell. Mind you, we'll carry out further tests, however I think you'll find it was a simple fall on the stairs.'

Tears sprang to Belinda's eyes. She was suddenly overcome by the reality of the lonely death her aunt had endured. She fumbled for her handkerchief and wiped her eyes. Jordan watched dispassionately. He had seen too many grieving victims to be affected by the tears of this slip of a girl. Besides, she was a relative of the old girl and she had found the body. For all he knew she could have pushed the old duck down the stairs herself. He'd known stranger things to happen to enable relatives to get Granny's life savings. Still, it did look like an accident. The old bird had probably had one too many and took a tumble. The autopsy would clear up any doubts.

'It seems such an awful thing to have happened.' Belinda stuffed her soggy handkerchief into her pocket. 'How long? I mean ... would she ...?'

'Would she have suffered? No, probably not. A fall like that at her age ... she probably didn't know what hit her.'

Belinda looked up, startled.

‘Hit her?’

The Inspector gave a half-chuckle. ‘A figure of speech, Miss. I don’t mean to imply that she was struck a blow.’

That we know about, he thought to himself.

Belinda mulled over this “figure of speech” on her way back to London on the Sunday morning but as the train pulled into Paddington station she shook herself out of her reverie and decided that the police were probably right; it was a fall down the stairs that caused her aunt’s death.

On the tube home to South Kensington Belinda realised that she had not discovered what it was that her aunt had wanted to tell her.

‘I’ll never know now, I suppose,’ Belinda sighed to herself. She remembered her aunt’s letter, and took it out of her handbag to read it once again. Her eyes misted over as she imagined her aunt eager to pass on some exciting news and then meeting her death in that terrible way. As Belinda put the note back into the envelope she glanced at the postmark.

It was dated the previous Tuesday. It was not until she was putting the key into the door of her flat that Belinda realised the significance of the date.

‘But the police said she died the weekend before!’ she cried aloud.

Without bothering to close the door Belinda hurried into the apartment, switched on a desk lamp and under the bright light inspected the envelope once again.

It was true. The stamp bore the previous Tuesday's date.

The following Tuesday Belinda received a letter that bore the inscription Munro, Munro & Clarke, Solicitors, BATH. Filled with curiosity, Belinda slit the envelope open then sat down at the table to read the contents.

Dear Miss Lawrence,

Re: the estate of Miss Jane Lawrence.

We are handling the estate of the late Miss Lawrence and would be pleased if you would make contact with our office in Bath to arrange a meeting at a suitably agreeable time.

A funeral service has been arranged for the late Miss Lawrence to take place at 2:00 p.m. Friday next at the village church at Milford.

Other than adding condolences the letter revealed little more than the name of the sender, one of the above-mentioned Munros.

The following Friday saw Belinda once again boarding the train at Paddington bound for Bath. This time she did fall asleep, almost as soon as the train pulled away from the platform. The events of the weekend and another fight with David about time off from work had unsettled her and she had slept badly all week.

The rhythm of the train quickly lulled her into a restful sleep and she dreamed of her schooldays in Australia and golden summers on the beaches.

An abrupt jolt of the carriage stirred her into consciousness and she sleepily opened her eyes, aware of a kink in the neck and suddenly aware also that her head rested on the shoulder of the person next to her. Mortified, she hastily sat up and turned to her neighbour to apologise.

Her embarrassment turned to surprise and then hostility. Smiling back at her was her coffee-dispensing companion of the previous week.

‘Sorry,’ he shrugged, ‘this really was the only seat available.’

Belinda could not trust herself to reply and shrank away from his presence, feigning interest in the passing fields. His closeness and the warmth of the carriage made Belinda feel over-heated and she struggled forward in her seat to remove her coat. The young man was suddenly attentive.

‘Do you want to get past?’ he queried, somehow managing to make his legs disappear.

‘No, thank you. It’s just getting rather hot,’ Belinda replied tersely as she fumbled with the buttons of the coat. She managed to slip it from her shoulders but was then trapped in what looked like a Bond Street version of a straitjacket.

‘Here, let me help you,’ her companion offered, and before she could reply, he had taken hold of the coat collar and pulled. The coat came away from Belinda’s body and as it did so she heard the undeniable sound of fabric tearing.

The young man gasped and turned a bright red.

Belinda looked down to see the lining of her coat rent from collar to hem. The coat had caught in the armrest and her companion's strength had done the rest.

'Oh!' she cried. 'My new coat.'

'I'm terribly sorry, Miss. I can't think how it happened. Can it be mended?'

His blue eyes pleaded forgiveness. The soft burr of his West Country accent tamed Belinda's initial anger.

'Oh, well,' she said inspecting the lining, 'I expect it won't show. I can get it repaired when I return to London.'

'You must allow me to pay for it,' he said, and plunged his hand into the pocket of his jacket.

'No, really. Please, just forget about it.'

He shook his head and his blond hair fell down over his brow. 'That I can't do. You must think me a great fool. I insist that you let me pay for repairs.'

Belinda began to feel annoyed. An apology was one thing but to keep insisting upon compensation was another. She took a deep breath.

'Look. I said just forget about it. It was an accident, besides it can easily be repaired. Now if you don't mind, let's drop the subject.'

The young man looked doubtful.

'Well, if you insist, but I really think that you should let me ...'

Belinda turned her angry eyes upon him. Honestly. He was becoming a bore.

'And I really think you should forget it. Please! Just let me alone. Forget it ever happened.'

She flung her coat over her knees and turned so that she faced the window. Slowly she brought her

breathing under control. There was a formidable silence and the young man shrugged, glanced at Belinda and put his money away in his pocket.

‘I’m going to move to another carriage, Miss. I think it wiser. Again, I offer my apologies.’

Belinda gave him a curt nod. He smiled back at her, a smile full of charm. However, all the charm in the world would not have won Belinda over at that moment and she turned her attention to the passing scenery. He reached over to take his canvas bag from the overhead rack and Belinda suddenly felt as though she was in a snow storm, for what appeared to be flakes drifted down around her, softly at first and then heavily.

Belinda was deluged with thousands of flower seeds.

Speechless with rage she turned to look up to her tormentor. He stood gaping down at her as she brushed countless seeds from her hair. His face flushed red and with a gesture of hopelessness he grasped his open bag and hurried away to vanish into the next compartment.

A cold wind blew across the tiny churchyard as the coffin was lowered into the soggy earth. Doleful chimes from the ancient church tower sounded tenuously across the valley and Belinda shuddered involuntarily at the sight of a worm slowly threading through the freshly dug soil. Belinda was the lone mourner, except for a representative of the legal firm of Munro, Munro & Clarke, a rather spotty-faced young man who appeared to suffer from rampageous adenoids, and Inspector Jordan who had investigated aunt Jane’s death. The

latter joined Belinda as she slowly made her way back to the solicitor's car, which had met her at the train station, transported her to the graveyard and was waiting now to convey her to Bath and a meeting with a senior member of the legal firm.

'It's almost certain that the old lady died as a result of a fall, Miss,' mumbled Inspector Jordan, and blew his nose loudly. 'Excuse me. Rotten cold.' He coughed by way of explanation.

'Almost certain?' queried Belinda.

Jordan nodded and began to suck noisily on a cough lozenge. 'One can never be quite certain, but there appears to be no break-in, nothing stolen and no motive for any attack. The autopsy revealed wounds equivalent to a fall of that distance, so ...' Again, he splayed his hands out before him as though protecting himself from a fall. Belinda walked on in silence and surveyed the deserted churchyard.

'Don't you think it odd that no one from the village attended the funeral?' she said eventually. Her companion shrugged and wiped his nose.

'You forget, Miss, your aunt was a bit of a recluse and didn't welcome any contact with her neighbours.'

'Yes, but after living here all her life, I mean, it seems a bit peculiar. I'm sure there must have been someone in the village or nearby who knew her, saw her from time to time. Aren't country people supposed to know everything that's going on around them?' Belinda stopped by a large monument that tilted at a precarious angle. Jordan stamped his feet and rubbed his hands together briskly.

'I hear that she made herself unpopular with the locals, Miss. Gave them short shrift. People have long

memories around here. They don't like their attempts at friendship thrown back in their face.'

'Will there be any further enquiries into her death?'

'No,' replied the man firmly, 'the coroner's report has gone to her solicitor, "death by accidental causes". The case is closed.' He put his hands rigidly into his coat pockets and rocked gently back on his feet as though to emphasise the finality of the matter. Belinda nodded uncertainly, a hundred questions still seething through her mind.

'But there is the letter.'

A faint look of annoyance crossed the Inspector Jordan's face.

'Letter, Miss?'

'You said she died at the weekend, or no later than Saturday,' said Belinda tenaciously, 'yet the letter she sent to me was mailed on the following Tuesday.'

Jordan glanced at his watch. Afternoon tea would now be served at the station. He was feeling peckish – "feed a cold".

'Probably held up in the post. It can happen you know. Or maybe she got a neighbour to post it and they forgot to do it straight away.'

'But you said she wouldn't talk to the neighbours.'

There was a brief and resentful silence. 'As I said, probably held up in the post,' repeated Jordan testily. He glanced at his watch. 'Must be on my way now, Miss. You all right for a lift?' He didn't look as though he much cared one way or the other. Belinda nodded and indicated the waiting solicitor's car. The hungry Inspector bade her farewell and, with a caution to accept the coroner's report and not fret, he set off eagerly for his tea.

Belinda walked slowly to the car. As she was about to step into it she glanced back to the churchyard where the gravediggers were completing their cheerless task.

Shaded by the protection of the tombs encircling the church was a dark figure.

She straightened up to get a clearer view. The figure, as though sensing her inquisitive gaze, moved sharply into the gloomy shroud of the surrounding foliage and vanished. Belinda's heart beat faster. The mysterious visitor sent a tingle of apprehension through her. If it was a genuine mourner, why had they not taken their place beside the grave?

From her vantage point beneath the shadowy trees, the woman in black muttered a profanity that was entirely out of place in the churchyard.

She sank down onto a long neglected tomb and cursed again when she saw the state of her new shoes. Her jaw set firmly in passionate ill will, she clamped a cigarette between scarlet lips, lit it, and exhaled disenchanted smoke from her long slender nose.

A gust of arctic air made the woman shiver and tuck wispy tinted hair back beneath her sleek fur hat.

The thud, thud of earth shovelled onto the wooden coffin only added to her exasperation, as the gravediggers committed Jane Victoria Lawrence's body to eternity.

'If the old bitch had only listened to reason.' The violent mute words echoed in the woman's brain. But there was no use crying over spilt blood.

It seemed there was an heir to the property and that could present either a help or a hindrance.

With an inquisitive eye she observed Belinda entering the car and being driven away.

'And we have Inspector Jordan on the case. Thinks he's Somerset's version of Hercule Poirot. More like a deficient Jane Marple,' muttered the woman in derisive tones as the Inspector's car vanished over the hill.

The woman rose a little unsteadily to her feet. The chill of the graveyard was entering her bones and she needed a warming brandy. Lurking around graveyards at her time of life was a little like tempting fate.

As she ground the half-smoked cigarette into the mud, she watched the Vicar, as he headed towards the church.

The Vicar hummed fragments of a hymn to himself. He'd not only despatched Miss Jane Lawrence from this life but also from his mind. His attention was now firmly fixed on Sunday's sermon and he was oblivious to everything around him. "Our life with its temptations and struggles is often similar to a voyage on a stormy sea" was the text, but how to put it into language that his largely geriatric land-bound parishioners would relate to?

The ancient church door swung shut, there was a moment's silence, and another figure emerged from behind the building. The woman pulled her elegant coat tightly about her, burying her chin into the gratifying warmth of the fur collar. Screwing up her eyes to focus on the man, for it was a man, a well-built athletic man, she watched as he made his way through the tombstones. For a moment, a desirable feeling of sexual anticipation warmed her, allowing her features

to relax into a coquettish smile. But as the man drew nearer a frown of uneasy recognition creased her brow, adding lines to that face that had cost her dearly in cosmetic additives. Rather than confront him she turned and hurried away in the opposite direction, her black coat gradually blending into the gloomy environment.

The man had observed the funeral from the edge of the graveyard ('Serves the old biddy right. No one will miss her.') and had watched and studied the young dark haired girl who was the lone mourner.

The old lady had proved uncooperative. Her young relation might be more pliable – in more ways than one. A carnal smile twisted his lips and, certain now that he could no longer be observed, the man moved from his place of concealment and crossed the churchyard. His next step would be to contrive a meeting with the girl and discover how much she knew.

And if she proved difficult? Well, there were ways to deal with difficult women. A sudden movement in the trees alerted him to the fact that there was another mourner in the graveyard.

Hesitating, he saw a shadowy figure disappearing into the murky darkness. He recognised the swaying walk and his mocking grin developed into a snort of contemptuous laughter. So she'd got wind of the mystery as well? He wondered how much she knew. Probably very little. Still, it might pay to keep an eye on her. If she proved too inquisitive, she might have to be removed from the scene.

The car pulled up outside the solicitors' office. On the return journey to Bath Belinda had speculated on who the enigmatic mourner could be. The obvious answer was just a snooping villager. Try as she might, Belinda could not determine if the figure was that of a man or a woman.

'But if it wasn't a villager, who else could it have been?' she asked herself silently.

Aloud she answered, 'Murderer.'

The adenoidal driver gave a startled glance at her in the rear view mirror and Belinda transferred her attention to the passing houses. Yet she had spoken the word that had been haunting her for the past week.

Suppose aunt Jane had not fallen down the stairs? How else would she have acquired the wounds to her head?

Belinda herself had just walked into the house through an unlocked door.

Anyone could have done the same.

Or perhaps the intruder had left the door unlocked? And if it *had* been an intruder who murdered her aunt, why?

Were they after something?

Money?

Or was it just a random killing with no point or purpose?

Belinda snorted angrily. Inspector Jordan had been too dismissive, too ready to accept the easy explanation. There were many unanswered questions. Yet how could she prove anything? The police had their evidence and all she had was her doubts and suspicions.

And the letter.

The Munro, Munro & Clarke office into which Belinda was ushered was lined with dark panelled wood and had the odour of polish and decades of conservatism. Sitting at the gargantuan desk was the tiny white-haired figure of Mr Munro. 'I wonder which Munro he is?' thought Belinda as she made her way across the deep pile carpet. Mr Munro rose to meet her and shuffled around his desk.

'Miss Lawrence. Welcome to Bath. My condolences. You must forgive me for not attending Miss Lawrence's funeral, but my arthritis, you understand?' He extended a deformed claw. Belinda shook his hand and a shower of seeds, trapped in her sleeve cuff, cascaded onto the polished veneer of the desk. Blushing, she attempted to gather the seeds together. But the old man's eyes lit up with delight and he plucked the seeds up and examined them minutely.

'Ah, Marigolds. Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth century saint, dedicated them to the Virgin and named them Mary's Gold. Difficult to get the old fashioned ones now. They all seem to be miniature and flagrantly bulbous. I prefer the orange-gold spread of the unsullied originals. Such simple flowers. But the world nowadays seems to demand more and more exotic species, don't you agree?' He waved Belinda to a chair.

'I really wouldn't know, I'm afraid, Mr Munro. I have little knowledge of plants.'

Mr Munro looked disappointed. 'Oh, I see. I thought ...' He gesticulated at the mound of seeds on his desk. Belinda sighed.

'It would take too long to explain the seeds, I'm afraid. But I am no gardener.' The old man nodded and silently slipped a few of the seeds into his pocket.

'Well, to business, Miss Lawrence.' He opened a well-worn file. Belinda leaned forward in her chair.

'You said in your letter that you were handling my late aunt's estate?'

Mr Munro looked at her over the top of his rimless glasses.

'Great-aunt, surely?'

'Yes. I meant great-aunt,' replied Belinda, feeling as though she were suddenly back in school and had been called to the headmaster's study to explain a childish misdemeanour. The elderly man flashed her a self-satisfied smile.

'You will excuse my pedantic manner, but I believe that it is always best to be accurate in every detail, in all areas of human concern.'

Belinda nodded. She was beginning to feel just a little impatient with Mr Munro.

'How does my aunt's ... my great-aunt's death affect me, Mr Munro?'

His withered hands caressed the legal documents and he cleared his throat.

'The late Miss Jane Victoria Lawrence, of Milford in the County of Somerset,' he intoned, 'according to her last will and testament has named you as beneficiary to her estate.'

Belinda sat upright in her chair. 'Estate?'

'Yes. She has named you as her sole heir and has left you the sum of eighty thousand pounds.'

Belinda dropped her handbag. '*How much?*'

Mr Munro glanced over the top of his glasses again and replied slowly and distinctly as though talking to a hearing impaired person.

‘Eighty thousand pounds.’

Belinda sat back in shock.

‘I don’t know what to say, Mr Munro. I only met my aunt ...’ Mr Munro cleared his throat. ‘... great-aunt, I mean. I only met her once and although we sent cards to each other at Christmas, I had no idea that she would leave me such an amount of money.’

Mr Munro transferred his gaze to the papers before him.

‘That is not all she has left you. The title for her cottage and adjoining land in the village of Milford will be transferred into your name.’ Mr Munro removed his glasses and looked across his desk to Belinda. For a moment she thought his eyes revealed a touch of envy and his voice, when next he spoke, a shade resentful. ‘It seems that your aunt was very fond of you, Miss Lawrence.’

‘Great-aunt,’ whispered Belinda automatically, her eyes wide with surprise. Mr Munro coloured, cleared his throat and replaced his spectacles.

‘Er, yes. Quite so.’

‘Mr Munro,’ said Belinda, ‘I thought that perhaps my aunt had left me a piece of jewellery, nothing more. I can’t tell you how surprised I am.’

‘The late Miss Lawrence had no jewellery that I am aware of.’

‘No, I wasn’t expecting any really. Nor was I expecting to inherit the cottage or any money.’

‘Well, be that as it may, Miss Lawrence, you now own the cottage and I will have a cheque for the

required amount made out in your name.' He slid a copy of the will across the desk top, dislodging a few of the marigold seeds, which he hurriedly pocketed. Belinda glanced at the paper.

'May I visit the cottage?'

'My dear young lady, as you are now the owner of it, you may do whatever you like. It will take a few days or so to complete all the paperwork and I will require your signature on some documents, but in the meantime ...'

'In the meantime, I would dearly like to visit the cottage,' said Belinda.

'That can be arranged. As a matter of fact I am going past the village on my way home. I only come into the office for a few hours each day now. I much prefer to spend my time in my garden. I would be happy if you would accompany me, Miss Lawrence.'

Belinda sank back into the leather seats of the large car as the chauffeur ushered Mr Munro in beside her and then shut the door. The solicitor chatted on about horticultural affairs and various problems he was having with his rhododendrons. Belinda nodded politely from time to time but her attention was taken by the startling news that she now owned property and an inheritance of eighty thousand pounds.

The tiny village stood silently by, as though deserted, when the car purred to a halt outside the cottage. Stepping from the vehicle, Belinda drank in the sight of the old structure. A thrill of excitement overcame her and tears sprang to her eyes.

'Oh, it's beautiful.'

Mr Munro swayed to her side. 'Yes, my dear. And very ancient. This whole village dates back to the thirteenth century.' He fumbled with a key ring and made a selection. 'It was a religious community until the dissolution of the monasteries. Later, much later, your cottage was used as a school for young girls.' He shuffled off to the front gate in the wall.

Your cottage.

The words rang in Belinda's ears. Smiling joyfully she hurried to assist Mr Munro with the recalcitrant gate. The wild garden seemed even more unrestrained as they stepped over the threshold into the property. Mr Munro's eyes grew wide with disapproval and a frown further creased his already corrugated brow.

'Dear, dear,' he muttered, horrified. His own garden resembled a finely structured prototype. 'You will need to have the garden taken care of, Miss Lawrence, if you plan to sell the property.' He made a futile attempt at plucking some weeds away from the entrance. Belinda took the keys to open the door. She stepped slowly into the darkened hall and it took a few moments for her eyes to become used to the gloom. They made their way to the long room and Belinda opened the shutters. A spider scuttled across the dirty windowpane. The room smelt musty and damp and the chairs near the fireplace emitted a stale aroma. Mr Munro entered and stumbled over a rug, sending a cloud of dust into the still air.

'I believe your great-aunt spent most of her time in this room in recent years, even slept here.' He waved a casual claw at the divan. 'She found the stairs to the bedroom difficult, and I must say, I don't blame her.'

Belinda pulled back the covers from another window overlooking the walled garden and sunlight filled the room for the first time in many weeks. She felt elated and proud of her ownership of this cottage. Looking around the room she could see that the furnishings were good quality although a trifle worn.

On an upright piano was a collection of photographs in silver frames, which she had not noticed previously. Belinda recognised her father as a young man and with a sudden shock, herself, taken at a school concert.

'Father must have sent her a copy,' she said gently. With a determined look Belinda turned to Mr Munro. 'Will it be all right for me to stay here?' Mr Munro looked startled. 'I mean, just for the weekend,' continued Belinda. 'You see, I was planning to stay in Bath until Monday morning and thought I'd take a room in a hotel. But now that the cottage is mine ... well, is it possible, Mr Munro?'

'I don't see why not,' said the solicitor slowly, 'that is if ...' he hesitated and glanced at the door leading to the staircase. Belinda followed his gaze.

'I know what you mean.'

She strode to the door and flung it open. A moment of apprehension shook her as she viewed the scene of her aunt's death. Then she felt a calm descend on her. She turned to Mr Munro.

'You needn't fear, Mr Munro. I am not afraid. My aunt died a horrible death, but I'm certain that she was a good woman and there is no evil in this house.'

Mr Munro, unconvinced, glanced over his shoulder.

'Good woman ... yes,' he murmured absently, 'but I must warn you, there is no electricity. I had it

disconnected. And no heat. And you will have nothing to eat.'

Belinda shook her head, a wide smile on her lips.

'No worries, Mr Munro. I'm sure I can find some wood for the fire. And as for food, I can get something at the pub.' She walked to the piano and took up a fading photograph of her great-aunt as a young woman. 'I feel that I owe my aunt ...' she gave Mr Munro an apologetic smile, 'my great-aunt, that respect.'

The old man nodded. 'I know what you mean, Miss Lawrence. I can raise no objection to your staying here. Technically you own the place, even though your signature is not on documents. I will leave you my card with my home telephone number on it. Should you have any difficulties you will be able to reach me. I live not too far away.' He handed her his card and together they walked to the front door.

Belinda wondered if she should tell Mr Munro of her suspicions about the way her aunt died. But doubts overwhelmed her. 'What evidence do I have?' she asked herself once again. Besides, Mr Munro had the coroner's report and he seemed satisfied.

The old man was inspecting objects with the eye of a connoisseur and casting inquisitive glances around the rooms as though he expected to discover something of special value.

Belinda looked out into the wilderness that had once been a perfectly maintained garden. The wall, which ran beside the roadway, dipped down so that from the front door of the cottage she had an unbroken view of the road leading down to the pub. She breathed in a

deep contented breath and suddenly felt the tension and unease that had haunted her lift and evaporate.

A figure emerged from the shadow of the pub and began the steep climb up the hill. Belinda idly watched the shape as it came closer.

‘A neighbour,’ she thought, and smiled at the prospect of getting to know the small community. Her smile began to harden and turn into a frown as the approaching figure became more distinct and strode into the sunlight. There was something familiar about the loping walk of the man, for it was a man. Belinda gave a gasp.

‘It’s him!’ she cried aloud.

Mr Munro guiltily dropped a small silver vase he was inspecting and hurried to her side.

‘What was that, my dear? Who is it?’

Belinda swallowed hard and stepped back into the shadows of the room.

The young man, her companion from the train, strode on up the hill towards the cottage, whistling a jaunty tune, his jacket over his shoulder.

‘That man, Mr Munro,’ Belinda whispered, ‘do you know him?’

Peering through his glasses, Mr Munro frowned as the muscular young man ambled past and out of their view.

‘Can’t say that I do, but then my eyes are not as good as they used to be. I dare say he’s one of the local boys.’

Belinda frowned. The man had annoyed her twice already. His appearance was spoiling the perfection of the moment, and the unease of recent times returned to settle on her as the sun dipped behind a cloud. A

cool wind disturbed the dead leaves in the abandoned garden.

Mr Munro waved goodbye and disappeared into his waiting car. Alone at last in the cottage Belinda stood at the bottom of the staircase where her aunt had died so horribly. It seemed to her that the light from the long room windows faded unnaturally into blackness so dense that the staircase vanished into a menacing and all-embracing emptiness.

Three

Night came on early, and Belinda barely had time to gather some wood for a fire and rummage for a few candles before total darkness descended around the house and a blackness unknown in urban streets engulfed the miniature village.

Belinda realised that there would be no point in attempting to go to the pub for a meal. Carrying a candle to the kitchen she foraged for supper but had to be content with some dry biscuits and a lump of suspicious cheese. Cold water completed her meal and she made her way back to the comparative warmth of the long room and the fire.

The candle flickered in a sudden draft and phantasmal shadows leapt and swooped over the grimy walls.

At the foot of the stairs Belinda's breathing quickened and she cast a hasty glance at the spot where her aunt's body had lain.

With a tremor of distaste she realised that she would have to clean away the dried blood.

She hurried on into the long room, shut the door forcibly behind her and in an irrational moment thrust a chair under the handle.

'No one can get in now,' she muttered, wondering at the same time just who – or what – she imagined would try.

Taking a book from her aunt's library shelf, Belinda tried to interest herself in travelling Britain in the 1920s, but eventually found herself drifting off into a fitful sleep, doomed to spend a restless night on the couch before the fading firelight.

In the early hours she questioned her sanity for staying alone in the cottage as the strange surroundings, the eerie country noises, odd creaks and groans of the old house combined to haunt her metropolitan mind, so that she fell into a fretful doze as the dawn light began to creep in around the edge of the heavy shutters.

The screech of the front gate woke her from a heavy slumber. With a cry of fright, she threw back the rug covering her and was instantly alert and on her feet.

The romantic cottage seemed to disappear in an instant and Belinda felt she was trapped in a nightmare setting where unknown terrors threatened to engulf her. The crunch of a twig and the scrape of a shoe on the broken slate path seemed abnormally loud in the silent house.

With every nerve taut and vigilant Belinda tiptoed into the hall. Her heart leapt into her mouth as a dark shadow appeared at the window. The flesh on the back of her neck tingled and a shiver made her teeth chatter. She froze on the spot and watched as the shadow paused and then moved slowly to the other window.

'It's that fool from the train,' she said softly. 'He's going to be a nuisance. I was right. He *is* the village idiot.'

The man moved back to the front door and Belinda heard him rattling the handle. Summoning all her courage she took a deep breath and hurried to the door. She would have to put a stop to this nuisance. The light blinded her as she flung the door open and she could just make out the silhouette of a black shape.

‘What in the hell do you want?’ Belinda demanded, her voice hoarse and authoritative.

The man stumbled back in fright and into the morning sunlight. To Belinda’s amazement, it was not the man from the train but a tall, handsome man, dressed in a dark suit and exuding refinement.

‘Oh,’ gasped Belinda, ‘I thought you were someone else.’

The stranger smiled.

‘Someone you don’t like, I imagine.’ Before Belinda could reply he produced a card from his pocket and presented it to her. ‘You must forgive me for trespassing, but I knew the old house was empty, or at least I thought it was. If I had known you were in residence, I would have arranged to call at a convenient time. My name is Mark Sallinger.’ Belinda glanced at his card and saw that it belonged to a real estate firm in Bath.

‘Well, Mr Sallinger, how may I help you?’ asked Belinda, giving this attractive visitor a relieved smile.

‘Business, I’m afraid, Miss ...?’ He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

‘Lawrence. The cottage belongs to my aunt, or rather did. It’s mine now. My aunt left it to me.’

Her visitor absorbed this information.

‘I see,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘I heard that old Miss Lawrence died recently. That was why I came to visit. I thought that perhaps it might be going up for sale and wanted to inspect the property.’

Belinda gave a small laugh. ‘Oh, Mr Sallinger –’

‘Please call me Mark,’ he interrupted. Belinda nodded.

‘Mark ... I think it’s a little early for that. I only arrived last night and I’m not sure yet what I intend to do.’

‘Will you be staying on here?’

Belinda considered this.

‘As I said, I’m not sure. Perhaps I will.’

Mark smiled. ‘If you do, you’ll be a welcome addition to the village. But in the meantime should you decide to sell, I’d be delighted if you would consider my company. We have vast experience selling property in this area. I’m sure we could get you a good price.’

Belinda was amused at his smooth business manner.

‘Yes, I’m sure you would ... Mark.’

Mark stepped back from the door and turned to go. He gave another smile and waved goodbye. ‘Perhaps I’ll see you again,’ he called as he moved down the path to the garden gate.

Belinda watched him disappear and slowly closed the door behind her. As she pulled the shutters open to admit the daylight the enjoyable thought ran through her head that it might not be such a quiet village after all.

Belinda hardly had time to wash her face in icy water when she heard a knock at the door. Peering through the window she saw her visitor was a hearty-looking young woman about her own age and that she carried a tray covered by a tea towel.

‘Hello,’ said the woman cheerfully, as Belinda opened the door, ‘I’m your next-door neighbour, Rosemary Aitkins. I heard that you’d arrived and I thought that you might not have anything to eat, so I prepared you some tea and toast.’ Beaming a wide smile she held the tray forward.

‘Oh, thank you very much. How kind. Come in,’ said Belinda, grasping the tray and inhaling the luscious aroma of hot buttered toast. The two women entered the long room and sat by the fireplace.

‘I’m Belinda Lawrence,’ said Belinda as she took a huge bite out of the toast and wiped a drop of butter from her chin. ‘Thank you for breakfast. I only had some cheese and biscuits that I found in the kitchen for dinner. Now I’m starving. But how did you know I was here?’

Rosemary laughed and wandered about the dusty room with a curiosity that seemed a natural gift.

‘Things don’t remain a secret long in this village. I’m sorry about your aunt. You are her niece, aren’t you?’

‘Great-niece,’ mumbled Belinda through a mouthful of toast.

‘If we’d had any idea that she was ...’ Rosemary hesitated and Belinda smiled understandingly.

‘Thank you. But you weren’t to know. And accidents do happen.’ Even as she said the words Belinda felt the doubts returning.

‘Your aunt never welcomed visitors, and I’ve been dying to sneak a look around the cottage,’ Rosemary said as she turned back to Belinda who was pouring a mug of steaming tea, ‘you know what I mean. I’m such a sticky beak.’

Belinda laughed. She felt relaxed with this happy-go-lucky girl. ‘Feel free to wander about. Actually, you can come upstairs with me to investigate the rooms up there. I didn’t have the nerve to go by myself last night.’

Rosemary rubbed her arms as though suddenly cold.

‘I don’t know how you did it. I wouldn’t have stayed here alone if you’d paid me. Not at night.’

As they delicately stepped around the dried blood at the foot of the stairs, Belinda wondered why, if Rosemary knew she was alone there last night, she had not visited and introduced herself then?

In what was obviously once her aunt’s bedroom the two women inspected the faded lace bedspread and doilies that covered the dresser.

‘Your aunt was very pretty,’ said Rosemary suddenly. Belinda looked at her curiously. Pretty was not the word she would have used to describe the old woman. ‘I mean when she was young,’ continued Rosemary hurriedly, as she nodded at the oval photograph on the wall above the bed. Belinda joined her.

‘You’re right. She was.’ The black and white features of Jane Lawrence, twenty-one years old and posed in a white ball gown, gazed down on the two women from another age.

'Sad to think how she finished ...' Rosemary stopped suddenly. 'Sorry. That was a bit crass.' She glanced guiltily at Belinda.

'Yes. I know what you mean.' Belinda turned and walked thoughtfully to the window. Rosemary, anxious to change the subject of the old lady's death, joined her. The two women looked down onto the overgrown garden.

'Will you be staying?' asked Rosemary as she turned away and idly inspected the contents of an old sewing basket.

'Do you know, I think I will,' replied Belinda, scanning the distant hills.

'I was hoping you'd say that. We could do with some new blood around here.'

'It seems so peaceful after London. Besides, to tell the truth I've been restless for the past few months and a change like this might be just the thing. Of course, I will need to make some modifications to the house.' Belinda ran her fingers along the dusty window ledge. 'Get central heating and paint the place.' She glanced out the window and sighed. 'And then there's the garden. I don't know when I'll find time to do that. It'll take months.'

Rosemary joined her at the window.

'Perhaps we can help you. My brother and I, I mean. He's a landscape gardener and could give you some ideas.'

'Would he do it for me if I paid him? Gardening isn't my thing.'

Rosemary laughed. 'Try and stop him. He said last night that it broke his heart to see Miss Lawrence's

garden going to wrack and ruin. He'd jump at the chance, I'm sure.'

'Good,' sighed Belinda, 'then I must meet him.'

Rosemary pointed out the window. 'Well, you won't need to wait long. Here he is now, coming up the road.' Belinda looked down onto the road and her heart sank to her shoes.

It was the young man from the train.

'The village idiot,' she muttered involuntarily.

Rosemary gave her a sharp look.

'What did you say?'

Belinda blushed.

'I'm sorry,' she stammered, 'I didn't mean that. It's just that I think we've already met. Yesterday on the train.'

Rosemary gave Belinda a searching look and a smile hovered about her lips.

'You don't mean,' she chuckled, 'you don't mean that it was you. Oh, you poor thing. Jacob told me last night that he made life hell for some unfortunate woman on the train yesterday. He was so embarrassed.' She grasped Belinda's arm. 'You must come and meet him and allow him to apologise. He's really harmless.'

'I don't know how you can say that,' retorted Belinda, as Rosemary dragged her down the stairs. 'You haven't seen the damage he did to my coat, not to mention my skirt.'

Rosemary's eyes widened. 'I haven't heard about the skirt. You must tell me.' She ran out into the garden and called over the wall to her brother. 'Jacob. Jacob, come here. I have someone for you to meet.'

Jacob, his fair hair brushed back from his strong face, sauntered over to his sister and looked up to her as she stood leaning over the wall.

‘Jacob, may I introduce Miss Lawrence. However, I think you’ve already met.’ She collapsed into silent laughter. Jacob looked bewildered and his handsome masculine face reddened as Belinda appeared beside his sister.

‘You!’

The two women looked down at him and, for an instant, Belinda thought that he was going to make a run for it. She took pity on him; after all, he was going to be a neighbour.

‘Won’t you come in?’ she asked. Jacob hesitated and then, taking a deep breath, he strode up to the gate and entered the garden.

‘Miss Lawrence?’ he said, as he put out his hand. ‘Welcome to Milford. I want you to know that I am sorry for what happened yesterday and I hope you’ll forgive me.’

‘I’m sure she will,’ said Rosemary, ‘and if she gives me her coat, I can repair the damage.’

Belinda took Jacob’s hand, and he grasped hers firmly.

‘Thank you, Jacob,’ she said, ‘please, let’s forget about yesterday.’

‘But you must allow me to make recompense.’

Belinda was aware that he was holding her hand far too long and she quickly removed it from his grasp. ‘I thought we had settled that on the train,’ she replied testily. ‘I told you to forget it, and I meant it.’

‘But you ...’

Rosemary stepped forward quickly.

‘Jacob, Miss Lawrence is interested in restoring the garden.’ Turning to Belinda she continued: ‘If you’ll fetch me the coat, I’ll do the repairs now.’

It took Belinda only a few minutes to show her neighbour the tear in the coat lining and Rosemary set off for home with the promise that she would return it shortly.

Belinda wandered out into the garden. There was no sign of Jacob. A precocious spring flower thrusting through the overgrown grass caught her attention and she stooped to inspect it.

‘It’s a *crocus angustifolius*,’ said a disembodied voice. Startled, Belinda stood upright as Jacob dropped to the ground from the tree above.

‘Can’t you behave like a normal person,’ she snapped sharply, ‘you frightened the life out of me. Hiding in trees like a schoolboy.’

Jacob looked defensive. ‘I was just inspecting the branches in the tree, to see what damage had been done to them. I call that normal behaviour, even if you don’t.’

Belinda silently cursed him. He was a pain, she decided, but he might be able to help her with the garden, so she determined to humour him.

‘I was thinking about repairing the garden, and Rosemary suggested that you might be able to help me.’

‘Do you mean it?’ Jacob said earnestly. ‘Because for years I tried to talk the old battleaxe – begging your pardon – your aunt, into permitting me to restore it, but she kept to herself most of the time and would have none of it.’

‘Well, if I do stay here I shall want the garden neat and tidy, and the same applies if I should decide to sell. I intend to do some of the repairs to the house myself, such as painting and wallpapering, so I won’t have time to do the garden as well. Rosemary tells me that you do landscape gardening. What would it cost if you were to do the garden for me?’

Jacob cast his eye over the jungle of weeds and overgrown shrubs and slowly scratched his head. ‘Ah, Miss. That’s the question. I shouldn’t like to say until I had the chance to inspect the damage done and lay out some plans for you.’

‘Plans?’ asked Belinda, sudden doubts assailing her. Plans suggested time and paperwork and that added up to money unnecessarily spent. ‘Why would you need plans? Couldn’t you just set out a garden ...?’

Jacob eyed her questioningly.

‘I could, but what d’ you mean when you say “a garden”?’

Belinda floundered. ‘Just ... a garden. You know. A country garden ... am I making sense?’

‘Well, Miss. If it’s a country cottage garden you want, that may take a little time. It appears that the original garden laid down here was something more than that, and it will take some time and effort to turn it back into what you want, always supposing ...’ He left the statement unfinished. Belinda glared at him.

‘Always supposing what?’ she demanded.

Jacob scratched his head again and shuffled his feet.

‘Begging your pardon, Miss, always supposing you really know what you want.’

He glanced up to Belinda's face and was met by a steely gaze. Belinda swallowed hard and with great restraint idly kicked a weed with her foot – instead of his head as she wished.

'Mr Aitkins, I think it may be assumed that I do know what I want, and I would be pleased if you'd provide me with a quote for renovating the garden. Firstly clearing it, so that it becomes workable, then I ...' She hesitated, and glanced away from Jacob. 'Or perhaps ... we ... can decide just what sort of a garden it should be.'

Jacob smiled and placed his cloth cap on his fair head. He nodded and pulled a small worn notebook from his pocket.

'Certainly, Miss. I shall need access to the garden for a few days to determine what needs to be done ...'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Belinda, walking towards the cottage door, 'I shall be going back to London on Monday and it will be a week or so before I return, so please, take as much time as you like and come here whenever you need.' She stopped at the porch, folded her arms and leant against the doorframe. Jacob followed making pencilled observations in the notebook.

'Are you frightened you'll forget?' Belinda asked mockingly.

'No,' replied Jacob slowly, as he put away the pad and pencil, 'I always keep a note of any job I begin. A job I mean to finish, that is.' He thrust his hands in his hip pockets and stood for a moment looking at her, a happy smile on his handsome face. Belinda shifted uneasily under his inspection.

‘Well, I’ll say goodbye then,’ he said, lifting his cap, ‘and I’ll have a quote for you when you’re next in the village.’ He paused, glanced away, and then back at Belinda. ‘And, might I say, it will be a pleasure having you as a neighbour, Miss.’

With a nod of his head he walked down the path and onto the road. Belinda watched him stride away, his long legs thrusting firmly down at each step and his broad shoulders swinging to an unheard natural rhythm. She smiled to herself and had to admit, once again, that he might be dim, he might be irritating, but he was an attractive creature.

Belinda spent the next few hours exploring the cottage. The first task was the most unpleasant. With an archaic mop and a bucket of water she cleaned the blood from the floor. The water coloured a light ruby, and Belinda reverently poured it over the rudimentary tips of some crocuses. She said a little prayer, wiped her misty eyes, and turned resolutely to the task of cleaning her house.

Her house.

Belinda’s breast swelled with pleasure as she gazed at the facade of the building. The windows of the top floor were open to air the musty bedrooms and it struck Belinda that there was something odd about the end room that had been her aunt’s. She could not define what it was that struck her as curious but it seemed that the window was in the wrong place even though it appeared to be architecturally correct. She shrugged off the uncertainty to hurry indoors.

The kitchen was old fashioned and although it had a gas stove it dated from the nineteen-thirties and would have to be replaced. The furnishings needed some repair and apart from the obvious requirements such as central heating and some new appliances, the house was in surprisingly good condition.

‘A new coat of paint, and some elbow grease, will have the place sparkling in no time,’ Belinda thought as she climbed the stairs to what had been her aunt’s bedroom. As she did, she inspected the carpet for wear. If her aunt had fallen on the stairs, perhaps she had tripped on a worn carpet? But there was no sign of anything that could trip a person. Belinda got down on her hands and knees and pulled at the carpet on the top stair. It was firm and secure.

‘Well, she didn’t trip over the carpet, that’s certain,’ she thought with some disappointment. It would have laid her doubts to rest if there was evidence that proved the police’s theory. ‘I suppose it is always possible that she just lost her balance and fell.’ But even as she thought it, Belinda instinctively rejected the notion. Yet why should she be so convinced that it was not an accident?

The bedroom had an Old World quality of lace and faded flowers, and as Belinda began to collect her aunt’s clothes to give to a charity, her gaze fell upon the waste paper bin beside the dresser. Some scraps of cotton and a garish red business card revealed themselves as Belinda rummaged through the bin. She inspected the card that bore the inscription:

Heirloom Antiques – Specialists in objets d’art & Georgian Silver. Proprietor, H. Whitby
and an address in Bath.

Turning the card over, Belinda read, in barely decipherable handwriting,

"Do you have anything you wish to sell? If so give me a call."

It was signed "Mrs Hazel Whitby".

Belinda put the card aside. There were also a number of screwed up pages from a writing pad. Belinda unfolded them. The easily recognisable spidery handwriting of her aunt scrawled across the page. Three notes were addressed to her and were obviously attempts at drafting the letter that had finally been sent to Belinda. The first read:

Dear Belinda, you will no doubt be surprised to hear from me but I have something that will interest you. It concerns the cottage and as you

The letter ended abruptly and had been discarded. The second consisted only of:

Dear Bellinda,

... with a line drawn through "Bellinda". The third was more detailed.

*Dear Belinda,
You will be surprised to receive this letter but I must see you urgently. It concerns the cottage and as I intend to leave it to you, you should be aware
of what I have discovered.
No doubt you have heard of Lancelot Bro*

Again the letter ended suddenly and had been screwed up and consigned to the waste bin. Belinda considered her reflection in the dusty mirror of the dresser.

‘Lancelot who?’ she asked her diametric twin.

The squeal of the garden gate sent her scurrying to the window. Rosemary made her exuberant way through the weeds clutching Belinda’s coat in her hands. Belinda smiled and hurried downstairs to greet her neighbour.

‘Rosemary. It’s perfect,’ Belinda exclaimed, delightedly inspecting the lining of her coat. ‘You’ve done a wonderful job. How can I thank you?’

‘Please,’ laughed Rosemary, ‘I was just repairing the damage done by my clumsy brother. Talking of whom, he is over the moon about restoring your garden and he told me to ask you to come for dinner tonight. I was going to invite you anyway, because the pub food is just that – pub food, and I’m sure you have nothing in the house.’

Belinda nodded in agreement. ‘That sounds wonderful. I’d be delighted.’

‘And I don’t suppose you have any hot water here either, so if you want a bath, come over before dinner, say about five o’clock and make use of our bathroom.’

Belinda spent the rest of the day in the cottage making discoveries, which included a Spode dining service and a collection of Waterford crystal goblets.

As the sun increased in warmth, she wandered down the hill past the pub and along the old railway tracks, long forgotten now and overgrown with weeds;

encountered a rippling stream that lead to an ancient water mill; exchanged pleasantries with a few of the locals; and made her way back to the cottage as the sun began to sink behind the nearby hills. The charm of the country overwhelmed her and the thought of returning to noisy, dusty London on the Monday morning grew more unattractive by the minute.

The far wall of her property formed the side of the pub's car park, and Belinda decided to return to the cottage via her own garden.

A wooden beer barrel provided a ready-made stile and she dropped effortlessly down into the damp earth beneath a large-oak tree. Various overgrown paths presented themselves and Belinda chose the least congested and the one that revealed the rooftop of the house in the distance. She strode on up the hill, her breathing increasing as the steep slope took its toll, while around her the branches began to thicken. The path stopped abruptly and Belinda paused to catch her breath.

In the thick foliage the silence was almost tangible and her breathing sounded unnaturally loud in her ear. She sensed rather than heard the snap of twigs breaking and held her breath tightly to decipher the cause.

Something was rushing helter-skelter towards her.

With a broken cry Belinda ran.

Crusted fingers of branches mauled her as she ran blindly towards the sanctuary of the house. The pursuing creature crashed wildly through the undergrowth, gaining at every step.

Almost senseless with fright she stumbled into the open space before the house and fell heavily over a

displaced paving stone. For a moment she thought she would faint.

Then she sensed and heard the thing approach her and the snorting and licking being was upon her, yelping delightedly after the exciting chase.

Belinda opened her eyes and beheld the black snout and friendly face of a large brown dog that leapt and gambolled about her, begging for the game to continue.

Tears of relief and amusement flooded down her cheeks as she sat upright and patted the energetic mongrel. It licked the tears away and Belinda shrieked with laughter and pleasure. Suddenly the dog was still and alert. Pointed ears pricked up and it looked off into the depths of the garden.

Once again Belinda heard the indisputable sound of something moving in the trees.

The dog bounded swiftly into the shrubs towards the sound, leaving Belinda alone and exposed. She scrambled to her feet and ran to seek the protection of the house. The heavy door slammed shut behind her and she felt secure. For the moment. For there was a growing realisation within her that some obscure dread was slowly beginning to encircle her.

A little after five, as the twilight gave way to the evening gloom, Belinda made her way up the hill to Jacob and Rosemary's cottage. She carried her overnight bag containing a pair of jeans and a warm woollen top.

'Come in,' Rosemary greeted her warmly, and ushered her into the cosy dwelling. The bathroom was

warm and smelt of tantalising perfumes. 'Now you take your time with your bath,' she continued as she heaped thick towels on Belinda's arm, 'dinner will be in three-quarters of an hour. Jacob is on his way home and is bringing a special bottle of wine,' she concluded with a broad grin.

Belinda sank back into the scented foam and gave herself over to the luxury of the hot water. The country air and the exercise had made her pleasantly sleepy.

'I'm just popping down to the shops in the next village,' called Rosemary, from the door, 'I'm out of mustard and I need some for the roast beef.' Belinda heard her close the front door and drive away in her car.

'A car,' said Belinda to herself, 'I suppose I shall have to get one. I'll need it to do shopping and to get into town.'

Her thoughts flashed from the need of a car to the unexplained letters that aunt Jane had begun and discarded.

'What was it she wanted to tell me?'

Belinda swished the comforting warm water over her arms. Her aunt had obviously started to reveal the secret in one of the letters but rejected the idea, preferring to tell her personally.

'Was it so important that she feared the letter falling into other hands?' Belinda wiped her face with a sponge. 'Was it significant enough for someone to murder her?'

Again the feeling that her aunt had not died a natural death took hold. Yet the police thought otherwise. Was she being over-dramatic? Nevertheless the connection between her aunt's letters and her

death seemed unmistakable to Belinda. Did it have something to do with the incomplete name in the abandoned letter?

‘What was it?’ murmured Belinda. ‘Lancelot Bro...? Bro... what? She ran some more hot water into the tub. ‘Bronte? What was Charlotte and Emily’s brother’s name?’ Belinda racked her brain but the name eluded her. He was a poet and a painter. Had aunt Jane discovered a painting by him? And would that be a strong enough motive for murder?

The belief that her aunt was murdered grew stronger by the minute, but Belinda realised she could produce no evidence to confirm her conviction. She lazily washed her smooth legs and had just pulled the plug when she heard a car come to a stop.

Time for dinner. She rose from the water and enveloped herself in the towel. She began to hum gently to herself and pushed thoughts of murder from her mind, giving herself over to the pleasant contemplation of renovating the cottage.

‘Branwell. Branwell Bronte.’

The name popped unsolicited into her mind.

Well, that put paid to that theory. Belinda’s thoughts returned automatically to the mysterious name in her aunt’s letter.

She had just finished drying herself and was reaching for her clothes when she heard the stairs creak and slow shuffling footsteps at the door.

Her flesh tingled and her eyes widened as she saw the handle of the bathroom door slowly begin to turn.

Four

Belinda took an apprehensive step backwards.

The door swung open. Jacob entered yawning, his eyes shut tight in a sleepy grimace and a towel flung over his bare shoulder.

The near-naked Belinda gasped, and Jacob came to an abrupt halt. His eyes opened wide in astonishment. Belinda clutched the inadequate towel around her. Jacob swallowed hard and quickly exited, pulling the door closed behind him.

Belinda smiled to herself. A deep chuckle began in her breast and emerged as a full-throated laugh.

A few minutes later, fully dressed and carrying her overnight bag, Belinda descended the narrow staircase to the combined kitchen and dining room. Jacob, now wearing a dark heavy woollen pullover over his amply muscled torso, was standing at a sideboard opening a bottle of wine. Belinda paused at the bottom of the stairs and their eyes met as Jacob turned over his shoulder to look at her.

His serious features suddenly relaxed into a grin, and a moment later when Rosemary stepped in through the front door, she found the two of them roaring with laughter.

‘What’s so funny? Tell me?’

Jacob, almost choking with laughter, replied: ‘I think I owe Miss Lawrence another apology.’

The roast beef was cooked to perfection and the fresh country vegetables, grown in local gardens, provided Belinda with the most enjoyable meal she had had in many a day. After the dishes were stacked away to be washed in the morning, the three relaxed over the last of the wine.

‘I’m willing to bet, Miss Lawrence, that you’d find no finer food in any of your grand London restaurants.’ Jacob spread his long legs out, stretching and yawning. Belinda felt her eyes drawn uncontrollably to Jacob as he raised his arms above him and threw his head back so that his strong throat was exposed and blond hairs, that she now knew covered his chest, appeared at his collar.

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ she replied hurriedly, ‘but as I seldom have the opportunity to dine at grand restaurants, I’ll have to take your word for it.’

Rosemary began to prepare coffee. Belinda decided that now was as good a time as any to make enquiries about her aunt.

‘How long have you lived in Milford?’

‘Most of our lives,’ replied Rosemary as she lit the flame under the pot. ‘Jacob was born shortly after we moved here from Wells. That’s where we lived when I was born and our parents moved shortly after, so Jacob grew up here in Milford.’

Belinda transferred her attention to Jacob who was toying with the salt cellar.

‘Then you would have known aunt Jane very well?’

Jacob’s fingers froze on the salt cellar and Rosemary turned abruptly to face the table. Brother and sister exchanged a hasty glance.

Rosemary shrugged. 'Not really. No one did – very well.'

Belinda looked from one to the other.

'But you live right behind her house. Do you mean over all those years you never spoke?' she questioned unbelievably.

Rosemary hesitated and dropped her eyes as she turned back to the coffeepot.

'Well, your aunt didn't welcome visitors. She was –'

'She was a cantankerous old maid who made life uncomfortable for everyone who came near her.'

Rosemary shot Jacob a look that implied he should hold his tongue. Belinda looked at him and he met her gaze steadily.

'Perhaps,' said Belinda frostily, 'she may have had good reason. After all some people can be unpleasant.'

'Point taken. It's just that your aunt rejected every neighbourly advance we made to her.'

'Including, no doubt, your offer of renovating her garden?'

Jacob's eyes became steely. 'Especially that.'

'And because you didn't get your way,' continued Belinda, 'you decided that she was a difficult old maid. Just because you couldn't get your hands on her garden. Was it that important to you? A weed-infested yard?'

Before Jacob could reply, Rosemary hurried to the table with the coffee cups.

'No, dear. Jacob is quite right. She was a very difficult woman. Not just with us, but the whole village.'

Belinda breathed deeply in the following silence. Then she shrugged.

'I apologise. I may have been wrong. It's just that ...'

'I know,' interrupted Rosemary soothingly, 'she was your aunt.'

'And she died a horrible lonely death,' Belinda concluded, more sharply than she intended.

'Now look,' snapped Jacob, 'don't accuse us of ...'

'I'm not accusing anyone of anything.'

'Honestly, dear. We never dreamt that she had fallen,' said Rosemary gently. 'If we had had any idea that she was in trouble, don't you think we would have gone to her aid?'

'If your aunt had made an attempt to be neighbourly,' said Jacob steadily, 'we would have been friends and in and out of her house the same as we are with all the other villagers. We are a close-knit community; furthermore we support each other. Your aunt chose to be alone.'

There was a silence. What they said was true, Belinda realised. She flushed and ran her hand over her brow.

'I'm sorry. Forgive me. I believe you.' She looked at brother and sister and gave a weak smile.

Rosemary returned it with a beaming grin and began to pour the coffee.

'And don't you think, under the circumstances,' Belinda added, sipping her wine, 'seeing that I am to be a neighbour, you should call me Belinda?'

Jacob raised his glass. 'I'll drink to that,' he replied, and took a healthy gulp of wine. He leant forward and put his elbows on the table. 'I think it is a good thing that you will be living there, keeping the property in the family, so to speak.'

‘Well, we shall see what the future brings,’ Belinda said, stifling a yawn, the country air and the wine combining to lull her into a relaxed mood.

Jacob looked at her quizzically. ‘What do you mean by that?’ he asked, a belligerent note creeping into his voice.

Belinda glanced at him and was surprised to find an aggressive look in his eye. ‘Just what I said. I’ll wait and see.’

‘Does that mean you may not be staying? Do you plan to sell the cottage?’

Belinda shrugged. It was too late in the evening to be having this sort of discussion and, after all, it was none of his business.

‘I might,’ she admitted in an off-hand manner. ‘I’ll live here for a time, and then decide.’

Jacob pushed his chair away from the table and drew his legs closer to him in an aggressive stance, as though he was about to spring into action.

‘Folk around here care for their homes, Belinda. They care for the land and they don’t just sell off their property for a quick profit.’

Rosemary put her hand on his arm to restrain him but he brushed it aside. Belinda began to feel uncomfortable and angry.

‘You seem to forget, Jacob that I am not “from around here”, as you put it. I have just this weekend become aware that I own the place, and as I do own it, you will allow me to make up my own mind as to what I do with it.’

Jacob opened his mouth to reply, but his sister spoke ahead of him.

‘Of course you should, Belinda,’ she said soothingly, ‘but if you are going to live here, what will you do for work? Have you any plans?’ Belinda gratefully dragged her eyes away from Jacob and turned to Rosemary. She realised with a shock that she had not even thought of that aspect of living in the village.

‘Do you know, I hadn’t thought of that? I suppose I will have to find some work. Perhaps I’ll find something in Bath.’

Rosemary swilled the dregs of her wine in her glass.

‘Well, if you are interested, I may be able to help you.’

Jacob gave a mock snort of disgust.

‘You don’t think Belinda would be interested in what you call work, do you?’

‘I’ll thank you, Jacob, to not be dismissive about my job.’

Belinda nodded. ‘Yes, Jacob. And allow me to make my own decision as to whether I would be interested in the job, thank you.’ She turned to Rosemary. ‘What work is it?’

‘Housework,’ said Rosemary tentatively. Jacob gave a snigger as Belinda’s face fell. ‘What I mean is,’ continued Rosemary, ‘I do house cleaning for some of the professional people who live in the villages surrounding Bath. Most of them don’t have time, what with their work and all, and so I do a couple of hours a week for each of them. Frankly, I’ve got more than I can handle and it would be a relief if you could take some of them over for me. It’s just dusting and running the vacuum cleaner over the rugs. You don’t have to do ironing.’

‘Ironing?’ Belinda almost shrieked.

‘Not unless you want to,’ Rosemary replied hurriedly. She looked pleadingly at Belinda. ‘It pays quite well, and you can work the hours to suit yourself.’

Jacob stood and stretched his large frame.

‘I told you she wouldn’t be interested,’ he said dismissively.

Belinda looked at him with a flash of impatience.

‘Well I am interested,’ she exclaimed a trifle unconvincingly, ‘it sounds ideal, actually. If I can suit myself when I work, but ...’ She stopped suddenly as a new thought hit her.

‘What?’ asked Rosemary, fearful that she had lost a workmate.

‘I’ll need a car, won’t I?’

‘Yes,’ nodded Rosemary, ‘but I can help you there. Mr Jackson, who lives in Pebble Cottage nearby, his wife bought a small car last year but she’s since decided that she hates driving so I know they want to sell. You can probably get it for a good price.’

Belinda glanced at Jacob and saw a judgmental look in his eye.

‘That sounds fine,’ she said firmly, ignoring him, ‘I’ll talk to you tomorrow Rosemary, about the car and the job. And now, if you’ll excuse me, thank you for a wonderful meal, but I must be going.’ She rose and bent to pick up her overnight bag.

‘Oh, by the way. Does the name “Lancelot” mean anything to you?’

She straightened up and saw that Jacob was watching her with an odd expression – watchful and suddenly alert.

Rosemary was folding the tablecloth. 'Wasn't he one of the Knights of the Round Table? You know, King Arthur and all that?'

'Oh, yes,' Belinda replied uncertainly, 'I expect that's who I'm thinking of.' But it wasn't.

Jacob let his breath out slowly and relaxed a little.

'I'll walk you home,' he said in a low voice, as he pulled on his coat.

'Oh, don't bother,' Belinda replied hurriedly. 'It's only a few steps really.'

'It's black as pitch out there,' he frowned, 'if you don't know the way you'll break a leg.' He grasped a large electric torch and opened the door.

Protesting that she would be all right, Belinda stepped out into the dark. The pool of light from the torch was the only illumination in the velvety black of the rural night and she cautiously put one foot before the other as she felt her way down the hill towards her cottage.

'You see what I mean,' said Jacob triumphantly, 'you'd be in a ditch before you knew it.'

Belinda sighed. 'Yes, you were right. If that makes you feel better.' She sensed that Jacob turned to look at her in the inky shadows.

'You must forgive me if I sounded angry this evening,' he said with a tenderness in his voice that she had not heard before, 'it's just that I care about this part of the world, this village, very much.'

Belinda stumbled on a pebble and instantly she felt Jacob's arm support her, then felt it slide around her waist. She began to pull away but his grip increased and she admitted to herself that it felt strangely comforting.

'It's just that one sees so much destruction these days,' he continued, a new strength and determination in his voice. 'Destruction of the environment, family houses destroyed to make way for mean little hovels. Whole farms disappear, farms that have been in the one family for generations.'

'You're an environmentalist,' declared Belinda, enjoying the closeness of his firm body. Perhaps she had been wrong. There was another side to him, a depth she hadn't expected.

Jacob snorted. 'That's a fancy new label invented by journalists. I just care for the land, for the history, and want to see that history and the land respected.'

They arrived at Belinda's gate and with the aid of the torch negotiated their way through the weeds and shrubs to the front door. His comforting arm never left her, guiding her through the labyrinth of twisted branches and grasping foliage.

The house was glacial with winter drafts and Jacob found a few dry logs and kindled a fire. Belinda threw some blankets over the old divan.

'I'll sleep here again tonight,' she said, 'the bedrooms are freezing.'

The orange flames lit the musty room, driving back the shadows and adding an illusionary gilt edge to the Victorian furnishings. Jacob squatted before the blaze, feeding it further logs.

'Do you really think you'll sell?'

Belinda sank down on the sofa. She felt too weary to resume this argument.

'Oh, not again, Jacob. Give me a break, please.'

He turned to look at her and the firelight turned his fair hair scarlet. In the flickering shadows she could see

his pale eyes sparkle, but she could also see within his eyes an urge and a need, the same impulse and demand that, inexplicably, she felt take hold of her. He leant over her and bent his head to hers, his lips brushing tantalisingly against hers. For a brief moment Belinda resisted him, was prepared to reject him and push him away, but the urgency of his lips increased and, with surprise, she felt herself respond and she opened her lips to receive the fever of his kiss.

His urgency strengthened and she returned his passion. His mouth moved to her cheek and seductively ventured to her neck and to her breasts. She knew that in a moment or two she would not be able to stop, that she would succumb to his urgent need and with gentle hands she thrust him away.

‘We must stop,’ she whispered huskily.

He swallowed hard and nodded. For a moment they both fought to control their emotion and then Jacob slowly stood before her.

‘Thank you for seeing me home,’ she said softly.

He turned to her and his eyes slid a yearning glance over her breasts and slowly, tenderly, back to her face. He smiled.

‘I’ll see you tomorrow?’

A sudden wariness took hold of Belinda and she shrugged. ‘Perhaps. We’ll see,’ she replied in an offhand manner. ‘Good night, Jacob ... and thank you.’

He held her look for a moment, then nodded and stepped out into the black void of the night.

Belinda drew in a deep breath and sank down onto the sofa. She stirred the fire with a twig and elfin sparkles went spiralling upwards. Her breathing was heavy and she felt light-headed.

‘What am I doing?’ she asked herself. ‘This morning I couldn’t stand the man, and here I am kissing him.’ She stood and, with an angry movement, threw the covers back off the divan. ‘I must be losing my reason.’

The shutters were still open. As she began to pull them closed, she looked out into the night and saw the lights of the next-door cottage. The downstairs lamps went out and in a moment the upstairs bedroom windows were illuminated.

She thought back over the evening’s conversation and the description of her aunt’s solitary life. She felt that both brother and sister were too eager to impress upon her the aloofness of her aunt.

Too anxious to convince her that they had no contact with the old lady.

Jacob’s silhouette appeared briefly at a window and the light was extinguished. Her neighbour’s cottage melted into the black night.

‘He may deny it, but Jacob knows the meaning of “Lancelot Bro...”,’ Belinda muttered as she violently closed the shutters with a bang, reducing her world down to the confines of the dusty room.

It was four weeks before Belinda returned to the village. As she lay in bed on her last night in London she recalled that she would be knee-deep in brooms and mops if she were to take up Rosemary’s suggestion.

‘I only hope I’ve made the right decision,’ she yawned as she turned out the light, ‘a bit late now though, if I haven’t.’ All her belongings were packed and stood waiting silently in the hall.

She had just drifted off into an apprehensive sleep when she was woken by the piercing ring of the telephone.

She switched on the light and noticed that it was well past midnight.

‘Hello?’ she croaked, her voice full of postponed slumber. Jacob’s over-cheerful voice crackled down the telephone wire.

‘Is that you, Belinda?’

‘Who is this?’ she demanded gruffly, even though she knew full well who it was. The nerve of this man. Calling at some ungodly hour. Then a frightful thought struck her. The cottage. It was on fire. Incinerated. And she hadn’t yet renewed the insurance policy.

‘It’s me, Jacob, I was calling about ...’

‘The cottage,’ interrupted Belinda, now wide awake and struggling with one arm to pull on her dressing gown. ‘Is it all right? How badly damaged is it?’

There was a confused silence at the other end of the phone, then Jacob replied in a perplexed voice, ‘Damaged? There’s no damage that I know of. Why should you think there would be?’

‘Well if nothing is wrong, why on earth are you ringing at this hour?’ Belinda said crossly.

‘Rosie told me you were arriving tomorrow, and I thought that, seeing you probably had a few cases and belongings, I would drive up, collect you and bring you down in the truck.’

Belinda drew herself upright. ‘I can manage very happily, thank you, Jacob. I have everything under control.’

He chuckled down the phone. 'Yes, I'm sure you have, however don't you think it would be much more pleasant to drive down to the village with me?'

'I've made arrangements for a freight van to collect my boxes and I am going down by train, Jacob. As I told you, it is all under control. All organised.'

'Well, un-organise it. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I'll pick you up at your flat, Rosemary gave me the address, and we'll take a leisurely drive back here, stop off at a pub I know for a tasty lunch, and have you back in the cottage in time for tea. How does that sound?'

Belinda sighed. 'But Jacob, I already have the van booked to pick up my belongings.'

'Well, cancel it. Be ready at ten. I won't take no for an answer.'

There was a click and the line went dead. Belinda dropped the receiver and sank onto the bed.

'Well, really. The insolence of the man. He's got more front than Selfridges.'

Yet, even as she muttered the words, she felt herself relax and a pleasant feeling of anticipation engulfed her. Anyway, he will be handy for carrying the luggage. She smiled to herself as she put out the light. But the moonlight was creeping in through her window and the clock chimed four before her eyes closed and she slept.

The air grew warmer the further west they travelled and Belinda opened the window allowing the breeze to whip her dark hair away from her face. She welcomed the

pastoral scents after the petroleum fumes and grime laden air of South Kensington.

‘Rather than take the motorway I thought we should go by the back roads that take us through some of the countryside. After all, what can you see from the motorway other than the car in front and back of you?’

‘But this way will take forever, Jacob!’ cried Belinda. ‘We won’t get there until all hours.’

‘What’s so important about getting there in a hurry, Belinda? You’re leaving London behind, you know. You don’t have to clock-watch in Milford; it’s the country. We do things differently there.’

‘You certainly do,’ Belinda said grumpily, ‘things like kidnapping.’ Jacob shifted gears and leant back in his seat, sighing and shaking his head.

‘Boy, you really get uptight, don’t you? And so easily. I can see that we will have to teach you to relax once we get you to the village.’

‘If you get me to the village. At this rate, I’ll have a tour of Great Britain before I ever see it.’

Jacob shook his head. ‘Not a tour of Great Britain, just a pocket of it. I want you to see some pretty countryside along the way. We’re going down through Wiltshire. Have you been to Salisbury before?’

Belinda shook her head.

‘What? You’ve never seen the cathedral? I can’t believe it. A pretty young English woman like you?’

‘I’m not English, I’m Australian.’

‘You don’t sound Australian.’

‘Well we don’t all talk like Crocodile Dundee and wear corks around our hats, you know. Actually I am English, but I was raised in Australia and spent most of my life there so I feel Australian.’ She leant back in her

seat and gave an artificial yawn. 'As a matter of fact, I was thinking that after I sell the cottage, I'll probably go back to Melbourne. The money from the sale would come in handy there, and it's such a good rate of exchange at the moment.'

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him stiffen, and smiled to herself as she realised that her teasing had irritated him. She now knew his Achilles heel. He hated the idea that she would sell the cottage.

Late afternoon found them wandering around the nave and Trinity Chapel of Salisbury cathedral and Jacob, a fountain of ecclesiastical and architectural knowledge, had been giving Belinda what amounted to a guided tour of the thirteenth century structure.

'That stone,' he said pointing to a plain black slab, 'marks the spot where a shrine in honour of St Osmund stood. He was the bishop who built the original cathedral at Old Sarum.'

Belinda nodded sleepily. She'd heard of Sarum quite recently, she recalled, and she knew it was of some importance, but little sleep last night and the drive in the country had combined to make her drowsy. Jacob looked at her quizzically.

'You do remember Old Sarum?'

'Should I?' queried Belinda stifling a yawn.

They made their way back to Jacob's truck.

'I showed you the ruins on the way here, and told you its history,' he whispered testily as an elderly deacon shuffled by.

‘Hmm. I remember. Something about it being hit by lightning and rheumatic clergy moaning about the cold winds, so they rebuilt the cathedral here, am I right?’

‘Sometimes you act as though you’ve been hit by lightning,’ Jacob hissed as he turned away. Belinda shrugged.

‘Well, I’m sorry, Jacob. I live in this century, and while all that history is interesting, I can’t see why I should be expected to drool just because you happen to think its exciting.’

‘Do you know your trouble?’ asked Jacob as he clambered into the truck and angrily revved the engine.

‘No,’ sighed Belinda. ‘But I have an awful feeling you’re going to tell me.’

‘You lived too long in Australia. They have no history to speak of.’

He put his foot down hard on the accelerator and the truck lurched forward and onto the road that led to Bath. Belinda groaned.

‘Jacob, that is such a stupid statement, even from you.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ he snapped, swerving to avoid a pothole in the road.

‘I mean that at times you behave like a child, and please slow down, you’ll run off the road and I do want to survive this trip so that I can get to live in my cottage. Look, I think it’s wonderful that the cathedrals and ruins are here and that you like them, but please don’t expect me to react with the same enthusiasm.’

‘You haven’t understood one little thing have you?’ he sneered.

Belinda looked bewildered. ‘I’m sorry, was I supposed to?’

Jacob braked sharply and pulled the car over to the side of the road. He switched off the engine and turned towards her, his face red with indignation.

'I've shown you some of the most beautiful countryside and one of England's loveliest cathedrals and you haven't got the message.'

'Message?'

Jacob nodded abruptly. 'Yes. You saw the effect of history, of man's efforts in architecture and the combined reward of retaining his history and his landscape.'

Belinda's jaw dropped. 'So that's it,' she gasped. 'You're still on about my retaining the cottage and restoring the garden – restoring it the way *you* want it to be.'

Jacob slumped exaggeratedly back into his seat and raised his arms. 'Finally!' he cried. 'But not the way I want it, the way it was.'

'Do you mean to tell me that you dragged me all over the country, just to try and convince me to do what you want?' cried Belinda. 'What you want to do with my property? Well, let me tell you Mr Aitkins, nothing will convince me now or ever to listen to what you have to say. Nothing!'

The drive to Bath was undertaken in a glacial silence and it was under darkening skies that the truck pulled up outside the cottage. Belinda jumped out of the cabin almost before the vehicle had come to a halt. Fumbling in her purse, she found the keys and flung open the front door.

The freezing air hit her with force and she shivered as she groped for the light switch. The electricity had been reconnected and a weak light washed over the frigid hall.

There were one or two letters on the floor near the door. One was from Mr Munro and the others from the local council. She looked out the window and saw Jacob unloading the boxes by the front gate. He dropped the last one heavily and clambered back into the truck. Belinda gasped in exasperation and dropping the letters, ran back out along the path. A tendril of a weed caught her foot and she fell headlong into a bush. There was a roar of laughter from the truck as Belinda pulled herself free from the foliage, her hair ruffled and a scratch on her arm. She glared at Jacob.

‘Well, don’t just sit there laughing like a hyena, help me get the boxes inside.’

Jacob shook his head and turned the ignition key. Belinda stared at him in disbelief.

‘That’s your problem, Miss Lawrence. You’re so efficient, I think you should be able to manage to get the contents inside.’

‘But it’s getting dark,’ wailed Belinda.

‘That it is, so you’d better get started.’ The truck moved off slowly. ‘Welcome to Milford, Miss Lawrence.’ Jacob sullenly gave a wave and drove on up the hill to his own cottage.

‘You brute,’ shouted Belinda after the taillights, and kicked one of the boxes angrily.

Unfortunately it was a solid carton holding the works of Shakespeare and Dickens, and Belinda stubbed her toe. She let out a cry of pain.

Feeling miserable and close to tears she began to carry armfuls of her belongings inside, hobbling along on her injured foot and dumping them in a pile on the floor. She made her way to the long room with the intention of lighting the fire to warm the house. As she flung open the door she stopped in amazement.

The room was in chaos.

Drawers had been torn from cupboards. All the books from the bookcase were scattered about the room. Pictures had been torn from their frames.

Belinda gave a cry of exasperation. Instinctively she knew this was not the work of vandals.

Whoever had broken into her cottage was searching for something and she was convinced that that "something" had to do with the mysterious "Lancelot Bro...".

Five

The stars were twinkling when the last armful of Belinda's unpacked belongings hit the floor and she sank exhausted onto the sofa. Her arms were aching and her back sore but her mind was exhilarated with lurid thoughts of Jacob stretched on one of his mediaeval racks – slowly elongating.

With weary limbs she carried wood to the fireplace and collapsed in a frazzled heap in front of the soothing flames, aching, grubby and exceedingly lonely.

Back in London curtains would be going up in the theatres, nightclubs happily full of dancing people, restaurants serving gourmet food.

'And I haven't got a thing to eat,' whimpered Belinda, tears of self-pity and frustration welling up.

After her discovery of the confusion in the long room, she had fearfully made her way upstairs. Even though this was her first night in her new home she felt the violation by the intruders as keenly as if she had lived there all her life. Her first thought was to run up the hill to Jacob, but her pride and her anger prevented her. Arming herself with an iron poker, she tentatively climbed the stairs.

Her worst fears were confirmed as she inspected the disarray in each bedroom. Beds had been stripped and contents of cupboards flung on the floor. There

wasn't one piece of furniture that had not been violated.

Anger rose up in her as she raged at the monster that had desecrated her home and, she was certain, had butchered her aunt. She felt certain that the two events were connected.

The morning sun shone brilliantly into the long room as Belinda began to clean up the mess and restack the books on the bookshelf. As she worked, Belinda deliberated on what her next move should be. It was possible that the intruders were just vandals who had heard that her aunt had died and took sadistic pleasure in destroying her property. Yet even as she thought it, Belinda rejected this premise. But if she went to the police now, without strong evidence, she would be met with the same cynical response that had greeted her suspicions about aunt Jane's death. Somehow she had to find the connection between the violation of the cottage and her aunt's murder. In her mind Belinda rejected the word "death", convinced in her heart that it was not just a simple fall down the stairs.

Mr Munro's letter, which had awaited her arrival, confirmed that all the legal documents had been completed and Belinda was now the legal owner of the property. A further investigation of the house that morning had disclosed two more rooms in an attic area reached by a ladder that dropped from the ceiling of one of the spare bedrooms. The cramped dusty rooms were empty save for some old discarded trunks and packing cases.

An early morning walk to the next village to buy some breakfast revealed that her land ran all the way downhill to the remains of the old railway station and

according to the solicitor's letter, covered a wider area than she had realised.

Belinda had clambered down deteriorating garden steps beside a bulging retaining wall that towered some six feet above her and discovered a fountain covered by vines, as well as the remains of a tiny summerhouse that could not be seen from the cottage. The crumbling retaining wall looked decidedly dangerous and would have to be repaired.

On her return she approached the front of the house and stopped to admire the facade. Her eye swept over the top floor windows and she was again struck by the irregularity associated with the window in her aunt's bedroom.

She continued up to the house. Climbing the stairs she walked to the window and looked down into the garden.

What was it about the front of the house that bothered her? She leant back inside and against the wall on her left side.

It was then that she realised what was wrong. She flung the window up and stretched far out, looking to her left.

'That's it!' she cried triumphantly.

Extending away from the window to her left was a further six feet of wall of the facade, yet when she stepped back into the room the left-hand wall was against her shoulder.

'It's a false wall.'

Belinda glanced out the window once again to confirm her discovery.

There must be a hidden room behind the wall at least five or six feet deep. She ran her hands over the

portion of the wall not covered by the huge dominating Victorian wardrobe and tapped with her fingers.

The hollow sound confirmed her discovery.

Was this the secret her aunt wanted to reveal to her?

If so – why?

Belinda was scanning an antiquated timetable for buses to Bath, when there was a knock at the front door.

Her first instinct upon opening it was to slam it shut, for Jacob stood on the steps, a sheepish expression on his handsome face and clutching an envelope in his powerful hand.

‘I know what you’re going to say,’ he said quickly, before Belinda had a chance to close the door, ‘but before you do or say anything, I have a message from Rosemary.’

He proffered the envelope and after a moment’s hesitation Belinda snatched it from his hand.

‘You’ve got a nerve turning up like this after last night.’

Jacob shoved his hands into his pockets, stretching the denim tightly over his hips. He kicked idly at the ground with his foot and dug his chin deep into his chest.

‘Sorry about that.’ He peered under his eyebrows at Belinda. ‘I behaved badly, I know. It was just that ...’ He shrugged and let the words hang in the air.

‘Just what, Jacob? Just that I didn’t fall down at your feet and agree with you? Give into your masculine wishes?’

Jacob flashed an angry look at her. 'Don't let's turn this into a sexist argument, please.' He swung away from her and looked out over the hills, his shoulders tight with suppressed animosity. 'OK,' he muttered grudgingly, 'I apologise for last night. And I'm sorry if I upset you yesterday.'

'Well, I accept your apology, but please don't treat me that way again.'

Jacob gave her a grateful smile but Belinda, unsure of her ability to withstand his appeal, busied herself with tearing open the envelope.

Two keys fell onto the floor.

'Rosie asked me to give you that,' said Jacob hurriedly, picking up the keys and handing them to Belinda, 'and she asked could you do her a favour and do her jobs for her today.'

Belinda's hands froze on the envelope. She shot a startled glance at Jacob.

'What? Clean houses? Today?'

'Yes. Our uncle who lives in Wells has taken poorly and Rosie had to go to him.' He nodded at the letter. Belinda sighed heavily.

'You'd better come in.'

She led the way through to the long room, scanning Rosemary's letter as she did so.

'She's written all the instructions there,' said Jacob.

Belinda shrugged him off. She sensed that he was enjoying her discomfort.

'But,' she protested, 'I won't know what to do. And I've got my own house cleaning to do.' She waved the letter towards the shambles in the long room. Jacob stopped at the door and drew in a deep breath.

'Cripes. What have you been doing here?'

'It wasn't me,' snapped Belinda as she sank down onto the sofa. 'You should see upstairs. It's a hundred times worse.'

'But how ...?'

'Someone broke in and ransacked the place. Isn't it obvious?' A new thought struck her and she stared accusingly at Jacob. 'I don't suppose you heard or saw anything?'

Jacob shook his head. 'Not a thing.'

Belinda pursed her lips. 'No. I didn't imagine you would have,' she muttered sarcastically.

Jacob bristled. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well you didn't see or hear anything when my aunt was attacked, so why should you start now?' She turned away.

'Attacked?' Jacob grasped Belinda by her shoulders and spun her around roughly. 'Haven't you got it through your thick head that she fell down the stairs? The coroner said so. What more proof do you want?'

Angrily, Belinda shook his hands off her shoulders.

'Have you contacted the police?' asked Jacob, his tone softened by the expression on Belinda's face. 'About this break-in, I mean.'

She shook her head wearily. 'No. What's the point? The damage has been done. Besides ...'

'Besides what?'

Belinda shook her head again and waved his question away. She turned her attention to Rosemary's letter once more, read it through and dropped it beside her on the sofa.

'About this, Jacob. I don't think I'm up to it.'

Jacob squatted on his haunches in front of her.

'It's just that these are fairly new customers and if Rosie doesn't turn up they'll think that she's unreliable and has let them down. It's only for today,' he grinned encouragingly. 'And maybe tomorrow,' he added softly.

'Tomorrow as well?' cried Belinda.

Jacob took a deep breath. 'You would be doing Rosie a great favour if you could.' He rested his hand on Belinda's arm. The warmth of his hand shot through her and she moved back from him.

'Well,' she said, rubbing her arm where he had touched her. 'I suppose I can.'

'Good. That's that then.' He turned to go. Belinda rose and followed him to the front door.

'Just a moment, how am I supposed to get to ...' Belinda glanced at the names and addresses of two customers in Bath, '... to these places. I don't have transport.'

Jacob considered this for a moment. 'Well, I could give you a lift in my truck.'

Belinda's face hardened. 'No thank you,' she replied firmly. 'After your efforts yesterday I'd rather walk.'

Jacob chuckled. 'You might have to. Unless ...'

'Unless what?'

'Unless you want to use Rosie's bicycle.'

Belinda laughed scornfully. 'I haven't ridden a bike in years.'

'But it's something you never forget,' called Jacob encouragingly as he moved to the gate. 'Anyway, if you want it, it's parked behind our back door.' With a smile he disappeared into his truck and with a roar of the engine and sardonic wave to Belinda, sped off down the hill.

‘Well, of all the nerve!’ cried Belinda, screwing up the letter in anger. She swallowed hard and realised that she could not let Rosemary down. After all, they were going to be neighbours and she had agreed to take on the job.

It was just that she hadn’t thought it would happen so quickly. She spread the crumpled letter out and smoothed it with her hand. There were two addresses, both on the outskirts of the city, and with the aid of her aunt’s 1920s guidebook to Bath, Belinda located both streets.

Pulling on jeans that had been designated as “work clothes” and covering her hair with a scarf that was more suited to Sloane Square than the rural surrounds of Somerset, Belinda locked the cottage door and climbed the hill to Rosemary and Jacob’s house.

She mastered the bike easily and set off confidently along the pleasant country roads towards the city. After one or two stops along the way to consult the guidebook, Belinda finally arrived at the first address in Rosemary’s note. There was no name, just the address and Belinda felt like an intruder as she pushed the bike up the front path of a pretty house, which overlooked the city. A sparse garden lay before it and the house itself had an empty feel. She knocked tentatively even though Rosemary had indicated that no one would be home.

The key slid smoothly into the lock and the door opened noiselessly. The silence of the house seemed almost solid and Belinda shivered as she removed her coat. She could have been a burglar as she made her

way from room to room in the hushed house. The scent of a subtle but expensive after-shave lingered faintly in the cool air.

Having located the kitchen she gathered the cleaning items from under the sink as indicated by Rosemary and with polish and dusters set off to locate the living room.

It was a large, well-furnished room overlooking the garden. The furniture looked expensive and Belinda ran her hand enviously along a Chesterfield sofa. She sighed heavily and, rolling up her sleeves, began to polish the wooden mantelpiece.

The next hour was taken up with polishing and vacuuming the downstairs rooms. Upstairs took less time as it consisted only of a bathroom, easily dealt with; a spare bedroom that required only a casual dusting; and the master bedroom. The double bed was lightly made and Belinda smoothed the covers and began to pick up some magazines scattered on the floor beside the bed.

Weary after her exertions, she sat on the edge of the bed and idly flipped through the periodicals. They were mostly related to male pursuits, horses, cars, and one – well, she hurriedly put that aside.

The last magazine was a copy of *Country Life* and she flipped through the pages of properties for sale, gloating over the fact that she herself now owned one. The pages fell open at a series of sketches that accompanied an article on eighteenth century gardens. It was a comparison between English and Italian gardens of the period and well-known landscape gardeners were represented.

The last and biggest illustration was a design for an English garden at Stowe, all formal and regimented. Beside it was a matching plan where the lines had been softened and simplified. Belinda read the caption underneath.

"The famous gardens at Stowe were transformed by Brown as illustrated in the comparison dated 1753."

The piercing ring of the telephone in the hall below made her jump and she packed the magazines neatly beside the bed, smoothed the cover once again and hurried to the stairs to answer the phone.

As she reached the landing she heard the click of a key turning in the front door lock and the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall. Leaning over the balustrade she peered down.

A man in a dark suit hurried to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

'Hello,' His deep voice rang out through the silent house.

He stood with his back to Belinda and, feeling faintly ridiculous, as though she had been caught in some nefarious act, she strained to see who it was.

'Yes, that's right,' continued the man, 'I'm certain we can get it. In time. It's not going to be that easy.'

Belinda leant further forward. If only he would turn around.

'Well of course I'll do everything I can to make her change her mind,' snapped the man angrily, 'but if she gets wind of what the value ...'

The feather duster tucked under Belinda's arm dropped over the railings and fell with a soft plop beside the man.

He spun around in surprise and looked up into the staircase. Belinda's heart leapt and she gave a gasp of astonishment.

It was the real estate salesman, Mark Sallinger.

He stared at Belinda with a startled expression but that aspect soon changed to one full of burning questions.

'I'll call you back,' he said softly into the receiver and replaced it on its cradle.

Belinda came diffidently down the stairs feeling like a naughty schoolgirl caught out of bounds. Mark gave a guilty glance back to the telephone and then to Belinda. She flinched as she saw a flash of intense animosity in his guarded eyes.

He moved slowly towards her.

Six

Mr Leo's dainty fingers massaged Belinda's scalp as he shampooed her hair. He prattled on in sibilant tones about the new production at the Theatre Royal, to which he and his friend had been lucky enough to receive an invitation the previous night.

Belinda felt drowsy with the warmth of the salon and the luxury of someone fussing over her hair. She smiled, not at Mr Leo's gossip but at her chance encounter with Mark the previous day. He had been equally surprised at finding her in his home and had wasted no time in setting about offering a dinner invitation. Belinda had to admit that the possibility of further contact with Mark was a pleasing thought. She found that she was eager now for him to contact her, as he promised he would, and set a date. As she paid for her new shorter hairstyle and stepped out into Argyle Street, she felt more positive about her move to Bath and the prospect of a new life.

Crossing Pulteney Bridge she caught sight of a sign hanging above a diminutive shop.

HEIRLOOM ANTIQUES written in over-ornate scroll also announced that Hazel Whitby was the proprietor.

Belinda stopped and peered in the dusty window. Mrs Whitby had left her card enquiring if aunt Jane wished to sell any of her possessions. She might also

be able to supply Belinda with information regarding her aunt.

Belinda stepped into the tiny shop to the accompaniment of an annoying bell that was attached to the door by a particularly buoyant spring. The resultant cacophony produced a flurry of activity behind a worn curtain strung across a doorway at the rear of the shop, and a formidable middle-aged woman with a cross expression on her patronising face stepped behind the counter. She was carrying a spectacularly ugly vase, which she was attempting to wrap in brown paper.

'Mrs Whitby?' asked Belinda, as she threaded her way through the overstuffed glass display cases.

'Buying? Or browsing?' Mrs Whitby demanded gruffly, in a voice redolent of gin and very little tonic. She brushed a strand of unnaturally coloured hair from her forehead.

'Neither, I'm afraid,' replied Belinda to this blunt query, 'I thought you may be able to help me.'

Mrs Whitby fought unsuccessfully with the vase and brown paper. 'If you want to pick my brains about the value of your possessions, you're wasting your time.'

Belinda wondered how the woman ever made a sale.

Admitting defeat, Mrs Whitby abandoned the vase to a worn cardboard box and began smoothing the brown paper to erase creases and ensure its use another day.

'No,' replied Belinda, 'I believe that you may have known my aunt, Miss Lawrence. She lived nearby in Milford.'

Mrs Whitby stopped fussing with the paper and looked Belinda up and down.

‘What’s it got to do with me? Or for that matter, what’s it got to do with you?’

‘What’s *what* got to do with it?’

Mrs Whitby snorted none too delicately. ‘Her murder, that’s what I mean.’

Belinda gasped. ‘Murder? Why do you say that?’

The woman rolled her eyes exasperatedly, as though dealing with a simpleton. ‘I read the papers, dear. Or rather I read between the lines. Fell down the stairs.’ She made a flatulent noise that indicated total disbelief. ‘That woman was as steady on her feet as you or me, even if she did use a stick. Independent old biddy,’ she concluded caustically.

Belinda gave a quiet sigh. At last here was someone who had known her aunt.

‘So you knew her then?’

Mrs Whitby’s eyes sharpened. ‘What makes you —’

The clamorous doorbell interrupted her. A small man entered and began to browse around the silver display. The two women stood by in silence. Mrs Whitby tapped the counter irritably until, her patience wearing thin, she strode over to the customer, who asked some questions in a fusion of French and English.

After some virulent bad French on her part and much gesticulation Mrs Whitby sent the bewildered client on his way. ‘I think it’s time for a drink,’ she barked at Belinda.

As she waited for her refreshment, Mrs Whitby fidgeted with her makeup mirror and a lipstick of a particularly vigorous hue. Belinda watched as she layered the colour on her wiry lips. Despite herself, Belinda felt a wave of pity for this woman, past her prime and clinging violently to what remained of her borderline beauty. As though reading her thoughts, Mrs Whitby glanced at Belinda and with a self-deprecating smile gave a shrug.

‘Mutton dressed as lamb, eh?’

She dropped her lipstick into her handbag and anxiously sought the waiter who was approaching the table with their drinks. Her enthusiastic fingers grasped the glass, which would have served as a fish bowl for any fastidious goldfish. With a sigh she took a robust gulp of the gin and, as it coursed its way downward, she relaxed visibly and sank back into the cushioned alcove, her head resting against the flock wallpaper. At this hour, the lunch crowd was just beginning to emerge to seek refreshment but so far Belinda and Mrs Whitby had the small bar to themselves.

‘Mother’s ruin it may be, but it’s mother’s milk to me,’ smiled Mrs Whitby, casting a disparaging glance at Belinda’s orange juice.

‘Mrs Whitby –’ began Belinda

‘Hazel, dear. Call me Hazel. All my friends do.’ She gulped a formidable mouthful of gin.

‘Right,’ nodded Belinda. ‘Hazel ... Did you know my aunt Jane very well?’

‘Didn’t know her at all.’ Hazel’s eyes slid to the door where two young businessmen entered and headed to the bar.

‘But you left your business card with her.’

‘Nothing unusual about that.’ Hazel pulled her gaze reluctantly back to Belinda. ‘I leave my card at all the cottages in the local villages, that is, places that look as though they have something of value tucked away. - Mind you, you can never judge a cottage by its exterior. I’ve known some absolute dumps to have real gems used as everyday kitchen items.’ She shook her head sadly. ‘Some people have no idea of the value of things.’

‘Did my aunt have any “gems” tucked away?’

Belinda sipped her orange juice. Mrs Whitby’s eyes had strayed back to the younger of the two men at the bar. He had just noticed her.

Mrs Whitby gave a slight coy smile.

‘What was that, dear?’ She flicked her eyes back to Belinda. ‘No. Or perhaps I should say I never found out.’

‘But you did know her, didn’t you?’ asked Belinda, beginning to feel that she was on a wild goose chase.

Mrs Whitby shrugged. ‘Met her a couple of times,’ she said dismissively. She suddenly leant over the table in a conspiratorial manner.

‘I left my card under the door one day about three or four months ago. Just on spec. To tell the truth I didn’t really expect to hear from her. She wrote to me about a week later, said she might have something for me. Only got as far as the living room and most of the furniture was ugly Victorian and not my sort of thing at all. I kept hoping she had a decent feather-pattern silver setting under the bed, but if she did she wasn’t parting with it.’ She leant back and swilled the last of the gin.

‘But if she said she had something for you,’ began Belinda.

‘Oh, a few bits of bric-a-brac, I grant you, but she seemed more interested in talking about the garden and did I know anything about old maps. Of course, I don’t. My ex-husband did but I haven’t heard from him in years since he ran off with that young slut from the travel agency. Said he’d take me on a second honeymoon, went in to book the tickets and decided that the booking clerk was a better proposition.’

Her attention drifted back to the young man at the bar and her smile to him was warmer this time.

‘Hazel,’ said Belinda, trying to draw attention back to the subject under discussion, ‘you said you thought my aunt was murdered. Have you any proof?’

Hazel looked at her sharply. ‘Proof? Of course I don’t have proof. But as I told you, your aunt was as strong as a horse. Someone did her in, that’s for sure.’

‘But why?’

‘Maybe she had something someone wanted.’ Mrs Whitby eyed Belinda speculatively. ‘You did inherit the cottage and possessions didn’t you?’

Belinda nodded.

‘Well, my dear,’ said Mrs Whitby in honeyed tones, as she reached into her handbag and slipped her red business card across the table to Belinda, ‘if you do find anything that you wish to sell, anything of consequence that is, I’d appreciate it if you would see me first. You’ll find I give good value.’

Belinda thanked her and slipped the card into her pocket. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the young man on his way towards their table with a fresh gin in his hand. Not wanting to get involved in Mrs Whitby’s

private life, Belinda made her excuses and left. By the time she had reached the door, Hazel was on first name terms with the young man and, Belinda had no doubt, was about to give good value.

So someone else thought it was murder. Making her way to catch the bus home, Belinda wondered if she should go to the police.

With what evidence?

'Proof, that's what I need,' she muttered to herself as she turned into Pierrepont Street and headed towards the bus station. Coming towards her was Mr Munro. She was about to wave to him when the old man faltered in his step, cast a quick glance to left and right and with downcast eyes disappeared into a small bookshop. Belinda was bewildered by his action. In past meetings Mr Munro had been the soul of courtesy, so this obvious avoidance of her was curious. Belinda slowed as she past the bookshop and peered into the dingy interior. But the old solicitor was nowhere in sight.

Knowing she had half an hour to wait before her bus departed, Belinda decided to follow Mr Munro and she slipped into the shop. Perhaps she simply could not see him from the street or he might be hidden by bookshelves or in a back room.

The front of the shop was given over to secondhand paperbacks and popular detective novels. Making her way further into the shop and past a disinterested, corpulent bookseller installed behind a pile of romance novels, Belinda became aware that the volumes on the

crowded bookcases were first editions and heavy leather-bound tomes dating from previous centuries.

As she moved further towards the back of the dusty, dishevelled shop the light grew dimmer and she could just make out a narrow door set between two overflowing shelves. Belinda glanced back at the bookseller who sat hunched over his desk. He'd barely glanced at her when she'd entered and the soggy cigarette wedged between his moist lips had discharged a spray of grey ash down the front of his greasy waistcoat. A derogatory wave of his nicotine stained fingers only succeeded in grinding the ash firmly into the stained garment. With a snort that indicated severe sinus congestion, the rotund man, who could have been anywhere between forty and senility, turned his attention back to the well-worn Barbara Cartland novel.

Certain that his attention was elsewhere, Belinda tried the handle on the inner door. It was only with great effort that she was able to turn it. Once the latch was released the door swung open freely and with a glance back at the bookseller, Belinda stepped into a musty smelling back room.

Belinda found herself standing on a small platform that overlooked row upon row of bookshelves and piles of decrepit and worn books of all shapes and sizes. The only light came from a grubby window that overlooked a narrow side lane. The air was damp and smelt of ingrained mould. In the faint light Belinda shuffled towards the edge of the platform and down the steps to the ground level. If Mr Munro was here he must have been cringing in a corner, for there was nowhere that he could hide, except in the fundamental

toilet; and even there, with the door half off its hinges and wide open, concealment would have been impossible.

And indeed, why should he hide?

'Perhaps he was still in the shop and I didn't see him,' thought Belinda as she turned to go back up the stairs, but even as she thought it she knew that was wrong and that the solicitor had somehow avoided her.

It was then that she noticed, at the back of the room and leading into the lane way, a small door.

'So that's where he went,' she muttered, 'he was taking a short cut.'

Perhaps she was reading far more into this than there was. Mr Munro, being shortsighted, might simply have failed to recognise her and, knowing the bookseller, had used this short cut to get back to his office.

Except that his office was in the other direction.

Belinda stepped over volumes of verse and made her way to the door. It gave easily, but came to a sudden halt with just enough space for a thin person to squeeze through. The alleyway was littered with papers and broken bottles. Belinda was about to close the door, satisfied that she had found Mr Munro's escape route, when a door in the building opposite opened and Mr Munro himself emerged. With a quick glance about him the old solicitor hurried away down the alley, pulling his coat tightly around him to ward off the chill wind.

Belinda was about to call to him when a hairy hand grasped her shoulder.

With a faint scream of fear, Belinda turned to face her assailant.

Seven

‘What d’you think you’re playing at?’ growled the obese bookseller, his fingers tightening on Belinda’s shoulder.

‘Oh. I’m sorry,’ Belinda gasped, trying to free herself from the man’s grip. Up close, Belinda thought he resembled Charles Laughton in one of his seedier roles, possibly the Hunchback of Notre Dame. ‘I was just looking for a book.’

The man ran his eye down Belinda’s form and loosened his grasp. ‘Oh yeah? What sort of book?’

Over his shoulder Belinda glimpsed a row of gardening books, decayed to the point where they would be mulch themselves before long.

‘A gardening book.’

The man gave her a small shove as he released her. The cigarette quivered on his lip.

‘Don’t sell any.’ He waved the pink covered romance novel as if to prove the fact.

Belinda thought the man needed all the romance he could get. Her eyes flicked to the books behind him.

‘But you have a shelf full just there.’

She pointed over his shoulder. The man half turned and glanced at the shelves.

‘Like I said, we don’t sell gardening books.’

The fool must be vision-impaired as well as gross, Belinda reflected. By now she was beginning to get nervous. There was something detestable about this man and she just wanted to get away from him.

‘Who told you about this place?’

Who indeed? Belinda gave the first name that came into her head.

‘Mr Munro.’

The man paused as he began to blow his nose on a particularly revolting handkerchief. ‘You know old Munro?’

‘Yes, he’s my solicitor. He said you might be able to help me with gardening books.’

The foul handkerchief found its way into the man’s equally malodorous pocket. ‘Got some gardening to do?’ he enquired suspiciously.

Belinda nodded. ‘Yes. I’ve just come into some property and the garden is a mess.’

The man grunted. ‘So you’re the niece, are you?’ He eyed Belinda speculatively.

‘Do you mean you know about my aunt?’ Belinda was astounded.

The bookseller nodded slowly as though considering something of great value. ‘Heard she snuffed it recently. Fell down the stairs, didn’t she?’

‘Yes. It was dreadful. But how did you know?’

The man shrugged. ‘Word gets around. Heard that a relative had inherited the place when she died.’ He eyed Belinda thoughtfully as though disillusioned. ‘Thought it was an American.’

‘Did you know her? My aunt?’

‘Only as a customer,’ he replied, wiping his nose on the back of his hirsute hand.

‘A customer?’ Belinda could not imagine her aunt frequenting this shabby establishment. ‘Was she selling some of her books?’

‘Buying, actually.’

‘What did she buy?’

‘Nothing.’

‘But you said she was buying.’

‘She was looking for something.’

Belinda waited for the man to continue but his attention seemed to wander to the book in his hand as though eager to immerse himself in nefarious amorous entanglements.

‘What was she looking for?’

‘Can’t remember now ...’

He searched the cobweb-covered roof as though expecting to find the answer there.

‘Well,’ prompted Belinda acidly, ‘perhaps she wanted a book.’

The man shook head. ‘No ... not a book ... a map.’

‘A map? A map of what?’

‘Not sure really. She seemed rather vague.’

‘Just like you,’ thought Belinda. Out loud she asked: ‘Was it a map of Bath? Or maybe London?’

‘No ... I remember now. It was a map of the area around Milford. Near where she lived.’

‘Did you sell her one?’

‘Couldn’t. I don’t sell maps.’ Suddenly he stood erect, or as erect as it was possible for him to do. ‘Like I said, we have no gardening books. Now you’d better be on your bike. It’s closing time.’ He turned and, taking hold of Belinda’s arm, led the way back over the disintegrating books that lay scattered about the floor.

Without a further word from the bookseller, Belinda found herself expelled from the bookshop and heard the door slam behind her. As she leant against the window and took a deep breath, she glimpsed a hairy

hand as it spun the card bearing the inscription "CLOSED" towards an indifferent passing public.

So aunt Jane had wanted a map of Milford. Why would she want that? What on earth was it all about?

Belinda shook her head in bewilderment. She glanced at her watch and realised that she would need to hurry if she were to catch her bus.

As she left the shop she glanced down the side alleyway. What business had taken Mr Munro into that dingy thoroughfare? As she watched, the same door Mr Munro had emerged from opened and Belinda saw a familiar figure step hurriedly into the lane.

It was Jacob.

With a glance back into the doorway he farewelled a hidden partner and began to run away down the alley.

Curiosity got the better of Belinda. Consumed with a passion to discover what lay in the building that attracted both Jacob and Mr Munro, she slipped into the lane and approached the door.

Just as she reached it the door opened and Belinda found herself face to face with a cheerful young man whose arms were full of cut flowers.

'Whoops, sorry, lady. Almost ran you down. Need any help? I'm just about to shut up shop. Got some deliveries to make.'

Belinda was at a loss for words.

'Oh, excuse me. It's just that I wondered what was in this building.'

The young man looked at her quizzically.

Belinda blushed. 'I mean, I just saw someone I know leave here and I wondered what ...' Her

explanation petered out feebly. She was beginning to feel rather stupid.

The man smiled. 'I expect you mean Jacob. He's just left. He buys some supplies here.'

'Supplies?'

'Yeah, garden supplies. And flowers, seeds, all that sort of garden stuff. Do you need anything?'

Belinda took a step backwards. 'Oh, no, not really.'

"Cause if you do,' the young man continued, 'I'll be back in half an hour. As soon as I get rid of these.'

He indicated the flowers in his arms with a nod of his head. Feeling foolish, Belinda assured him that she was not in need of anything for her garden and thanked him for his help. With his eyes burning into her back she made her way up the alley until she reached the street and the bookshop. She turned and looked over her shoulder. The young man had vanished.

Suddenly she felt the sensation that she was being watched and with a start she saw the bookseller eyeing her from the window. His beady, joyless eyes were fixed upon her and she watched in disgust as a drop of saliva dribbled from his fleshy lips.

Belinda began to run towards the bus station.

All the way back to the village Belinda mulled over these latest developments. Unable to come up with an answer, she convinced herself that Mr Munro had some eccentric habits and his avoidance of her was probably just one of many. And as for both Jacob and Mr Munro visiting the garden centre, they both had legitimate cause to do so. There was no mystery there.

But there was the question of aunt Jane and her search for a map. The old lady had sought help from Hazel Whitby and the odious bookseller.

Why would she want a map of the village?

Brewing a pot of tea in the kitchen, Belinda decided that clues to confirm her aunt's murder were of greater importance than Mr Munro's peculiarities and, sipping her tea, she once more inspected the staircase. Again it offered no lead and Belinda climbed up to her aunt's bedroom. Something Mr Munro said the day of her aunt's funeral popped into her head.

He had said that her aunt made use of the long room downstairs as a bedroom. That she found the stairs difficult.

Belinda sank down onto the bed and took a sip of tea.

'Well, she certainly used the sofa as a bed, but she also used this room, because she wrote her letter to me here. The waste bin proved that.'

She rose and slowly walked from the room to the top of the stairs.

'If she did use this room, and she was up here and heard a noise downstairs, she would have walked to the stairs to investigate.'

Belinda hesitated on the first step.

'But that's not right, because if someone pushed her down the stairs, they would have had to be up here behind her.'

She sank down to sit on the top stair and finished her tea.

'So, if they were up here and she came up to investigate a noise ...?' Belinda shook her head. 'No, that doesn't work either, because how would they get

into the house and past her without her knowing. Unless ...' Belinda sat upright. 'Unless it was someone she knew. And she let them in. But who? She was a recluse.'

Belinda returned to the bedroom and, taking her aunt's pen, she made a list of people who could have legitimately gained entrance to the cottage. The list read:

Mrs Whitby

Mr Munro

Jacob

Rosemary

'Well, certainly Mrs Whitby was permitted in, even if it was only the living room, or so she says. Mr Munro probably called about the will, but there is no evidence that he did. Jacob and Rosemary say they have never been in the cottage, but again, what proof is there that they haven't?'

Belinda felt the beginnings of a headache. Perhaps it was only a drifter, a burglar aunt Jane disturbed. He panicked, pushed her down the stairs and fled.

Or perhaps she really did just fall down the stairs.

'But someone else has broken in and been looking for something,' she reminded herself. 'And there is her letter. It was posted after she died.'

The sense of foreboding engulfed Belinda again and the house seemed to suddenly chill, the air charged with obscure dread.

'I'll go mad talking to myself like this,' she muttered. 'If I could just discuss it with someone.'

Mark's handsome features came into her mind.

'Perhaps when he asks me to dinner, I can talk it over with him.'

It was not the ideal conversation for the dinner table but the need to lay the ghost of aunt Jane had taken precedence over everything else in Belinda's life.

Eight

Rosemary ran down the hill with small dainty steps that seemed at odds with her bulky figure. She carried a basket of newly baked scones from which drifted a mist of steam. A worried expression clouded her normally cheerful features and she mouthed silent anxieties as she made her way to the front door of Belinda's cottage.

Squirming from one foot to the other, she awaited an answer to her knock. Anxiously she peered through the window beside the door, willing Belinda to answer.

The door eventually swung open and Belinda stood wiping her hands on a linen tea towel that displayed faded illustrations of London tourist attractions.

'My dear,' grieved Rosemary, 'Jacob has just told me about the intruders. Aren't you terrified? It's coming to something when your own home isn't safe.'

Belinda held the door open and Rosemary, thrusting the scones unceremoniously into Belinda's hands, entered nervously as though the intruders still lurked menacingly in every crevice.

'How much damage ...?' The question hung in the air. Her eyes popped when she saw the state of the long room.

'If you think that's crook,' smiled Belinda, amused at her neighbour's response, 'I'll take you upstairs.'

This proved to be a mistake as it reduced Rosemary to tears. In aunt Jane's bedroom she sank

onto the bed and sobbed. 'Thank God old Miss Lawrence didn't live to see this.'

Belinda rather felt that all things considered, her aunt would have preferred to survive to witness it.

Rosemary stood up and began to inspect the destruction in detail. She paused at the heavy Victorian wardrobe that projected out at an angle.

'Why, they even pulled the wardrobe away from the wall!' She put her head into the space between it and the false wall and her voice became muffled. 'Now why would they do that?'

Belinda flushed and gathered some nightgowns from the floor. 'Who knows?' she said hesitantly. She pulled Rosemary away from the cabinet.

'Do you want me to do the cleaning tomorrow?' She was eager to change the subject. Rosemary drew in her breath.

'Oh, Belinda. How thoughtless of me. I'm so grateful to you, but no, I can do it tomorrow. My Uncle has a district nurse attending to him now. Much better, really.' She glanced about the room, as though what she was about to say would offend the furniture. 'Gentlemen's problems. Prostrate.'

Belinda laughed inwardly.

'And by way of thanks for your help,' continued Rosemary, 'I insist that you have dinner with us again tonight.'

'Oh, thank you,' said Belinda brightly, 'but I have been invited to dinner tonight in Bath.'

'Oh?' breathed Rosemary, eyes widening and a million questions forming in her inventive brain.

As the two women descended the stairs Belinda asked in a forced casual way, 'Rosemary? Did my aunt

give you a letter to mail for her at any time?' She reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to face Rosemary, who avoided her eye.

'Never,' she replied a little too hastily, her fingers plucking at the balustrade. 'I told you. Your aunt kept to herself.'

'Would she have asked Jacob to post a letter?'

Rosemary shook her head mutely.

'But perhaps she did and he didn't tell you,' continued Belinda.

Rosemary shook her head again. 'It'd be unusual if your aunt had asked anyone to do anything for her, in which case, I'm sure Jacob would have told me.'

Belinda picked up a fresh scone and took a bite. When she turned back, Rosemary was watching her nervously, an evasive look in her eye.

'She's not telling the truth,' Belinda thought, 'or at least, there's something she's not telling me.'

Having finally guided Rosemary to the front door, after she had deviated into almost every room in the house to commiserate over the damage done, Belinda eagerly climbed the stairs to her aunt's room. She stood at the door and eyed the monstrous wardrobe. The intruders had done her a service. Not only had they moved the closet away from the false wall but also they had emptied the contents, making it lighter.

Belinda squeezed into the space between the rear of the wardrobe and the wall. Bracing her feet against the wall and her back to the cabinet, she slowly pushed the heavy object a further foot and a half away from the partition. She breathed deeply after her exertion and stood for a moment looking at the wallpaper.

‘1920s, I’d say’ she murmured, running a hand slowly over the wall-face.

There was no way of telling how many layers were underneath. Her hands slid searchingly over the smooth surface. The colours of the wallpaper were stronger behind the wardrobe, indicating that it had stood there for a long time.

A slight dent in the otherwise flat surface caused Belinda’s fingers to hesitate in their exploration. She ran her hand back over the indentation, faint though it was. It ran upwards from the floor for three or four feet then crossed at a sharp horizontal angle.

‘A door,’ cried Belinda excitedly.

The faint groove then turned down suddenly and confirmed her suspicions. Belinda leant back against the wardrobe, a satisfied smile on her face.

She used a variety of appliances to cut through the layers of wallpaper – a nail file, a letter opener, a can opener and, lastly, a large carving knife from the kitchen. The knife, following the slight gap between door and wall, finally sawed through the brittle membrane.

Belinda, breathing heavily from her toil, wiped dust and perspiration from her brow and stood back to admire her handiwork. Now that the moment to open the secret door was upon her she felt a tremor of apprehension.

How long had it been there?

What did it conceal?

She had read of people discovering human skeletons bricked into walls and with a house dating back to the thirteenth century and considering the history it had ... well!

But having gone this far there was nothing else to do but proceed.

She pushed gently against the panel.

It remained rigidly in place.

She pushed again, harder this time but the door, apart from emitting a faint squeak, stood firm.

Drawing in a deep breath and bracing herself against the wardrobe she thrust the weight of her body onto the unyielding partition. This time she was rewarded by a louder squeak and the door dislodged itself from its rigid surroundings.

Pausing for breath, she renewed her attack and with a great shriek of rusted metal and tortured wood the small door finally gave way. Belinda pushed it open.

A dusty, mouldy draft made her recoil.

The door unexpectedly jammed hard and Belinda gave a gasp of pain as her leg slipped and she skinned her ankle on the rough edge of the cut wallpaper.

Rubbing her injured foot she dropped down to her knees to peer into the mysterious cavity.

She could see nothing in the jet black of the secret room.

She lit the candle that had stood by her aunt's bed. Bending low, summoning all her courage, she struggled into the menacing space. Her heart beat loudly in her ears as her eyes grew accustomed to the dim light. Standing erect she took a tentative step forward. Her shoe crunched down on something brittle and a cold chill engulfed her as she glanced quickly down.

Her foot rested on a pile of bones.

Then she gave a relieved, if nervous, laugh as she realised they were the skeletons of a family of rats.

Holding the candle higher she saw that the room was empty but for a small desk in the corner. As she made her way towards it a veil of cobweb skimmed over her face. In a moment of irrational panic, her flesh crept and she clawed at the web as it clung stickily to her body. She shivered and wiped the despicable substance from her hands.

The desk was a small writing table dating, she thought, from the eighteenth century. A number of dust-covered documents rested on the desktop. Belinda gingerly took them in her hand and blew the dust away. They appeared to be household accounts from an earlier age.

Separate from the others was a scroll of heavy paper tied with a perished red ribbon that disintegrated as Belinda picked it up. She placed the candle on the desktop and slowly, with great care, unrolled the scroll.

What met her eye was more surprising than anything she could have imagined.

The spritzig in the Australian Chardonnay recalled the southern summer sun as Belinda enjoyed her wine and observed soggy Bath residents scurrying to shelter from the unexpected rain. Outside in Queen Square the drizzle increased in density but in the ornate dinning room of the Francis Hotel all was warm and comfortable.

Across the rim of her glass Belinda inspected her companion.

Mark was scrutinising the menu, finally ordering his choice in an authoritative manner that was a match for

the waiter's haughtiness. Dismissing the subordinate he returned his interest to Belinda.

'As I was saying,' he said, idly playing with his glass, 'this place was originally a row of private houses.' He took a swig of his wine. 'Georgian. John Wood the Elder, 1728 or thereabout.'

'It's been well preserved,' Belinda said, gazing around the warmly lit room.

'Restored.'

Belinda looked at him quizzically.

'The war. Bombed. Rather badly, actually.'

His clipped public school accent amused her. She leant back in her chair and listened as he chattered on about the history of the hotel. As handsome as he was, she felt vaguely uneasy in his company, but she had to admit that when he had called at the cottage the previous evening with his dinner invitation, she had accepted readily.

'And Mary Godwin who later wrote *Frankenstein* lived here. Number six, I believe,' his brow wrinkling as he momentarily questioned his own authority. 'Shelley was hanging about at the same time,' he added confidently, as the waiter placed smoked salmon mousse before them.

'You know a good deal of history,' observed Belinda.

Mark shrugged. 'As a real estate agent you get to know the history of the area.'

He glanced across at Belinda. She thought she detected a wary expression in his look.

'For instance, what do you know of the history of your house?' His voice had a curious edge to it.

Belinda swallowed a mouthful of mousse and dabbed at her lips with her napkin. 'Not much. But I do know that it dates back to the thirteenth century and later it was a religious community.'

Mark waved at the waiter and indicated the need for some more wine.

'Part of the house is thirteenth century,' he corrected her. 'The long room at the back was originally a cobbler's cottage. The window is where he sat, met his customers and carried on his trade.'

'Oh, really,' said Belinda sardonically under her breath, as the waiter refilled her glass. She had a feeling that she was about to receive a lecture on events connected with the cottage.

And she was right.

For the next ten minutes the history of the village was expounded and, interesting as it was, Belinda found her attention wandering.

Mark continued confidently: 'And then the village became a Cistercian community until the dissolution of the monasteries.'

Belinda nodded knowingly. 'When Henry VIII sold off religious communities to private ownership, and pocketed the profits. Then it became a girls' school,' she concluded smugly.

'Oh, that didn't happen until late Victorian times,' responded Mark, inspecting the roast beef as it was placed before him.

'Really?' Belinda was now curious to hear a further history of the cottage.

'After the dissolution by King Henry, the community broke up and the land, as you say, fell into private hands. In the eighteenth century, when Bath became a

fashionable spa again, the properties were split up and your cottage was extended. An uncle of John Wood – you remember Wood built this place and the rest of Queen Square,’ Mark nodded out the window, ‘well, his uncle bought the cottage, expanded it as I said, and purchased some of the surrounding land, which is why you have such a large garden today.’

He turned his attention to the beef.

In the brief silence that followed Belinda digested not only her food but also Mark’s history of the estate. She placed her fork on the plate and gave her attention to Mark.

‘May I ask you a question?’

‘By all means,’ said Mark, through a mouth full of the Roast Beef of Old England.

‘Does the name “Lancelot” mean anything to you?’

There was the slightest of hesitations as Mark cut through a parsnip. He popped a piece into his mouth and looked directly at Belinda. His eyes, alert once more, had a cold enquiring glint.

‘Should it?’ he asked flatly.

Belinda sipped her wine to calm herself. ‘Perhaps not,’ she replied with false indifference.

They ate in silence for a moment during which Mark watched her continuously. She shifted uncomfortably under his gaze and sought to change the subject.

‘The most amazing coincidence,’ she began overbrightly.

He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

‘Yesterday, while I was cleaning your house, I happened to see a picture, an illustration in a magazine, of a landscape design for a garden in the eighteenth century.’ She glanced across at him with a

sudden feeling of inexplicable nervousness. His eyes narrowed imperceptibly. In her uneasiness she began to babble.

‘And the funny thing is that just today, quite by accident, I found a similar one at the cottage. Not a magazine. I mean a real plan. A plan for landscaping a garden.’ She paused for breath and glanced at him. ‘And I’m sure it’s quite old.’

Mark’s expression changed from intense alertness to one of sudden relaxation. A loose smile played around his lips and he sipped his wine.

‘That’s an interesting story,’ he said offhandedly.

But his voice was tight and he looked at her with new interest, as though something he suspected had just been confirmed.

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. After a stroll around the square under bright stars that had replaced the misty rain clouds, Mark drove Belinda home.

The evening had not turned out to be as pleasant as Belinda had hoped and she felt uncomfortable. The prospect of introducing the possibility of her aunt’s murder as a topic of conversation simply did not arise. Several times she caught Mark watching her thoughtfully and her unease in his presence increased.

As he walked her to the front door he suggested that they see each other the following weekend.

‘Perhaps,’ replied Belinda indifferently, ‘but I do have rather a lot of work to do here.’

‘Are you intent on staying in the cottage?’ Mark asked.

‘I’m still not sure.’

Belinda avoided his look. Her uneasiness grew so that she was relieved when he finally bade her goodnight and she heard his car leave. She watched the headlights light up the country lane as he slowly drove away.

When he reached the bottom of the hill the car stopped and she could hear the engine idling in the still night air. Ten minutes passed before the car sprang to life again and roared away in the direction of Bath.

‘Now why would he stop in the middle of a country lane, in the middle of the night?’ Belinda asked herself, as she kindled the fire. ‘Except that he stopped at the boundary of my property.’

Another unpleasant thought struck her. Mark had known the history of the long room. How would he know of its existence unless he had been in it?

She shivered in spite of the fire’s heat and imagined that unwelcome eyes were watching her. She hastily closed the shutters and was suddenly aware of the almost palpable silence. For the first time Belinda felt thoroughly insecure in the house and double-checked all the door and window locks.

From the kitchen drawer she took an ice pick and carried it with her to the long room. She was uncertain just what use it would be to her as a means of defence but its ugly hard spike was reassuring and she felt more at ease with it at her side.

Pouring a glass of port, she took the scroll from a cupboard and gently unfolded the plans for the garden.

It consisted of a roughly drawn design for a rural garden, not very large according to the measurements that Belinda could see, and included a rock waterfall.

The outline of a house stood to one side and a hand-written list of plants accompanied the proposal.

Some writing in faded ink at the bottom caught her attention and she took up her aunt's magnifying glass from the chair-side table.

Even with this strong glass it was difficult to decipher the faint handwriting. She began to spell out the letters as she recognised them.

All at once her heart leapt and the words became crystal clear.

She pronounced the name loudly in a triumphant voice.

'Lancelot Brown.'

Nine

The name ran around and around Belinda's brain the next morning as she washed her few breakfast dishes and made desultory attempts at sorting the contents of the kitchen cupboards.

Lancelot Brown.

The puzzling name teased her until it brought on the beginnings of a headache.

The squeal of the garden gate claimed her attention and she saw Jacob stepping onto the terrace. He waved a sheaf of papers in Belinda's face as she opened the door to his knock.

'What's this?' she asked as she grasped the pages. She was still cross with Jacob after their last meeting and his irritating manner.

'The quote,' he retorted, surprised that she appeared to have forgotten.

'What quote?' She glanced at the figures and the detailed writing.

Jacob grunted and slapped his thigh irritably. 'You have forgotten!'

Their agreement came flooding back to Belinda. She flushed and attempted to hide her embarrassment. 'Of course I hadn't forgotten,' she snapped defensively. 'We agreed that you would do my garden for me.' She looked again at the total of the figures in the handwritten quote.

‘You’ll pardon me, Belinda. We agreed that I would quote on clearing the garden. Then a decision would be reached as to the next stage of development.’

Belinda recollected their conversation. He was right, as usual. She gave him a sour look and walked to the balustrade overlooking the rambling garden.

Jacob stepped up beside her and Belinda edged away uncomfortably. She glanced at him and saw that he was looking down at her with the self-assured smirk that had exasperated her in the past.

‘Lancelot Brown.’

The name burst from Belinda’s lips involuntarily.

The change of expression that swept over Jacob’s face startled her. His smirk vanished suddenly. He was instantly alert, his blue eyes darkening while searching Belinda’s features as though seeking a hidden explanation. The intensity of his look chilled Belinda. It was the same expression she had seen in Mark’s eyes when she mentioned the landscape plan. She looked away to hide her bewilderment.

‘You must think me mad,’ she said through a forced laugh. She glanced back at Jacob. His expression had softened to an imperceptible smile, yet his eyes held her in the way a cat watches its prey just before the attack. ‘It’s only that I’ve read his name recently and I can’t place where I’ve heard it before.’

She busied herself with the quote, feeling his eyes burning into her, then sensed him relax as he cleared his throat.

‘I imagine you mean Capability Brown?’ Jacob said softly.

The name suddenly illuminated Belinda’s mind.

‘Of course. He was a famous landscape gardener. No wonder I couldn’t identify the name. I only knew him as “Capability”.’ She turned to face Jacob. ‘We learnt about him in English History at school. He was active early last century, wasn’t he?’

Jacob dragged himself up onto the balustrade and sat with one leg drawn up, the other dangling against the moss covered stone.

‘You obviously didn’t pay attention in class. He was working in the eighteenth century. From about 1735 or thereabouts.’

Belinda snorted mockingly. ‘I might have known you’d be a fountain of knowledge about him.’

Jacob ignored her interruption. ‘He was regarded as a genius in designing gardens, gardens that he would never live to see in their maturity. He had an insight that allowed him to predict the way that his work would mature.’

‘But surely the owners who wanted formal gardens wouldn’t wait until –’

‘Not formal gardens,’ Jacob broke in impatiently. ‘He did away with stuffy old-fashioned concepts of gardening. Knot gardens, gravel walks, all that strict pretentious thinking went out the window.’

He jumped down to the terrace, landing lightly on his feet and with his fists pushed firmly into his pockets strode backwards and forwards across the terrace, his excitement building as he described Capability Brown’s philosophies. Belinda found herself drawn into his enthusiasm.

‘He took hold of the fashionable gardens, softened the accepted lines, threw out geometric patterns and

substituted walks that meandered by streams and lakes with views over gentle rolling hills.'

Jacob stood in front of Belinda, so close that his thigh brushed hers.

'His gardens express an ideal. The native English landscape.' He paused, his breathing deep and powerful. In the brief silence Belinda found herself excited by Jacob's own stimulation. She recalled her second night in the cottage and her awareness of his obvious love of the country and its heritage.

Suddenly he kissed her. Belinda responded, a response that startled her by its swiftness. The solid touch of his lips stifled any objection from her and his hand slid around her shoulder to cradle her head. They separated; both a little stunned by their sudden intimacy. Jacob grinned.

'I'm sorry if I'm a grouch and if I get carried away with things.'

Belinda took a deep breath to steady herself. Once again she had to admit to herself the attraction she felt for Jacob. She gave a slight shrug and smile.

'No harm done.'

Jacob leant on the balustrade and looked out into the garden.

'Poor old Capability.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, poor bugger, many of his gardens have been destroyed. How heart breaking that must be. To put all that effort into creating beautiful landscapes, then have future generations turn them into golf courses or gravel pits.'

'Is that what happened?'

Jacob glanced at her and gave a resigned grin. 'In some cases. There are others that have been kept in good condition or at least restored to something like he planned.'

'How sad,' said Belinda softly, 'I'd like to see one of his landscapes.'

Jacob stood erect. 'That's easily fixed.'

'How?'

Jacob pointed over the hill and nodded. 'Just over yonder in the next village, Combe Down.'

He walked to the edge of the terrace, his gaze fixed on the sloping hills. Belinda followed slowly.

'At Prior Park,' Jacob continued. 'He created a landscape there in 1760.'

'Could we see it?'

'The old house is a school now, but we can get permission to view the grounds. Just tell me when.'

Belinda felt that her own garden was top priority. Ignoring the fact that she now had enough money to do the garden several times over, she haggled with Jacob over his quote for clearing the garden. She knew that a bigger and more seriously fought argument would take place when it came to deciding just what to do with the proposed new garden. Together they walked into the grounds and Jacob indicated where the most damage has been done not only by time but also by previous generations. All of this he carefully recorded in his notebook.

He paused beside the bulging retaining wall that towered above them. The swelling in the stone surface seemed more pronounced than ever.

'This will have to go,' he said. He slapped his hand against the moss-coated rocks. Damp soil trickled from

an ominous crack in the swelling wall and some small stones tumbled down the mossy incline. 'Apart from obviously being in poor condition and likely to give away at any time, it's spoiling the natural flow of the land.'

Belinda hid a smile.

'The deal is, we clear the ground first. I don't want a lecture on what is artistically correct.'

As Jacob began a fiery defence, Belinda's smile became a laugh and Jacob, realising that he was being baited, gave her a friendly shove and continued on with his assessment of work to be carried out.

It was agreed that Jacob would begin the task immediately and over the next few days, Belinda awoke each morning to a cheerful whistle as Jacob, happy in his work, dug out dead shrubs and trees, pruned others and gradually cleared the dense foliage away from the front of the cottage. Thick mud replaced the weeds and Belinda was forced to leave her shoes at the door. But each of those days saw progress, and Belinda felt a sense of achievement, a sensation that at last it was her cottage and she was making her impression upon it.

Hazel Whitby sat in the back of the taxicab and ran an appreciative eye over the potent shoulders and neck of the driver.

Perhaps she should take a taxi more often, she mused as the car sped away from Bath. Normally she would be driving herself in her sporty Mercedes but a recent mishap had temporarily required that vehicle to submit to the subtleties of the panel beater.

‘No, Officer, I wasn’t speeding.’ Well, maybe a little.

‘No, Officer, I haven’t been drinking.’ Well, maybe a little.

The Judge thought so too and the fine had been substantial.

Hazel gave a snort of derision as she recalled this inequitable treatment and pulled the fur collar of her coat tighter around her throat. Her snort caught the driver’s attention and his dark eyes flicked to the rear vision mirror. Hazel met his reflected look and for a moment there was a shared responsive frisson, a pleasant tantalising promise that suggested brutish couplings in semi-public places.

The driver cleared his throat noisily. ‘Haven’t seen you around much lately, Mrs Whitby.’

‘Nor me you,’ she replied huskily, slipping easily into her habitual temptress role.

‘I’ve been away in London these past six years. My mum tells me you’re divorced?’

Six years.

With a sickening thud Hazel came down to earth. She remembered the driver now – a spotty red-haired urchin whose mother had taken in laundry, how many years ago? Twelve years? He’d been about ten then. Twelve years had made him a young man, whereas it had made her ... Better not to think about that!

‘Just keep driving,’ she snapped, all trace of huskiness gone.

The driver shrugged. ‘Silly old cow,’ he thought. He remembered other things his mother had told him about Mrs Whitby – the high and mighty Mrs Whitby – who thought herself above others. How she liked more than a drink or two. How she had an eye for young

trade and had been caught with an adolescent farm hand literally making hay. No wonder her husband dumped her. A few years ago he might have considered a casual orgy with her; played the innocent teenager willing to be taught by the mature woman. She was a good-looker in those days. Now? Now she reminded him of his mum. Their eyes avoided each other instantly, he content to drive, she to ruminate on the ferocity of passing years.

The taxi pulled up at the Milford address and Hazel emerged, flinging the fare at the driver and wishing him to hell. With a smirk he accelerated away and left Hazel standing at the garden gate.

She opened it and stepped into a pool of glutinous sludge.

Her cry brought a young woman to the door of the cottage and Hazel recognised her quarry, the heir to the property, the old lady's niece, Miss Belinda Lawrence.

Belinda watched the woman struggling out of the mud and identified her as the antique dealer, Mrs Whitby. Hilda? No ... Hazel.

Taking Hazel by the hand she guided her gently towards the house.

'I'm so sorry about the mud, Hazel. I'm having the garden repaired, but I hadn't counted on it creating such a mess.'

Hazel remained silent, her rage literally making her speechless. In fact, the only word she uttered in the next five minutes was "Double" when Belinda offered her a gin and tonic.

Seated in the long room, her black fur coat draped over her shoulders, gin in hand, Hazel watched as Belinda wiped the mud from her shoes.

The soothing gin swiftly loosened her tongue.

‘To be perfectly honest, dear, I’m on the scrounge. You may remember that I was keen to inspect your aunt’s belongings to see what treasures she had closeted away?’

Belinda nodded, wiping the last of the mud from the expensive leather. She placed the shoes by Hazel’s feet and sat opposite her.

‘Hideous Victorian tat, I think you described it as?’

Hazel shrugged in agreement. ‘Sounds like me. What can I tell you? Corpulent Victoriana does nothing for me and frankly, ain’t worth the effort in trying to sell it off.’ She leant forward earnestly. ‘Now if you were to allow me to look over the place, and if I found something of merit that you felt you could dispense with, then perhaps we could come to some arrangement?’

‘Arrangement?’

‘I could sell on commission. You’ll find that I’m very reasonable.’

Belinda looked at her visitor. Reasonable? Belinda felt that Hazel’s priority would be to look after number one. However, she agreed to show her around the cottage, if only to keep the woman talking, for she sensed that Hazel’s interest was not limited to appropriating antiques.

They climbed the stairs to the bedrooms, Hazel having already dismissed the dining room furniture and shown only a mild interest in a small cabinet in the long room and a Chippendale chair in the living room.

‘You said my aunt was interested in old maps?’ Belinda asked as they climbed the stairs. Hazel was suddenly aware of her arthritic knee.

‘Yes. Seemed a curious thing for the old woman to be interested in.’

‘Did she say what kind of map?’

‘Oddly enough, she wanted old maps of this area,’ replied Hazel, running an expert eye over the offerings in the main bedroom.

‘Yes. I’d heard that,’ said Belinda, sitting on the edge of the bed.

‘Oh? From whom?’ Hazel replaced a small Wedgwood dish on the mantelpiece.

With a shiver of distaste Belinda recalled the fleshy bookseller.

‘It seems my aunt had been asking around Bath for old maps. She even called personally at a bookshop and specified that she wanted a map that showed this village.’

Hazel walked to the window and looked down into the derelict garden. ‘Which book shop?’

‘Can’t remember the name, but it’s in Pierrepont Street, near the bus station. A strange place and an even stranger owner.’

Hazel turned back into the room. ‘You mean Jack the Ripper?’

‘Do I?’ Belinda looked at Hazel in alarm.

Hazel resumed her inspections of the trinkets on the bedside cabinet.

‘That’s what he’s known as. Frightful creature. Up on a charge of selling pornography a few years ago. Why would your aunt go searching for a map in that appalling dump?’

'I wondered the same thing. Perhaps she didn't know where to start looking and thought a bookshop would be a good place to begin?

'Perhaps.' Hazel inspected the hallmark on a silver crochet hook.

Belinda rose from the bed and straightened the lace cover.

'I suppose it actually was a map she was looking for?' she proposed hesitantly.

'What else could it be?'

'Oh, I don't know,' replied Belinda, watching Hazel intently. She felt sure the older woman knew more about her aunt than she admitted. Why after all had she approached aunt Jane on the pretext of searching for antiques? Could she have been looking for something else?

The landscape garden design for example?

'Perhaps it wasn't really a map. Perhaps it was the blueprint for a house or something like that,' Belinda suggested.

She waited for the woman's response.

Hazel put down a water jug and turned to Belinda.

'If she said a map, I'm sure she meant a map. Your aunt was mentally alert. No sign of dementia in that old bird.'

The two women stood face to face. Belinda steeled herself. 'You said, when I called at your shop, that my aunt had been murdered. Have you any proof?'

Hazel sighed irritably and picked up an ornate silver hand mirror.

'As I indicated then, no. It is just a feeling. Call it a woman's intuition if you like.'

Their eyes met in the mirror.

'I'm convinced it was murder.' Belinda blurted the words out.

Hazel lowered the mirror and looked questioningly at her. 'Have *you* any proof?'

Belinda arched her eyebrows. 'Call it a woman's intuition.'

Hazel smiled. She hugged her coat to her body.

'You're an intelligent girl. You must have picked up the vibes about this place.' She ran her gaze around the room. 'Don't tell me you haven't sensed people's interest in it, an interest that on the surface would seem ...' she searched for the term '... Unwarranted.'

Choosing her words carefully, Belinda replied: 'I put it down to the availability of such an old building. People are interested in its history.'

Hazel gave her a disdainful look as though she expected better than that.

'All right,' snapped Belinda, beginning to lose her temper, 'you tell me what's so fascinating about the cottage.'

Hazel gave a frustrated snort. 'If only I knew. You're right about the historical aspect, of course, but there is something else, some mystery that I can't put my finger on.'

She turned her gaze directly onto Belinda. 'But I tell you this. The old lady knew something ... and was done in as a result.'

They nodded in mutual agreement.

Descending the stairs to the hall below, Hazel pulled a mobile phone from her coat pocket and ordered a taxi. Clicking off the machine, she stood firmly in the doorway, feet apart, hands fixed firmly on her hips, her black fur coat flowing like giant bat wings

from her shoulder. She fixed Belinda with an unyielding eye.

‘Look, I’ll be honest. No point beating about the bush. I’ve a business proposition to put to you.’

Belinda looked at her in amazement. Hazel continued, ‘I’m looking to expand into antique furniture. Up until now I’ve confined my interest to silver, china, and bits and bobs. It’s been interesting and I still have a passion for silver, but I want something challenging. So I’m looking to buy furniture up until the Georgian period. When I do, I want to be able to display it properly, not just in some dingy shop front, but somewhere where the buyer can see it in a setting that is complementary. Now, I could go out and buy a house, but until I’m certain that my plans will work, I don’t want that expenditure. I’m proposing that I display the furniture here in your cottage.’

Belinda blinked in surprise. ‘Here? But why?’

Hazel glanced about her. ‘You already know that this is one of the oldest cottages in the district and so it has a certain distinctiveness, a definite *éclat*, darling. That’s a further selling point and would make an ideal background to show the furniture to its best advantage. I could dress the rooms with bric-a-brac and make the objects that much more desirable. Of course I would make it worth your while. You wouldn’t be out of pocket and I would make viewing only by appointment so you wouldn’t be inconvenienced.’

Before Belinda could voice her startled reply Hazel continued.

‘I know this is a surprise to you and you will probably need time to think it over.’ She handed Belinda her bright red business card. ‘Give me a call

when you have had the opportunity to give it some thought.'

The toot of the taxicab outside alerted them to its arrival, and Belinda escorted Hazel out the back door so that she could avoid the mud.

At the gate Hazel stopped and turned to her.

'Give it serious thought. The house,' and her eyes flicked in the direction of the garden, 'and the restored garden will prove profitable in more ways than one.' She hesitated, opened her mouth to say something else but appeared to think better of it. She patted Belinda on her arm and stepped into the taxi.

Belinda, still stunned by the proposition, shut the back door and walked slowly through the house to the front terrace.

Beyond, the chaotic garden stretched before her, dank, grey and unattractive.

Why had Hazel mentioned the garden? Was it of more importance to her than the house?

Or was Hazel's business proposal simply a screen to camouflage a more covert and sinister interest?

Belinda polished the dark wood until she could see her reflection. She had begun house-cleaning two days a week, and was just finishing the house of Mrs Mainwaring, a rather officious woman who ran a small publishing firm in Bath.

Her thoughts while she worked were occupied, as they had been for the last few weeks, with the mystery surrounding her aunt's death. Try as she might she could not wipe from her mind the image of her aunt's face frozen in death and the puzzle of the half-written

and abandoned letters. An air of caution had replaced her initial enthusiasm for the cottage and the village. In addition, she could not shake off the sensation that she was being watched.

‘But by whom and for what purpose?’ she asked herself.

The shrill ring of the telephone made her jump and the tin of polish went skidding across the newly glossed tabletop. With her heart thumping unreasonably in her ribs Belinda picked up the receiver.

‘Hello?’ she said tentatively.

There was the sound of someone fumbling with the phone at the other end and Rosemary’s agitated voice came on the line.

‘Belinda? Is that you? Sorry to ring you there, but I need to speak to you urgently. I thought I’d catch you before you left.’

‘Well, you did,’ laughed Belinda, ‘but what’s the matter? You sound odd.’

There was a slight pause before Rosemary replied.

‘I’ve got something to tell you – show you actually.’ Her voice faded away and Belinda heard her muttering to herself.

‘Look, Rosemary. I’m just about finished here and then I’m heading home. Why not meet me there. Is Jacob still working in the garden?’

‘No, he’s gone over to Westbury to do a job ... oh, dear ... this is ...’

Rosemary’s thin voice trailed off. Belinda gave an exasperated sigh.

‘OK then, if I’m late, the key is under the red potplant on the terrace. We can discuss it over a cup of tea.’

‘Tea,’ replied Rosemary distractedly, ‘yes, I suppose so. You won’t be long though, will you? It’s just that, oh dear, this is so awkward, so embarrassing.’

‘Rosemary, I’ll be home in half an hour. If you’re that upset, go in and make yourself a cup of tea. Now I’m going to hang up. See you shortly.’

Belinda had decided to keep the bicycle for the time being in preference to a car, mainly because she enjoyed the exercise and she didn’t really need other means of transport at the moment.

As she cycled home along the country lane in the fading afternoon light her thoughts turned to Jacob and his excitement at showing her the Capability Brown landscape the following weekend.

Belinda had not revealed her discovery of the old plan for a garden design. Why this should be she couldn’t really explain, but an instinct had cautioned her about revealing its presence to Jacob. And she remembered Mark’s reaction when she had described it to him. She shivered, partly from the approaching night air and partly from apprehension as she wondered just what the significance of the landscape design map was.

Rosemary let herself into Belinda’s cottage and stepped tentatively into the hall, her breathing sounding ephemeral and hollow in the empty house.

She knew, of course, that Belinda would not be home for at least another half-hour but she would have welcomed a comforting reception. She went to the

back of the house, glancing over her shoulder as she did so. The light was fading fast and a menacing gloom filled the rooms.

'Oh, hurry up, Belinda,' she whispered and half ran into the kitchen. She filled the kettle and lit the gas, muttering strange half-sentences to herself. As she leant against the sink to await the boiling water she drew from her apron pocket a small wad of folded paper. It shook in her trembling fingers.

A sudden sound in the hall made her jump violently.

Her eyes flew to the kitchen door, where a faint shadow flitted across the passageway wall.

Her eyes widening with fright, she attempted to call out but all that emerged from her parched throat was a dull croak.

The house sank back into silence. Swallowing dryly, her heart pounding in her ears, Rosemary eased herself around behind the large kitchen table.

The distinct sound of a footstep on the bare wooden floor sent a shiver of dread through her.

Her instinct was to flee.

But where?

The only door in the kitchen led to the back hall where the intruder was established.

As a moth to a flame, Rosemary passed the stove and stood at the threshold of the door. Her chest tight with alarm, she leant forward and peered into the hall.

Something dark and malevolent cleaved the air above her and a shock of red fire exploded in her head.

Like a marionette suddenly freed from its strings, she collapsed backwards onto the stove, her eyes hardening in recognition of her assailant.

That image, held in her retina, was the last she registered in this life.

Ten

Belinda stood beside the open grave. It was the second time in a few weeks that she found herself in the small churchyard.

From the graveside, if she turned her head, she could see the freshly turned soil that covered the grave of her great-aunt Jane and glimpse the decaying flowers that had expressed her sympathy at that funeral.

Opposite her, Jacob stood, head bowed, shoulders hunched against the biting wind. He had barely glanced at Belinda and when he did his pale complexion and haggard expression shocked her. It was as though he had withdrawn into a world of his own.

The voice of the Vicar droned on in Belinda's ears as he intoned the prayers for the dead. A movement behind the ancient tombstones caught Belinda's eye and she saw Inspector Jordan quietly take his place with the village mourners. He looked directly at her and Belinda found herself blushing in an irrational feeling of guilt. What had she to be guilty about? She shivered, not so much from the icy breeze, but the recollection of the nightmare situation she had found herself in.

Cycling back from Mrs Mainwaring's that late afternoon, there had been a loud bang and the front tyre collapsed into a flaccid skin around the wheel.

Cursing her bad luck, Belinda dismounted and began the long trudge home. She hadn't realised just how hilly the route was and, as the sun sank behind the horizon and the dusky shadows began to fill the country lane, her silent curses increased and she wiped the perspiration from her brow.

Her limbs were aching now, not only from the housework but the interminable tramping up and down hill and dale. Her only thought was to sink into a relaxing bath and wash away the dirt and frustrations of the day. Then the realisation that Rosemary was waiting for her increased her irritation.

'She'll babble on about some petty little village gossip, and drive me mad. Why didn't I tell her I wasn't interested?'

As Belinda drew close to the cottage she saw that there was no light at the window, and hope rose in her breast that Rosemary had tired of waiting and gone home. Feeling a little more cheerful, she wheeled the lifeless bicycle onto the terrace and turned to the front door.

'Well, of all the nerve,' she muttered. 'She's just gone off and left the door wide open.'

Resentment spurred her forward and she marched determinedly into the hall.

It wasn't until she reached the door to the kitchen that she sensed the eerie silence that enveloped the house. Suddenly the old fears returned and with a feeling of apprehension she stepped into the kitchen.

The evening gloom reduced the room to a murky hollow, and she hurried to turn on the light.

As the illumination flooded the kitchen, it seemed that everything was normal and that Rosemary had

simply been waiting for her and had not thought to switch on the light. She stood by the stove, staring at a point above Belinda, as though about to greet a friend.

Looking back on it, Belinda realised that her next actions were automatic, totally detached from the reality of the situation. It was the lack of blood that was surprising, and Rosemary's expression almost welcoming.

The ice pick projecting from her skull. That was the only incongruous element.

Feeling that she was in a dream, Belinda looked down at Rosemary's hand. Clutched tightly between her thumb and forefinger was a small triangular piece of paper. Belinda reached down and withdrew the scrap of yellowing parchment.

In the cold glare of the kitchen light she read the single word etched in faded ink, and spoke the solitary name.

'Michelangelo.'

'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

The fragile voice of the minister and the thud of earth on the coffin drew Belinda back to the churchyard and the undeniable reality. She raised her eyes to Inspector Jordan, who returned her look with a questioning stare.

Suddenly Belinda felt herself falling, falling, falling into the embracing darkness.

Inspector Jordan leapt forward and caught her in his arms.

The white walls of the hospital and the sterility of the ward seemed oddly comforting to Belinda. Diagnosed as suffering from shock, she had been hospitalised and now, three days later, had just been advised by the doctor that she could go home. Her only visitor in the three days had been Inspector Jordan.

‘Feeling better?’

Belinda suspected that he didn’t care one way or the other.

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘Shock. It was delayed shock, or so the doctor says.’

‘Don’t you believe him?’

‘If he says that was the cause, then I must believe him.’

‘Inspector, I walked into my kitchen and found my neighbour dead, with an ice pick in her brain. Is it any wonder I’m suffering from shock?’

Jordan nodded. ‘Perfectly understandable. If that is what happened.’

‘What do you mean? Of course it’s what happened. I came home from work and —’

‘That’s what I want you to tell me about,’ interrupted Jordan. Belinda sighed in frustration. The man was an idiot.

‘Inspector,’ she began patiently, ‘I told you everything that happened when you interviewed me after I found Rosemary’s body. What else can I tell you?’

‘I’d like you to go over it once again. There may be something that you have forgotten, or something else that will come to mind.’

Belinda felt like ringing for the doctor and telling him to send the Inspector packing. What else could she tell him, that she hadn't already told?

'All right,' she sighed, 'as I told you, I was coming home from work –'

'What work?'

'Cleaning. For Mrs Mainwaring. I left her house –'

'She says that she can't vouch that you were at her house during the time you claim.'

'Of course not. She was at work. The house was empty. I left there about four o'clock or so and started home.'

Jordan flicked open a notebook and glanced at it.

'But you told me that you didn't discover the body until six o'clock or thereabouts. What took you so long to get home?'

'If you look in your notes,' replied Belinda sharply, 'you will see that I had a puncture and had to walk home. It is some distance from Bath to the village and –'

'But weren't you in a hurry to get home?'

'Only to soak in a hot bath.'

'I thought you said that your neighbour had something to tell you?' Jordan tapped his notebook. 'That's what you said.'

Belinda felt as though she was talking to a brick wall.

'Inspector, Rosemary was a great gossip. Yes, she did ring me and say she had something to tell me, but the only reason I was anxious to get home was to rest from a hard day's work. Rosemary's gossip wasn't important to me.'

‘But it was important enough for her to ring you at your place of work? Surely if it was just idle gossip, she would have waited until you were home and chatted over the garden fence.’

Belinda realised what the Inspector said was true. What was it that Rosemary had discovered? With a rush, Belinda recalled the scrap of paper she had drawn from Rosemary’s dead hand.

‘Michelangelo,’ she muttered to herself.

‘What was that?’ demanded Jordan, his eyes searching hers. Belinda glanced away.

‘Nothing. A relative ... someone I should tell about my aunt’s death.’ Jordan looked at her disbelievingly.

‘What did you do after you found the body?’

‘I went to one of the houses in the village and called the police. You know that.’

‘Why didn’t you go and tell the brother, Jacob? His house was nearest and he had a telephone.’

‘He was in Westbury quoting on a job. I knew he wasn’t home.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Rosemary. When she telephoned me at work. Inspector, please. I’ve told you everything.’ Belinda was beginning to feel weary.

‘But you didn’t tell the police when your house had been broken into.’

‘Well, I didn’t think it was that important then.’

‘It didn’t enter your head that it was connected with your aunt’s death?’

Belinda looked at Jordan in amazement. ‘But you said her death was an accident.’

‘Well ... I’m not saying it wasn’t,’ Jordan replied grudgingly, ‘it’s just that a break-in such as you had

should have been reported at the time. Especially after there's been a death ... or a murder. Stands to reason.' Jordan paused and looked thoughtfully at Belinda. 'What do you think they were after?'

Belinda thought of the garden plan secure in the hiding place where she had put it. It would be safe there for the time being. She hoped.

'No idea,' she replied blandly.

Jordan's face said that he was not convinced. He closed his notebook. 'There's nothing else that you can remember? Nothing else that happened that may ...'

'Nothing. I've told you exactly what happened. Everything.'

'Except for one thing,' Jordan said quietly.

Belinda looked questioningly at him. 'What's that?'

'Why someone would want to kill you.'

Belinda stared at him in disbelief.

'Kill me?'

The Inspector nodded.

'Your neighbour was there by chance. Whoever killed her was waiting for you. Make no mistake, someone wanted you dead.'

The strong perfume of violets drew Belinda back from her recollection of the Inspector's shocking declaration. A sudden awareness that someone was advancing towards her made her open her eyes and she saw Mark at her bedside.

'Feeling better?' he asked, thrusting the violets into her hand.

'Much better, thanks. I can go home tomorrow.'

Mark stood a little awkwardly by the bed. 'If you like, I can drive you home. That is if you want to go back to the house.'

'Where else would I go?'

Mark shrugged. 'I just thought that after what had happened you might prefer to stay elsewhere. I could find you a place if you like.'

'That's kind of you, but no. I'll be fine.' Belinda gave him a confident smile. 'And I don't believe in ghosts.'

'It wasn't ghosts I was thinking of.'

'Mark, I know what you're thinking, but believe me I am not scared.'

'But finding the body like that, surely ...'

'It was horrible,' Belinda interrupted, 'but I can't let that stop me from living. And living in my own house.'

Mark stood and walked to the window. He watched an ambulance draw up and a new patient dispatched into the emergency ward.

'Has it occurred to you that someone wants you out of the cottage?'

Belinda thought of the Inspector's warning that someone had tried to kill her.

'After all,' Mark continued, 'it was murder.'

'Yes,' said Belinda thoughtfully, 'but not premeditated.'

'Are you sure of that?'

Mark turned to look at her. Belinda met his eye but did not reply immediately. She fiddled with the bunch of violets.

'Oh, Mark, who would want to kill poor bumbling Rosemary?'

'My point exactly.'

Mark sat on the edge of the bed. Belinda looked away from him. She wished he would change the subject.

'I'll take you up on your offer to drive me home tomorrow,' she said with a cheeriness she did not feel.

Mark stood and rattled his car keys.

'Just tell me the time, I already know the place, and you're the girl.'

Belinda smiled gratefully. 'But on one condition.'

'What's that?'

'On the way, I want to visit Prior Park.'

Brooding mists camouflaged the Palladian house and the land that fell away before it. Around the bridge over the lake the mists intensified but even through this vaporous shroud Belinda could see the beauty of the landscape.

Mark had been delivering a knowledgeable commentary since their arrival at Prior Park and Belinda, recalling his historical diatribe at dinner recently, was not surprised at the extent of his knowledge.

'1760,' was his answer to Belinda's question. 'He was about forty-five when he created the gardens here at Prior Park. The first thing he would have done was restore the landscape to its natural regional features.'

Belinda nodded. 'Jacob says that Brown expressed in his gardens the ideal English landscape.'

Mark looked askance at her. 'Does he indeed? Well, he would say that, wouldn't he? I'm surprised you didn't ask him to show you around here.'

'Actually, I did.'

‘I thought as much. What happened? Did he stand you up?’

Belinda shot him a withering look. ‘Jacob is staying in Wells. I don’t know when he will be home.’

‘And he gave you his version of Capability Brown’s expertise, no doubt?’

Belinda was surprised at Mark’s caustic tone. ‘Do you mean he’s lying?’ she asked doubtfully.

Mark shook his head. ‘No, it’s just that he is so academic about his gardening. But he’s essentially right. Capability was a purist. He created landscapes that didn’t need to acknowledge anything other than the landscape itself. Their beauty was self-contained. He created a vista that his clients could never have imagined.

‘Does that apply to his small gardens?’ Belinda asked in an over-casual voice. Mark glanced at her.

‘So I’ve been told. I’ve never had the privilege of seeing one of his small gardens. He did so few.’

They made their way through the park and the sun, filtering through the lifting mists, shone weakly over the gently rolling contours of Capability’s vision. Mark opened the car door for Belinda and walked around to open the other. Belinda watched him over the roof of the car.

‘Tell me, Mark, you’re knowledgeable about historical matters. Did Michelangelo ever paint in England?’

Mark leant on the car roof and looked at her, an amused smile on his lips. Belinda gave an irritable shake of her head. ‘Oh come on, Mark. I admit it. I’m ignorant. Just keep your self-satisfied attitude to yourself and answer my question. Did he?’

‘Never in England.’ Mark could not keep his amusement from colouring his voice.

‘Well, did he paint at the same time, in 1760 or whatever.’

‘Same millennium, but two hundred years earlier.’ Mark could not contain his amusement.

Silently cursing him, Belinda took her seat in the car.

As they drove towards Milford in a strained silence, Belinda’s thoughts centred on the triangular scrap of paper she had snatched from Rosemary’s lifeless fingers. How did the word written on that fragment of parchment relate to Capability Brown and the mystery surrounding the garden? Silently, Belinda mouthed the name that tantalised her.

‘Michelangelo.’

But what was the connection?

Eleven

The press had shown great interest in Rosemary's death and had labelled it with a lamentable but not unexpected lack of imagination, "The Milford Murder".

Belinda had been startled to see a photograph of her cottage plastered over the front page of the morning newspaper. Photographers had besieged her when she'd arrived at the Coroner's Court for the inquest.

The stuffy courthouse buzzed with speculative whispers when the forensic expert detailed the discovery of fingerprints on the murder weapon. Belinda shrank down in her seat as it was revealed that they were hers, and she instinctively rubbed her fingertips against the fabric of her dress. She wished that she had never taken the damned ice pick as protection, wished she had never seen it, let alone touched it.

Did the police believe her alibi?

After all, she had no witness to the fact that she was cleaning Mrs Mainwaring's house at the time she claimed and her long walk home with a deflated bicycle tyre could be considered sheer invention. Jacob had been several miles away and no one in the village had seen her arrive home. Her eyes met Inspector Jordan's; was there a suspicious glint in his eye? Laden with unjustifiable guilt Belinda forced her attention back

to the coroner as he shuffled his papers and cleared his throat.

The local villagers were quizzed but no one had seen or heard anything unusual on the day. Jacob had returned briefly from Wells for the inquest and testified that he had been driving back from a job in Westbury and had arrived home shortly after Belinda discovered his sister's body. He left the court immediately after the verdict of "murder by person or persons unknown", and returned to his relatives in Wells.

Belinda was shocked by Jacob's appearance. He looked shrunken and his healthy tan had faded, his voice was subdued and at times inaudible. He had avoided Belinda's gaze and had looked only once in her direction as he told the court how she had broken the news of Rosemary's murder to him. It was clear that he was suffering greatly from shock. Belinda knew that he and Rosemary had been very close, and he was obviously deeply affected by her sudden and unexplained slaughter.

After the inquest Belinda had accompanied Inspector Jordan to the police station to look through the photographic files of known offenders. As she was swept away from the Court in a police car, television cameras were thrust against the windows of the vehicle and Belinda had the conviction that she herself was suspected, at least by the news-hungry media, of being the murderer.

After ten minutes of peering at the little square photographs, all the faces tended to look identical. There seemed to be a particular type that specialised in breaking and entering and another who favoured violence tending towards murder. Her inability to

recognise any particular rogue exasperated Inspector Jordan and with another lecture ringing in her ears, for not having advised the police earlier about the intruder breaking into her house, Belinda wearily hailed a taxi and headed home to Milford.

In the week following the inquest and funeral Belinda rested as best she could at the cottage. The weather, hinting at an early spring, had become warmer so she took the opportunity to open the windows and air the house. Time spent in the kitchen, with its memories of death, was kept to a minimum and Belinda roamed from room to room making a list of proposed alterations and repairs.

The young policemen assigned to duty outside the cottage proved to have various personalities, from morose and silent to garrulous and cheery. Belinda heard about their family problems, their children's progress at school and the pros and cons of holidaying in the Lake District.

An application of oil to the garden gate had stilled the hideous shriek of rusted metal, vacuum cleaner and duster had removed quantities of dust, and gradually the cottage began to shed its gloomy atmosphere.

Late on Friday afternoon she retired to the long room with a steaming cup of tea. She withdrew the garden plan from its hiding place behind a watercolour of Cheddar Gorge and spread it out before her. Belinda knew, after her conversation with Mark, that what she saw before her was not only a plan designed by Capability Brown, but a plan he had drawn up for the

garden of her own cottage. But a close inspection of the outline of the house on the map revealed the contours of a much larger building.

‘But this *is* my garden,’ Belinda said. Why was the house different?

A shadow fell over the plan and Belinda leapt to her feet in fright.

Facing her across the room was Mr Munro, his deformed hands turning his hat around and around in a circle before him.

‘Forgive me, my dear. I did not mean to startle you.’

His watery eyes were fixed upon the old plan unfolded on the table.

‘The front door was open and I’m afraid you didn’t hear me knock.’

Belinda knew that was a lie. They would have heard the huge doorknocker in the next village, if he had used it. Unfortunately the oiled hinges on the gate no longer gave a warning screech and Belinda mentally kicked herself for destroying that natural alarm.

She folded the garden plan over to conceal the contents.

‘That’s quite all right, Mr Munro,’ she said as calmly as she could. ‘Please sit down.’

The old man sank with a wheeze onto the sofa. He seemed distracted and reluctantly swung his gaze towards Belinda.

‘I should have visited earlier. You will think me very remiss. I should have come ... before ...’ He hesitated and waved his hand in the general direction of the kitchen.

‘Before the murder, you mean?’ Belinda said shortly. The old lawyer flinched.

‘Quite so. Quite so.’ His eyes darted about the room as though expecting to find an assassin lurking in the shadows.

‘I’m glad you did call, Mr Munro,’ said Belinda, ‘I have been thinking about making my will, and I wanted to talk to you about it.’

‘Your will?’ Mr Munro peered over the top of his glasses at her with a queer expression on his surprisingly smooth face. ‘Do you not have a will?’

Belinda shrugged. ‘Well – no. I’ve never felt the need.’

Mr Munro shook his head sadly. ‘Oh, my dear. One should always have a will. If you were to die suddenly, er – unexpectedly, that is, and you had provided no will, your property would be disposed of against your wishes.’

Belinda looked thoughtfully at her visitor.

‘That’s what I suspected,’ she said slowly, ‘so, if I were to die, or if it had been me that was murdered –’

Mr Munro drew his breath in and raised his hands in horror at the prospect.

‘Do you mean,’ continued Belinda, ‘that if I’d been murdered, the cottage could have just been sold off? To anyone?’

Mr Munro nodded energetically. ‘Yes. I mean just that, if you die intestate. Unless you have a close relative?’

Her mind racing with new ideas, Belinda did not reply but offered Mr Munro a cup of tea. In the calm of the kitchen, muddled thoughts occupied her as she poured fresh boiling water into the teapot and mechanically placed the chipped china vessel on a

tray. Adding a plate of biscuits, Belinda started back to the long room.

As she approached she saw Mr Munro's reflection in a wall mirror as he scrutinised the garden design. He muttered to himself and as Belinda appeared at the door he hastily dropped the paper, feigning a sudden interest in a nearby vase of flowers. She placed the tray on the table and unfolded the plan. Mr Munro looked guiltily at her.

'You may as well take a look, Mr Munro. You obviously know what it is.'

He blushed but this did not stop him from grasping the paper in his gnarled fingers. He held it close to his eyes and eagerly examined the design.

'You're quite right, my dear. I do indeed. There have been rumours for decades that Capability Brown designed a small garden at the same time that he laid out the gardens at Prior Park in Combe Down. Over the years the actual location of that small garden became lost and no one knew exactly which house it was. There had been ...'

His voice trailed off as he discovered something of interest in the design and he muttered the names of English trees under his breath, nodding approval as he did so. Belinda gently took the paper from his reluctant fingers and, folding it, dropped it casually onto the table.

'Did many people believe it to be this cottage?'

Mr Munro shook his head, his eye following the journey of the document. 'No one knew anything for certain. There were three other houses in the area that could have sustained gardens the size of the one

Brown designed, but as I said, no one had hard and fast proof.' He hesitated. 'Not until now, that is.'

Belinda considered this observation. 'Mr Munro,' she said thoughtfully, 'if someone had a property once designed by Capability Brown and the plans for the original lay-out, would that be considered of any value?'

Mr Munro breathed excitedly. 'Most certainly. To have discovered a new garden by Brown and be able to follow his plans to the letter – one could make a fortune. Why, people would kill for that ...' He choked over the words and his pale face went scarlet. 'I mean ... That is to say ...'

Belinda smiled wryly. 'I know exactly what you mean, Mr Munro.'

After tea, during which she proposed calling at his office the next week and making a will, Belinda escorted Mr Munro onto the terrace. As he left the long room, the lawyer cast a distracted look towards the plan as it lay on the table. He nodded at it and turned to Belinda.

'One thing, my dear, I trust that you keep the garden plan in a safe place. Perhaps you would like me to hold it for you at the office?'

'No thank you, Mr Munro. I assure you that it is quite safe here.'

'You'll have it under lock and key?'

Belinda did not reply, but continued leading the way from the house. Mr Munro cast a fretful glance back over his shoulder, then followed discontentedly.

'Tell me, Mr Munro. You mentioned that this was once a school. It must have been a very small one.'

The old man chuckled. 'Oh dear no. It was quite large.' He gestured to the left of the building. 'There was another wing which extended across to the far wall.' He shook his head sadly. 'Torn down early last century, I'm afraid.'

Belinda opened the garden gate. 'I'll be at your office on Tuesday, if that's convenient.'

The elderly man looked at her and Belinda was shocked by the expression of bitterness on his face. This was hastily replaced by a graceful smile.

'By all means, my dear. Shall we say at eleven o'clock?'

Returning to the long room, Belinda unfolded the garden plan. Following the outline of the building with her finger, she saw where the existing house was defined and where the wing, which had been torn down, had stood.

There was no doubt about it. This was a map of her cottage and land.

And there is no doubt that it was not Rosemary who was meant to die.

With a shudder Belinda faced the awful reality:

'It was me.'

Twelve

On Tuesday Belinda arrived at the office of Munro, Munro & Clarke. She shook her dripping umbrella and placed it beside a row of similar waterlogged implements. The young woman who had attended her on her first visit rose in greeting as Belinda pushed open the heavy wooden door of the office.

‘Good morning,’ said Belinda, ‘I have an appointment with Mr Munro. My name is Lawrence.’

The secretary looked bewildered and glanced down at her appointment book.

‘Oh dear!’ she exclaimed. ‘Mr Munro didn’t advise me of any appointment, and anyway, he’s not here.’

Belinda frowned. ‘Are we talking about the right Mr Munro? I mean the elderly gentleman.’

The woman nodded. ‘There’s only one. Young Mr Munro. The other Mr Munro has recently passed on.’

Belinda’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. Young? If he was considered the junior, then how old had been the other Munro partner? She explained to the secretary how she had made the appointment.

‘Well, I’m sorry, Miss Lawrence. All I can tell you is that Mr Munro rang in this morning and said that as he had no other appointments until Friday he would be going away.’

‘Did he say where?’

‘No, Miss. I must say it’s a little unusual.’

Belinda tapped her foot irritably. She had work to do and was now wasting valuable time.

‘May I see his partner? I wanted to make a will and I need some advice.’

The assistant looked repentant. ‘I’m afraid Mr Clarke is visiting our office in Glastonbury at the moment. There were some matters that needed urgent attention.’

The secretary withdrew behind her computer, allowing Belinda to escape the building.

As she unfolded her umbrella and scampered to her newly purchased car, Belinda thought how irritating it was of the old man to forget the appointment, but it was something that could wait until his return on Friday.

She hoped.

After leaving the solicitor’s office Belinda drove to Mark’s house. Gathering her basket of cleaning utensils, she made a dash for the front door. As she burst into the hall, water dripping from her headscarf and coat, a large brown dog came bounding and skidding along the polished floor. Yelping in delight at the prospect of a new playmate it forced Belinda against the wall.

Patting its head, she recognised it as the dog that pursued her through her garden the first weekend she had spent at the cottage.

‘Rusty.’ Mark’s authoritative voice rang through the hall.

Belinda looked up in surprise as Mark hurried down the stairs, struggling into his coat at the same time.

‘I’m sorry, Belinda. He’s quite harmless, I assure you. Just over-friendly.’ He took the dog by its collar and pulled it away.

‘Is he yours?’ she asked. ‘I’ve never seen him here before.’

Mark attempted to control the dog’s excitement. ‘That’s because he stays with some friends of mine who have a farm over near Norton St Phillip. I purchased him on the spur of the moment and then realised that this place was too small for him. Dogs his size need space.’ He shook the dog’s head roughly. ‘Don’t you, old boy?’ The dog barked his assent and renewed his attentions to Belinda by licking her hand. ‘I’m just about to take him back to the farm and then I’m due at the office.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Running late as usual.’

Mark and Rusty scrambled out the door and in the pouring rain ran to Mark’s car. Belinda stood at the window and watched as Mark herded the reluctant animal into the front seat and clambered in beside it. She recalled the terror she felt that day at Milford as she sensed, then heard, someone tracking her through the garden.

‘So it was you, Mark,’ she muttered softly. ‘Now why were you roaming around my garden?’

As she began her polishing she reasoned that Mark, as a real estate salesman, might have just been inspecting the property.

‘But he knew I was in the house,’ she answered herself angrily.

She stopped her polishing with a jolt.

‘He was spying on me.’

The startling realisation made her nervous and she glanced over her shoulder, feeling suddenly vulnerable in the empty house where the sound of the torrential rain masked any other noise.

Mark's arrival at the office was greeted with an assortment of telephone messages, which his flustered secretary thrust into his hands the minute he walked in the door. His own mood was one of irritation caused by his late arrival and a mounting feeling of frustration. The frustration increased as he read one of the messages left for him. He dialled a number and scanned the remaining messages as he waited for his call to be answered.

'Hello, it's Mark.' He sank down into his desk chair and spoke in a low controlled voice. 'Yes, well I do have other things to do, you know.' He signalled through the glass partition to his secretary that he would like a cup of tea. 'I know. I know,' he snapped into the receiver, 'but it's too late for that.' His voice dropped to a churlish mumble. 'She's found out.' He nodded his head angrily. 'Yes ... yes ... And I think she's guessed its worth.' He drummed his fingers on the desktop and gave an exasperated sigh. 'I agree with you, but the fact of the matter is that when I went to visit, she wasn't there, if you recall.'

He glanced up as his secretary placed a cup of tea on his desk. She gave him a questioning look and went back to her desk. Mark watched her go and remained silent until she was out of hearing. He spoke softly but urgently into the mouthpiece.

‘We’ve got to be very careful how we handle this. It’s difficult enough as it is with the police hovering around, but I’ll have another go at getting her to sell.’ He listened intently as the voice at the other end of the phone interrupted him. His expression hardened.

‘You mean it exists? Then it’s certain that she knows everything. In that case, I’ll make one last attempt. If she refuses – we’ll have to look at our options.’

Belinda had just folded clean towels into the airing cupboard when she heard a key turn in the front door and Mark’s footsteps in the hall. As she entered his kitchen it was to find him opening a bottle of champagne. He gave her a broad smile and poured two glasses of the wine.

‘Not much happening at the office today,’ he said, nodding out the window to the rain. ‘This weather has really slowed sales rather badly.’ He handed Belinda a glass and toasted her with his. ‘Here’s to the prettiest char in Bath.’

Belinda took her wine and eyed Mark suspiciously.

‘Champagne. And in the middle of the afternoon. What, may I ask, is the celebration? You can’t have made a good sale. You said yourself things are tough.’ She took a sip of wine.

Mark leaned confidently against the large kitchen table. He was the picture of a prosperous young blood. Successful in business and successful with women.

‘I’m celebrating in advance. You see, I’m hopeful of pulling off one of the best deals of the year.’

‘Congratulations. May I ask what it is?’

‘You may. After all, it concerns you.’

‘I don’t see how it can. I’ve got nothing to sell.’

Mark sipped his champagne. ‘Don’t be too sure about that. Wait until you ...’

Belinda put her glass down on the table with a thump.

‘Mark, don’t waste your breath.’

‘Wait until you hear the offer,’ Mark continued as though she had not spoken.

‘I’m not interested in your offer, Mark.’

‘It’s not my offer, actually,’ he replied, walking to the window and looking into the waterlogged courtyard. ‘It’s a client of mine. He’s prepared to offer you a princely sum for the cottage.’

‘I don’t want to sell, Mark.’

He turned back to her, a red flush of anger creeping over his handsome features.

‘Why don’t you listen. It’s a very good price for a rather rundown property – a price that I doubt you’ll get again.’

‘Not even if the garden was restored to the way Capability Brown designed it?’ Belinda shot angrily at him.

For a moment the two looked at each other, then Mark took a slow sip of his champagne.

‘Yes, Mark. I do know. Did you think it would remain a secret?’

Mark shrugged. ‘No. That has nothing to do with it.’

‘Oh come off it, Mark,’ snapped Belinda, ‘I didn’t come down with this rain. The reason you’re keen to buy it is because if restored to Capability Brown’s plan it could be sold for a small fortune. You know it. I know it. And whoever your so-called client is – they know it.’

Mark was silent for a moment. 'I take it that you don't want to discuss it further?'

'What's to discuss? You forget, Mark, that whatever else it may be to you, to me it's my home. And that's the way it's going to stay.'

To her surprise, Mark suddenly grasped her arm and roughly pushed her against the wall.

'Mark,' Belinda yelled in pain. 'Let go, you're hurting me.'

Suddenly his lips were upon her. Upon her eyes, her cheeks, her lips. His hands explored her in a rough caress and he held her tight against him.

Again his lips found hers and crushed them as his arms folded her in and engulfed her. A shiver of excitement went through her at the same time as she rejected his kiss. His body was too demanding, too impulsive and she struggled, her hands on his chest, to break free. She staggered back away from him and he reached out to take hold of her again, his fingers biting into the soft flesh of her arm.

'No, Mark. No. Please let me go.'

He pulled her violently towards him.

'Belinda, listen to me.' His face was close to her, his eyes blazing with an intensity she had never seen in him before.

'I want you. I've been content to wait quietly until the time was right. But I can't wait any longer.'

'Mark, you're talking nonsense.'

'Nonsense, is it? What about your infatuation with that idiot Jacob? That's a doomed relationship.'

'How can you say that?' cried Belinda, as she backed away.

‘Does he love you?’ With a quick move he held her in his arms again and thrust kiss upon kiss upon her throat and lips. ‘I’m the one who loves you. Forget him. What can he give you? Are you content to be a gardener’s little bit of fluff?’

With an effort Belinda pushed him away.

‘You’re talking drivel,’ she shouted. ‘Why are you behaving like this?’

‘Because you are behaving stupidly. You need bringing to your senses.’

Belinda found herself shaking with emotion. Mark watched her, his eyes calculating and determined. Belinda raised an eyebrow.

‘What were you going to do, Mark? Get me drunk, make love to me and get me sign on the dotted line?’ She gestured towards the wine. ‘Seduce me into selling the cottage? Do you think I’m that much of a pushover? Is that how you conduct your other business deals? In the bedroom? If you don’t mind I’ll finish my work here later in the week. I find it uncomfortable at the moment.’ She walked to the door. ‘That is if you still want me to clean house for you?’

Mark stood with his back to her. ‘Suit yourself.’

Belinda turned and left the building.

As the slam of the door echoed through the hall, Mark increased the tension on the glass in his hand. In a surge of anger he snapped the delicate glass stem. Razor sharp fragments gashed his fingers. How could he have been so stupid to imagine that she would be persuaded to sell by such clumsy methods? Still, desperate times call for desperate measures and it was vital that he got his hands on that property.

Late afternoon found Belinda in Bath. She bought some food for her supper and as she scurried across the Abbey Churchyard, the rain eased and faint rays of sunlight lit up the facade of Bath Abbey.

Realising that she had not played the tourist, and weary from her work and the recent confrontation with Mark, she slipped into the ancient Abbey and sat bathed in the faint coloured light spilling from the windows.

Gazing up at the elegant fan vaulting over the chancel, Belinda felt herself relax fully for the first time in weeks. Warm tears flowed down her cheeks as she mourned the loss of her aunt, tears that she had held back but now released in gentle tribute to her dead relative.

Intrusive questions rose in her mind, increased in potency and drove the tears from her cheeks. She dried them and found herself puzzling over the events of the past weeks.

Aunt Jane's letter, for one.

Why had Rosemary been killed and what was the significance of the scrap of paper bearing the name "Michelangelo"?

Who had broken into her house and what were they looking for?

The garden design by Capability Brown?

If so, was that all they were looking for?

Given the fact that the discovery of the plan and the potential to redesign her garden to Brown's specifications was considered valuable, who would benefit from it most?

Mark wanted to sell it – for a commission.

Jacob wanted to re-create the garden for its aesthetic qualities.

What connection did those aspirations have with a mysterious intruder and the horrors of two deaths?

The answers still eluded Belinda. She rose from the pew, the initial calm she had experienced upon entering the church dissipating rapidly.

The car headlights proved barely adequate against the curtain of water that fell over Milford. Putting on the handbrake Belinda stepped out into the rain and shut the car door. As she did she noticed a faint light in the kitchen window of Jacob's cottage.

'Jacob is home,' she cried and, slipping and sliding, made her way up the hill.

There was no reply to her knock on the door. With water trickling down her neck she turned the handle and stepped into the kitchen. It was icy cold and for a moment she thought the room was empty. The only light came from a reading lamp that stood near the window and she was about to turn and go when Jacob's sombre voice startled her.

'You may as well come in.'

Belinda shut the door behind her and pulled the wet scarf from her head. She saw Jacob sitting in the half-dark at the far end of the kitchen table. A half-empty bottle of whisky stood on the table before him and he twisted and turned a large glass tumbler in his restless hands.

'Get yourself a glass. You can get drunk with me.' He poured himself another glass of whisky and downed it in a gulp.

Belinda drew out a chair and sat near Jacob.

'Oh, Jacob.' Tenderly she laid her hand on his.

He snatched his arm away abruptly and half turned from her so that she saw his strong profile against the pale light.

'We'll have none of that,' he said huskily. 'None of that false sympathy.'

Annoyed, Belinda said, 'I've no sympathy with self-pity.'

Jacob looked at her from the corner of his eye and a contemptuous smile curled his lips.

'Pardon me, I forgot. I'm talking to the cool calm and collected Miss Lawrence, whom nothing, but nothing, fazes.'

Belinda struck the table with her hand. 'Goddamn it Jacob, shut up.'

The strength of her anger startled him and he looked at her in astonishment.

'Do you think I wasn't upset finding Rosemary dead in my kitchen? Or my aunt half-eaten by rats at the bottom of the stairs? Do you honestly believe that I wasn't affected by that? Because if you do, then you are the most self-centred individual I've come across.'

Her rage increasing, a rage that she realised she had been holding in for the past weeks, she stood and towered over Jacob.

'So you've lost your sister. She's dead. Well I'm sorry. I am very sorry – if you'll believe me. But the fact of the matter is that she – and my aunt – they are dead. Gone! And as sad and as horrible as that is, nothing, not even all the whisky in Scotland or all the self-pity in this world will bring either of them back again, and we just have to accept that and get on with

our lives, Jacob. Do you hear me? Get on with our lives!'

Her voice had risen to a roar and in the sudden silence she heard a strange noise. She fought to catch her breath and realised that the sound was Jacob sobbing. Softly and gently he grieved.

In a rush of compassion, Belinda slid her arm around his shoulder and held him close.

He turned suddenly and buried his face in her body, crying and wailing like a small child who faced reality for the first time. Together they clung to each other, Belinda gently rocking him back and forth.

Belinda lay back on the pillow staring at the ceiling, the sound of the rain filling her ears. Jacob lay nestled beside her, sleeping fitfully, one arm across her waist. She glanced down at him and lightly stroked his forehead. He stirred and murmured in his sleep, some indistinguishable accusation.

They had fallen into each other's arms, each seeking from the other comfort for their own particular anguish. Their lovemaking had proved frenzied and intense as though by welding their bodies, they could secure a common shield against the dismay and revulsion surrounding them.

Being honest with herself, Belinda admitted that she had been attracted by Jacob since she first saw him and that it was more than just a physical charm. As annoying as he could be, she admired his passions even though she did not always share them.

The hum of the rain lulled Belinda into a restless sleep.

She woke with a start and tasted the salt of tears on her lips.

Jacob was awake and sitting on the bed looking down at her. He leant over and gently kissed her salty mouth, then rose and walked to the chair to fetch his clothes. By the grey light seeping through the folds of the curtain Belinda saw his powerful, robust body as he drew his shirt over broad shoulders. He sank back onto the bed to pull his socks on, and Belinda ran her hand down the potent arch of his back.

'She was more than a sister to me,' he said softly, his movements slowing and his voice growing sweet as he began to talk, for the first time, about Rosemary.

'I think I gathered that,' whispered Belinda.

Jacob shook his head. 'No, I don't think anyone really could understand how close we were. She really was like a mother to me. After our parents died we were thrown together on our own resources and it was she who enabled me to study gardening.' He half-turned to Belinda. 'She took whatever work she could get to pay for my schooling. She even worked in a slaughterhouse at one stage, sorting out the offal. She'd come home with dried blood on her hands and that used to upset her.' He chuckled as he recalled a distant happening. 'For about six months we lived on liver and kidneys.'

Belinda smiled.

'She believed in me, in what I wanted to do. I think she was proud of me and what I had achieved.' He was silent for a moment, lost in his emotions. 'Then she took on housework. I used to tease her about it but underneath I was grateful. Grateful and proud that she was my sister. And I intended to make it up to her for

all the hours of hard demeaning work that she'd undertaken. Now I'll never get the chance.' His voice faded to a whisper.

Belinda rested her hand on his shoulder.

'No. But at least we can make sure that her murderer is found and brought to justice.'

She felt Jacob flinch. He rose abruptly and pulled on his trousers. 'Yes,' he said in a frosty voice, 'at least I've got that pleasure to look forward to.'

Thirteen

Intense torrential rain continued relentlessly all week. By Friday the garden was awash and everything was damp and threatening mildew. Jacob had been unable to continue work in the garden as it gradually sank into a quagmire of mud and decaying leaves. The police guard on the cottage had been removed, ostensibly because the police believed that any potential threat to Belinda had been reduced. Belinda herself guessed that it had more to do with the weather and the risk of the force catching pneumonia.

The departing police officer had given her a telephone number to ring but the nearest telephone was in Jacob's house, and it would be a very considerate murderer who would wait patiently for her to run up the hill to place a telephone call – prior to having her throat cut.

Belinda was driven to distraction as she mopped water and mud from the halls and floors of her clients' homes. The water seeped in everywhere and nightly on television, weather bureau experts were belittled by smug news presenters and more or less accused of being personally responsible for the inclement weather.

The week had gone by and each day Belinda had telephoned Mr Munro's office, but the old man had not returned to work. Searching through her bag, Belinda located his card, which he had given her when they

first met, and called his home number. There was no answer. It seemed that Mr Munro had disappeared.

The windscreen wipers flashed back and forth. With the aid of her ancient directory, Belinda was able to locate Mr Munro's village. Or, rather, the village near where he lived.

There had to be a reason for Mr Munro to break his appointment with her, and a further explanation why he had not contacted her or his office. With this thought Belinda made her way towards his home. Perhaps his housekeeper or staff member could explain his whereabouts. Keeping one eye on her directory and one on the misty landscape Belinda passed the ruins of a monastery set far off in a field.

According to the map, the village was just over the hill. It was really a collection of a few dilapidated farms, but at least it had a village store that sported ice cream signs and newspaper hoardings; all the important signs of civilisation. Belinda pulled the car over in front of the store and made a run for the door.

The interior was gloomy and smelt of sticky sweets and day old bread. A young girl of about fourteen slumped behind the counter reading a teenage magazine with a particularly lurid cover of semi-naked youths disporting themselves on some distant beach. The girl barely glanced up as Belinda entered and proceeded to ignore her. Belinda stood at the counter for a few moments and cleared her throat.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for Mr Munro's house. He lives near here. Could you tell me how to get there?'

Without taking her eyes from the magazine the girl called in an adenoidal bellow, 'Daaad.'

From the depths of the shop a shadowy figure emerged into the feeble light. It was a man of fifty or so who wore a tattered leather apron. He brushed his hands on his shirt and eyed Belinda with brazen curiosity as if sighting another human for the first time. The girl remained absorbed in her magazine.

There was a brief silence before Belinda, wondering if she had wandered into a village inhabited by half-wits, turned to the man and asked, 'Can you direct me to Mr Munro's house? I know it's nearby.'

The man and the girl exchanged a glance and they both turned their eyes back to Belinda.

'Did he send you?' the man asked gruffly.

Belinda shook her head in confusion. 'Did who send me? Do you mean Mr Munro?'

The girl sighed wearily. 'He means Ja—'

'You hold your tongue.' He turned his attention back to Belinda. 'You won't find Mr Munro, he's gone away.'

'Where?' asked Belinda, wondering how the man would know the solicitor's movements. As though reading her thoughts the storekeeper replied.

'We take supplies and newspapers up to the manor house. He's cancelled things while he's away.'

'Do you know how long he'll be gone?'

Again the father and daughter exchanged a glance.

'He didn't say. Likely he'll let us know when he returns.'

Belinda considered this. 'Well, I'd still like to call at his house, just to make certain and perhaps leave a message for him.' The man shook his head and the girl giggled.

‘Won’t do you no good. The place is empty.’

‘But surely he has a housekeeper and staff to look after the place?’

‘All away,’ was the abrupt reply.

The girl snorted again and returned to the photographs of muscle-bound youths.

As the engine roared into life, Belinda glanced back at the store. Both father and daughter had their faces pressed against the window watching her. The girl had a snide smirk on her lips.

‘Idiot child,’ snapped Belinda, as she put her foot down on the accelerator. The car leapt forward into a large puddle sending a spray of muddy water showering across the store window. Belinda was delighted to see the two faces disappear in the mucky deluge.

Belinda drove on for another half-mile. She stopped the car at a crossroads and consulted her map once more. There seemed little point in driving around in the hope that she would locate Mr Munro’s house, and his card was little help as it gave just a telephone number and the village name.

Just as Belinda was about to give up, a gust of wind revealed a small signpost half-hidden by the sodden branches of a huge tree.

In barely legible writing it pointed the way to “The Manor House”.

With a sigh of relief Belinda turned the car down the narrow country lane. The road wound for a further mile through high hedgerows before the trees cleared and a distant manor house was revealed on a gently sloping hillside with a spectacular landscape and lake behind it.

Belinda drove on and came to a halt at iron gates set into the high stone fence that surrounded the property. The rain had eased temporarily to a misty drizzle as Belinda stepped from the car and approached the entrance. Surprisingly, the huge gates opened easily; she had expected them to be locked. In a few minutes she had driven into the property and secured the gates behind her.

'What a beautiful grove,' Belinda cried, looking out the window. She was travelling down a green tunnel created by trees that had joined overhead, the faint light filtering soft and green to the rich damp earth below. Bursting out from the emerald dark the road ahead went uphill through a small but dense wood. The hill fell away unexpectedly and the sight revealed took Belinda's breath away. Below her lay a stately country house of Bath stone surmounted by a dome below which a pediment, adorned with sculptures, overlooked a formal garden with countless trees and small fountains flowing into ornamental pools.

Belinda drove rapidly down the hill and pulled the car to a halt at the side of the house. A honey-coloured stone staircase led to the terrace. She switched off the motor and in the sudden silence, sat back and looked about her.

The house seemed deserted and no one had acknowledged her arrival. She stepped from the car and walked down the gravel path. On closer inspection the gardens proved to be less exquisite than the house, with ponderous stone statues of lions and mythical animals poised among the formal setting. There was a lack of symmetry about the design with trees and shrubs crowded together, all fighting for space. It had

the air of an out-of-doors, overstuffed Victorian parlour, flamboyant to the point of claustrophobia. And oddly menacing. Belinda peered through the glass door that faced the terrace.

The large ornate room was decorated with panelling painted with arabesques, foliated scrolls and grotesques. Belinda's eyes, wide with wonder, flitted from these to the painted ceiling with its winged female figures and landscapes.

Tentatively she turned the handle of the window and to her surprise it clicked open. Holding her breath she stepped inside the study.

The air was rich with the penetrating odour of books, books that lined three walls from floor to ceiling. Belinda moved hesitantly further into the room. The stillness of the house unnerved her and she crossed the carpeted floor and opened a panelled door. A deserted passageway leading to a broad staircase met her gaze.

'Is anyone there?'

Her voice sounded strained, thin and hollow in the vast building and the only reply was the faint reverberation of her own words. She edged her way tentatively into the hall.

She gazed upwards to the top of the staircase. The slight movement of a shadow on one of the heavy wooden doors above caught her eye, a shadow that melted away as she watched.

'Mr Munro?' Her voice was tight with apprehension.

If the old lawyer was there, why didn't he reply? Having come this far to find him she was not going to give up now.

The staircase ran up in a circular motion around the wall and a small elevator about the size and shape of a large birdcage rose up through the centre. Just managing to squeeze herself into the rickety affair, Belinda closed the iron gate and pressed the button.

With great reluctance and the threat of giving up halfway, the lift shuddered, shot up sharply about four feet and then settled into a slow halting ascent. A sudden speeding up, followed by a heavy jolt and the elevator sighed to a stop. With as much haste as she could, Belinda disentangled herself. The heavy wooden door was half-open. Belinda tapped on it. There was a silence from within.

‘Hello,’ she called.

The darkened room was stacked from floor to ceiling with piles of books, old newspapers and magazines. An overstuffed armchair was set in the midst of this clutter along with a reading lamp and a small table on which crouched a large black cat. Belinda gave a shiver of fear at this sudden unexpected confrontation with the animal. It viewed her suspiciously through dark, green, villainous eyes, its only movement a portentous swish of its sleek black tail.

A loud clang and a rasping noise behind Belinda made her jump in fright.

She turned quickly and saw the lift shudder then slowly sink out of sight. Turning back Belinda realised the cat had vanished. Peering over the balustrade into the hall below she saw the lift come to a jolting standstill. The hall was still deserted.

‘Perhaps it returns automatically,’ thought Belinda, attempting to convince herself that this was the case.

She moved along the landing and became aware of eerie faint voices of a man and woman talking.

‘Excuse me, is anyone there?’ she called loudly.

But again there was no response.

‘This is ridiculous,’ thought Belinda, ‘surely someone’s here. People just don’t go out and leave all the doors open.’

She stepped into the first room on her left. It was a well-appointed sitting room with a large leather couch and what she recognised as a Louis XV black lacquer commode. The draped windows overlooked a garden and in the half-light Belinda could make out a large chestnut tree.

The low ghostly voices came from a television set which was softly conveying the daily news to a collection of antique furnishings. Nervously, Belinda stepped back into the hall and nearly knocked over a small table. She was feeling very light-headed and it seemed that she floated down the passage. As she reached the end, she became aware that from behind a closed door on her right she could hear running water. Her mouth had gone dry and she ran her tongue over her lips. Swallowing hard she called, ‘Hello. Is anyone there?’

She pushed open the door to reveal an old fashioned bathroom. The heavy bath was in the middle of the room. A large, highly polished brass tap was gushing water into the empty bath. The mysterious atmosphere closed in on Belinda and she turned and fled back to the staircase. As she descended she saw at the bottom of the stairs, the formidable black shape of the cat. It watched her descent, its eyes never leaving her. As she approached the bottom step the cat

sprang into life and with a grating, resentful meow it flew past her up the stairs.

Belinda returned to the study. On a dusty oak desk there were a number of volumes open, their pages spilling colourful illustrations across the leather inlay and vying with the splendour of the opulent room. They were largely eighteenth century prints of exotic plants from around the world, some grotesque, others fantastic but all strangely beautiful. There was a collection of illustrations collected by Sir Joseph Banks from his voyages with Captain Cook to the South Seas including early sketches of Banksias, the curious Australian plant named after Banks himself.

Beside the books stood a teacup half-filled with milky tea. Belinda touched it.

It was still warm.

Suddenly the menace of the silent house was too much for her.

Feeling that she was being scrutinised by an invisible eye and afraid of a sudden confrontation with her unknown observer, Belinda crept back towards the window, her eyes running over the tomes entombed in the shelves lining the walls. Here again they were horticultural manuscripts, leather bound, profound, solid and intimidating.

She stepped out onto the terrace and, breathing a sigh of relief to be out in the open again, pulled the window shut behind her. Across the lake a breeze sprang up. Belinda glanced up at the sky. The clouds moved swiftly and grew into malformed nocturnal shapes. But the enigmatic house drew her back to it. Belinda moved to the next window. As she put her

forehead to the glass her blood ran cold, for she came face to face with a grotesque creature.

The ghastly being swiftly flung back the window and stepped onto the terrace. It grasped the startled Belinda by her arm and roughly pushed her against the wall.

The misty light revealed her assailant to be the oafish bookseller. Jack the Ripper.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded in a hoarse voice.

For a moment, Hazel's melodramatic description of the bookseller overcame Belinda's reason, but she inhaled deeply and pushed the man's hand away.

'Let me go, you great fool. I came to see Mr Munro.'

The man gave a loud sniff. 'He's not here. The staff's away and I'm here by myself.'

Belinda was getting angry at this standard reply.

'Well, if he's not here, where is he? He had an appointment with me earlier this week and he didn't keep it. No one seems to know where he is, which I think is a little odd.'

The bookseller seemed to lose interest in her for a moment as he gave his attention to chewing a fingernail. It suddenly struck Belinda as peculiar that he should be in Mr Munro's house.

'And may I ask what you are doing here?'

A fragment of fingernail was spat onto the terrace.

'I live here.'

The possibility of this gross individual living in splendour was inconceivable. Belinda gave a snort of disbelief.

'*You*. Live here?'

The man nodded, and clearing his throat spat violently into the bushes. Belinda felt nauseous.

'I live in the old caretaker's cottage.'

'But why do you live here with Mr Munro?'

'The old boy's my uncle.'

Belinda found it difficult to imagine that this vulgar creature could be in anyway related to the strait-laced, meticulous solicitor.

'He took me in when my parents died,' continued the nephew, 'and set me up in the bookshop. I'm his only living relative.'

The prospect of him inheriting this beautiful manor and gardens was almost too much for Belinda.

'How nice,' she replied weakly. She held out a hand, which the man ignored. 'My name is Belinda. And you are ...?'

'Jack,' he replied almost coyly.

'Tell me Jack, did you ever tell your uncle that my aunt came to you looking for a map?'

'Your aunt?' Jack looked confused.

'Yes, you remember. The old lady who fell down the stairs.'

'Oh, yes. Now I remember.' A crafty look came into his eyes. 'What if I did?'

'Oh, nothing,' replied Belinda, with false indifference, 'it's just that I found a map of a garden and your uncle was very taken with it.'

The man was suddenly alert. 'He's seen it?'

Belinda nodded in satisfaction. The bookseller was not as innocent as he made out. 'That's right. And he's so interested in gardens, isn't he?'

Jack bit his lip and twisted his anxious fingers as he absorbed this information. 'He never told me he'd seen

it. He never told me.' For a moment Belinda feared he would burst into tears.

'Why was it so important to him, Jack?'

Jack gave her a distrustful look but remained silent.

'And you have no idea where your Uncle is?' continued Belinda sceptically.

'No. He didn't tell me anything. He just went away.

'Don't you think it odd that he has just vanished? If I were you, I'd worry that something may have happened to him. And you know how people talk. If he can't be found and it comes out that you are his heir, people may imagine all sorts of things.'

Having planted a seed of suspicion in the bookseller's mind Belinda returned to her car. As she drove away she felt certain that Jack knew more about Mr Munro's mysterious absence than he admitted and wouldn't be at all surprised if he had something to do with the solicitor's disappearance.

'Still, he's probably just gone off to the Mediterranean to avoid this foul weather,' Belinda grumbled enviously to herself, as she arrived at Mark's house late in the day, to finish the work she had left undone after their last meeting.

The memory of Mark's clumsy attempts at getting her to sell the cottage raised her hackles again and she wielded the vacuum cleaner like an instrument of war as she set about cleaning the rooms.

As Belinda finished the polishing in Mark's study she picked up a pile of large books that had been removed from the bookcase. They were mostly art books and photographic essays on country houses and estates.

She clambered onto a small set of steps that stood by a bookcase covering one wall. One by one she replaced the books in the spaces from which they had obviously been taken.

As the last book slid onto the shelf some obstruction prevented it from finding its position and she withdrew it. Protruding slightly from the bottom of the book was a number of yellowish pieces of paper.

'He'll probably be looking for these in the future and wonder what he's done with them,' thought Belinda, as she opened the book, unfolded the papers and glanced at them.

She almost dropped the book with shock and her heart leapt at the discovery.

Taking the worn papers she half fell down the steps, sat unbelieving at the desk and switched on the desk lamp so that she could inspect the letters, for that's what they appeared to be.

Written in fading ink and in the language and idiom of a past age, the first letter appeared to be a request. Her eyes wide with excitement, Belinda began to read,

"Sir, if you have time - when you visit Combe Down I would take it as a mighty kindness if you would do yourself the bother to stop at my dwelling in Milford. I am in considerable concern and disquiet, which one swift glance of yours into a sizeable measure of land of mine would swiftly ease me from. I hope I am not in error to desire a diminutive canvas from a ..."

Here the letter finished abruptly as the page was torn at a sharp angle. Belinda realised that she had hardly taken a breath since starting the letter. She placed the first page aside and picked up the second. As she did the telephone at her elbow emitted a shrill

ring and she jumped with fright. She took the receiver in her hand.

‘Hello, this is Mark Sallinger’s residence.’

There was a menacing silence at the other end of the phone. Belinda heard someone breathing as the line was disconnected.

The unknown caller had hung up. Belinda shifted her attention to the second letter, written in a different hand but which appeared to be an answer to the first.

“... and at your request, I have scratched a design as best I could from the survey as well as the report you gave me.”

The top of the page was missing but the faint writing was in a definite and strong hand.

“To bring about these ideas there needs to be a pleasing design, decent execution, a faultless awareness of the country and the substances in it – and constant tenderness in the planting thereof – building on the magnitude of the trees and the tint of their leaves to yield the reward of light and shadow so necessary to the completion of a delightful design.

As to the matter of ...

Again the page was torn and gave no hint as to the identity of the writer. Belinda however had no hesitation in identifying the author. Capability Brown! As the full meaning of her discovery dawned on Belinda, a fear that grew stronger by the minute overtook her and without bothering to collect her cleaning utensils she gathered her coat and took the ancient letters in her hands. Looking at the first, she examined the bottom of the torn page.

“I hope I am not in error to desire a diminutive canvas from a ...”

Belinda knew where the missing fragment of paper was and what writing it contained.

The torn portion she had taken from Rosemary's dead hand and hidden behind the watercolour in the long room at the cottage. It bore the missing name – *Michelangelo*.

Hardly had Belinda's car turned out of one end of the street when Mark's car appeared at the other. It sped to a halt outside his house and Mark flung open the door and ran up the short path to the front entrance.

He clattered into the empty hall and stood at the door of the study. An open book on the desk illuminated by the desk lamp told him all he needed to know. His arms dropped in a thwarted gesture to his side.

Belinda had discovered the letters.

Fourteen

The two pieces of paper fitted together like a well-constructed jigsaw puzzle.

"I hope I am not in error to desire a diminutive canvas from a ..."

Belinda slid the triangular fragment of paper against the torn edge.

"a diminutive canvas from a ... Michelangelo."

Belinda's hands shook as she dropped the incriminating letters onto the table.

'It was Mark.'

A chill of horror engulfed her as the reality of Mark's involvement in Rosemary's murder sank into her consciousness. Mark had stabbed Rosemary with the ice pick and wrenched the letter from her fingers. The triangular particle had torn along the crease and remained in Rosemary's hand.

Belinda dropped onto the sofa, icy perspiration coating her brow. She felt ill with the thought that she had dined with Mark and had actually cleaned his house. She shivered in the damp night air. Restlessly she rose and paced back and forth across the narrow room like a caged and frightened animal.

'I've got to tell the police.' Belinda ran towards the door. 'I've got to tell Jacob.'

The door handle was cold and clammy in her hand as she wrenched the huge door open. The ferocious rain engulfed her.

Out of the liquid shroud a hand grasped her tightly.

Belinda screamed of fright as the black nightmare shape thrust itself against her, engulfing her in its watery arms.

Belinda felt herself propelled back against the wall. She heard the creature call her name and felt the stinging blow across her face as its claw struck her cheek.

Belinda gulped and caught her breath. She opened her eyes. The night-monster was Mark, his eyes alight with excitement. He grasped her shoulders and shook her violently.

‘Belinda. Be quiet.’ He shook her again.

‘You killed her!’

Belinda backed away from Mark. His strong hands reached out for her and she hit out at them.

‘No.’ Mark’s voice was harsh, desperate.

‘Yes. You killed her and took the letters.’

Belinda reached the door of the long room and flung herself in, searching the room for some means of defence.

‘Shut up, you stupid bitch, and listen to me.’

Mark hurled her down onto the sofa. Belinda struggled but he held her firm.

‘Listen to me. She was dead when I got here.’

Belinda squirmed to be free of his grip.

‘You’re lying. You came here to get the letters and you killed her.’

She glared into his angry face. His fingers bit into her arm.

‘I didn’t know about the letters. Why would I come looking for them here?’

‘You knew about the garden plan.’

‘Of course I did, but not about the letters. I came here to talk to you. The door was open and I thought the house was empty. I came in, thinking I could find the plan. Then I saw Rosemary’s body in the kitchen. She had some papers in her hand. I thought it was what I was looking for. The garden plan. I reached out and took hold of them. As I pulled them away a piece tore off. Then I panicked. I realised that if anyone found me there they would think I had killed her. Later, when I got home, I realised that the letters were written to and by Capability Brown and were connected with the design for your garden.’

Both of them gasped for breath.

‘Do you believe me?’ Mark’s voice vibrated with anxiety.

Belinda ran a cold eye over him. ‘Why should I?’

Mark gave an exasperated growl. ‘Look, I freely admit I wanted the plans and I had every intention of stealing them if I could. I admit that I tried everything I could to get you to sell the property, and I would have profited from the sale. I admit all that. But murder was not – definitely not – part of my scheme.’

Belinda struggled upright as a new thought struck her.

‘Then where did the letters come from?’

Mark shrugged his shoulders and, brushing his wet hair off his forehead, sank down on his haunches.

‘Weren’t they here in the house?’

Belinda shook her head violently. ‘I’ve never seen them before tonight.’ She felt as though she was going mad. Where would Rosemary have found them?

‘But she was in this house, it must have been here that she discovered them.’

‘No!’ cried Belinda, vehemently. ‘She rang me from her cottage. I was working at Mrs Mainwaring’s.’ She leaned forward as she recalled Rosemary’s telephone call. ‘She sounded distracted, as though she was guilty about something.’

‘What did she say? Did she mention the letters?’

‘No. She didn’t really say anything. She just said she wanted to tell me something – no – to *show* me something.’

‘The letters. She wanted to show them to you.’

Belinda scowled at Mark, irritated by his statement of the obvious. ‘Of course she did. But I still can’t figure out where she got them. It wasn’t here, I’m sure.’

‘Then what was she doing in the kitchen?’

‘I suggested that we meet here. She was to wait for me and I told her to make a cup of tea. But Mark, she already had the letters before she rang, I’m certain.’

Mark rose shivering in his damp clothes.

‘Well, she can’t tell you now what happened. But perhaps he can.’

Belinda looked up at Mark in bewilderment.

‘Who?’

Mark nodded in the direction of Jacob’s cottage.

‘Your neighbour. He must know what her movements were that day.’

‘But Jacob wasn’t here. He was over at Westbury quoting on a job.’

Mark’s lips curled into a derisive smile. ‘You’re rather fond of him aren’t you?’

Belinda leapt to her feet and stood before Mark, her jaw set. ‘And what if I am? Does that offend your masculine pride?’

Mark shrugged. ‘I find it just a waste, that’s all.’

‘And I find it a waste of time standing here talking to you, Mark. You’d better go. I’m sure you know the way out.’

Mark stood for a moment as though about to reply, then strode to the door.

‘Of course, Mark, you’ll tell the police all that you’ve told me tonight? If you don’t – I will.’

Mark paused at the doorway. ‘You needn’t worry.’ His precise voice was taut with resentment. ‘I’ll go to the police station first thing in the morning.’

The roar of the rain filled the void as their angry voices ceased. Mark stepped into the hall and Belinda flinched as the front door slammed shut. She let her breath out in a rush and gasped, for she had hardly inhaled in the last few minutes.

With a shock she realised that she now had not only the valuable garden plan but also the letters. In haste Belinda withdrew the plan from its hiding place, which she now felt to be insecure. Folding the letters within it she mounted the stairs to the bedroom.

Above the bed was the oval photograph of aunt Jane. Dressed in white as a young debutante, she sat on an ornate chair clutching a bouquet of white roses. Her monochrome eyes seemed to approve Belinda’s actions as she clambered onto the bed.

Taking the photograph from the wall and brushing away years of dust and cobwebs, Belinda slid the papers behind the photograph and replaced the oval frame on the wall. Straightening the picture she gave a conspiratorial smile to the image of her aunt as though including her in the secret.

A flash of light from the distant headlights of a car swept over the photograph, and Belinda realised that

the curtains were not drawn. Fearing that someone had seen her hide the papers, Belinda rushed to the window but the headlights of the car were vanishing past the pub. Nevertheless, she pulled the heavy drapes closed.

But her uncertainty over Mark's innocence or guilt plagued her.

Was he telling the truth?

Or was he a clever murderer biding his time?

Should she go to the police?

Question after question whirled around her brain.

Pulling on a dry coat and snatching up an umbrella, Belinda hurried out into the deluge. Fighting against the barrier of rain, she made her way slowly up the hill to Jacob's cottage.

'I've got to talk to someone sane, or I'll go mad myself.' thought Belinda, as she reached the gate. The cottage was in darkness. A sense of foreboding, almost tangible, rose up and enveloped her.

Fifteen

The kitchen, long unheated, was cold and damp. Belinda fumbled for the light switch and the feeble glow of the solitary bulb barely revealed the table and chairs, the walls merging into a dark encompassing cavity.

‘Jacob. Are you there?’

Belinda’s voice sounded shrill in the frigid isolation of the cottage, and she sensed there would be no reply. She sank down at the table to think.

‘If Mark is correct, and the letters were in my house, how did Rosemary get hold of them? But if I’m right, and they were not in my house, where did she find them?’

Her eyes swept over the tabletop. A pile of unopened letters and a gardening magazine lay beside a loaf of stale bread. Beneath the envelopes she could see a small notepad. Reaching out, she withdrew the book from its hiding place.

‘It’s Jacob’s notebook.’

She spoke aloud, finding comfort in the sound of her own voice in the eerie emptiness of the still house.

Idly Belinda flipped through the tattered pages. She came upon the notes Jacob had made the day she asked for a quote to redevelop the garden. How long ago that seemed and with it, the joy she had felt at the prospect of exploring her new home and the challenge of renovating the garden.

Belinda flipped through further pages. On each dated page were notes, reminders and requirements, for work to be done on various gardens in numerous villages and addresses. A surge of curiosity overtook Belinda and she flicked the pages back to the date of Rosemary's murder.

'That's odd,' she said, her voice barely audible above the noise of the incessant rain. She went back over the pencilled dates.

'He says nothing about the job at Westbury. He was there when Rosemary was murdered. Why didn't he jot it down in his book? Unless he forgot, or unless ...'

'Unless I wasn't there.'

Belinda leapt to her feet in fright.

Jacob stood at the shadowy foot of the stairs.

'Jacob! You scared me to death. I thought you were still away.'

'So you thought you'd come and snoop through my things,' said Jacob coldly, as he moved into the thin light. He looked bloodless and edgy, his eyes wide and staring.

'Don't be silly, Jacob. I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to ask if Rosemary had told you about some letters she'd found.'

'Letters?'

Jacob edged closer to the table. His hands grasped the back of a chair tightly and the veins in his arms stood out like thin black vines.

'You mean the old lady's letter?' Before Belinda could reply he went on. 'Rosie had made friends with the old girl. Baked her scones and cakes and things. It was tough going. She didn't respond easily.'

Belinda shook her head in confusion. 'Jacob, what are you talking about?'

'I wanted the garden.' Jacob's voice hardened and grew intense. 'I wanted to recreate Capability Brown's concept. Gradually we got under the old lady's guard. She started to let us do things for her. Some shopping, post her mail, things like that. We went to her one day and found her dead, sprawled out at the bottom of the stairs. We agreed that we would say nothing about it because there was a chance that we could get the cottage and the garden if the property was auctioned. But then Rosie mailed the letter the old lady had given her the night before she died. I told her not to send it, to destroy it, but Rosie sent it without telling me. And then we heard that she had willed you the cottage.' The bitterness in his voice increased.

'So that's how it was posted after she died.' Belinda took in this information, then shook her head.

'But that's not the letter I'm talking about. I mean the letter that was written to Capability Brown. About designing a small garden in this village.'

Jacob dropped his head onto his chest. His voice was hoarse and a shiver caused his shoulders to tremble.

'Rosie found them.'

'Where? In my house?'

Jacob shook his head. 'No. In my room.'

Belinda's brow creased in puzzlement. 'How did they get there?'

Jacob slowly raised his head until he was looking directly at Belinda. He spoke in a listless manner but his eyes held her firmly in his gaze.

'I got them from the old lady's house. She must have found them. I searched one day while Rosie kept her busy outside. I was looking for the garden plan. For years there's been rumours that the plan existed but no one knew where or which property had the remains of the garden, but it was clear to me that it was your aunt's. I knew she'd got wind of it, and she used to ask me questions about it. If the plan existed it had to be in her cottage. I found the letters that proved I was right, but not the plan. I'm not certain even your aunt knew where that was. Rosie didn't realise I'd got the letters, but I knew they would prove that it was your property that Capability had designed the garden for.' He glanced around distractedly.

'Rosie had them in her hand when she died ... and I ran.' His voice grew husky. 'Ran and ran and ran.' He looked earnestly at Belinda. 'Rosie must have found them in my room and was going to give them back to you. What she didn't know was that I was waiting in your cottage.'

'In my cottage? But ... what were you doing there?'

There was a short silence and then Jacob spoke softly but distinctly.

'I killed Rosemary. I took the ice pick and drove it into her skull.'

Belinda felt a terrible numbness invade her body.

'You killed your sister?' she breathed in horrified disbelief.

Jacob nodded slowly.

'Oh, Jacob, why?'

A flush of colour tinged Jacob's gaunt cheeks.

'You don't think I meant to kill Rosie, do you?' He gave a slight, odd laugh. 'I mean, how could you think

I'd plan to kill my sister? I heard her in the kitchen, and it seemed like the only thing to do.' He looked at Belinda earnestly.

'I took up the ice-pick and when she leant out the kitchen door, I ... killed her.'

'But you said you didn't mean to kill Rosie.'

Jacob leant forward across the table, his voice gentle as though explaining to a backward child.

'Of course not. *I meant to kill you.*'

To Belinda it seemed as though her heart had stopped beating. Instinctively she took a step backwards towards the door.

Jacob edged around the table. He seemed like a small boy attempting to explain a mindless diversion to a disbelieving and sceptical adult.

'You see, if you were dead, there was a chance for me to buy the cottage. I thought first of marrying you, so that as your husband I would own the land.' He stopped and frowned. 'But that would have meant leaving Rosie, and I couldn't do that. Not after all she'd done for me. So I decided that if you were dead I could buy your land when it came up for auction.'

Belinda's hand closed over the door handle. Her only thought was to escape, to get away from this madman.

Jacob continued talking pedantically, as though rehearsing a speech.

'I went to your cottage to wait for you to come home. I heard someone in the kitchen. I thought it was you. But it was Rosie. And I ...' Jacob paused, tears sprang into his eyes and he roughly wiped them away.

'After I killed her, I ran. I told people I was in Westbury on a job. I thought I'd go mad.'

‘Did you think you’d go mad when you killed my aunt?’

Jacob stared at her in innocent disbelief.

‘Oh, no. I didn’t kill her. She fell down the stairs. It was an accident. You must believe me, I didn’t kill her. Just ask Rosie.’

He gasped as the words left his mouth and he whimpered his dead sister’s name.

‘I don’t believe you.’

Belinda turned the handle and pulled the door open.

The rain swept over her like a curtain as she ran into the intense storm.

A glance over her shoulder showed Jacob silhouetted against the door as he gave chase.

His voice challenged the tormented elements.

‘*I want that garden,.*’ he shouted, his voice strident and full of bitterness.

Hardly able to breathe, Belinda reached her gate and pushed the heavy door open. It gave easily and she felt herself fall and land heavily on the garden path.

The key to the front door of the cottage flew from her hand and disappeared into the mud and rotting foliage.

Jacob’s heavy footsteps crashed closer as she hauled herself to her feet. Her only hope was to find a hiding place somewhere in the garden until either Jacob gave up or morning light permitted escape.

Slipping and sliding in the mud, Belinda headed down the hill just as Jacob reached the gate. He saw her blurred figure disappear into the wall of rain and continued his furious pursuit.

She clung to the trunk of a tree for support, drawing herself into its concealing shadow. Her hope was that Jacob would bypass her and she could then retrace her steps to the gate and seek help.

The torrent of rain drowned out any chance she had of hearing Jacob approach. Uncertain now where he was in the garden, she tentatively peered around the tree trunk. She could see no more than a foot or two before her.

Her heart in her mouth, she decided to make a run for it. Taking a deep breath she stepped out from the protection of the tree.

Something white flashed out of the blackness.

Belinda screamed as Jacob's muscular hand clawed at her arm. She caught a glimpse of his face, his eyes wild with madness, his lips curled in hatred.

Jacob lost his grip on her wet flesh and she fell free, slumping heavily against the tree.

Her hand touched a wooden garden stake. Automatically she grasped it. She stepped quickly away from the tree just as Jacob lunged at her. Swinging the stake over her head she brought it down with a crunch of Jacob's shoulder.

He gave a cry of pain and staggered back.

Belinda raised the stake to attack again, but this time Jacob reached up and grasped the weapon as it descended towards him.

His strong grip wrenched it from Belinda's hands. Jagged splinters tore into her flesh.

He threw the stake aside and now, triumphant, powerful, his murderous fingers aimed at her throat, Jacob lunged forward.

Terrified, Belinda backed away from him.

Suddenly she felt the earth give way beneath her and with a scream she slid down a slope, plunging through sludge and water, to land on the remains of a path below.

She struggled to her feet as Jacob slid down beside her. Her feet were held fast in the mud and each step was a super-human effort to escape.

Jacob clawed at her and his filth encrusted hand closed over her wrist. He began to haul her towards him, to sink his fingers into her throat, when there was a sound as though the earth was opening to disgorge its dead.

The sinister groan seemed to come from the bowels of the planet and there was a sharp crack as if a rock cliff-face had been rent asunder.

Belinda looked up to see a giant fissure disfigure the bulging retaining wall high above them as it split in two. A cascade of mud, stone and water exploded towards them.

With a shriek Jacob disappeared beneath it, his slimy fingers tearing desperately at Belinda's arm as he vanished under the tons of waterlogged soil and rock freed by the deluge.

The force of the cascading water and earth propelled Belinda backwards and she fell heavily against the solid trunk of a tree.

The roar of the collapsing wall lessened and faded; in the comparative silence of the rain Belinda saw Jacob's fingers emerge from the mud tomb, tremble, and then relax in death as they were covered by the embracing earth, the earth that he had nourished all his life.

Belinda looked wildly around her for escape. Through the barrier of rain she could see the top floor of the cottage and to her astonishment, she saw a light appear in her aunt's bedroom.

As she watched, a shadowy form took malignant shape at the window.

Shivering now not from cold but from shock, she fought the nausea that surged through her and stepped away from Jacob's saturated tomb.

The cloying mud bonded to her feet, drawing her down to join Jacob in death as, trance-like, she moved towards the cottage. Her eyes never left the illuminated window. She dreaded any confrontation with the spectre before her, but Belinda had no strength to fight against the force that drew her closer and closer to the cottage.

The front door swung open at her touch. As though in a dream, she felt herself drawn further into the darkened rooms. Water dripped from her hair and clothes as the rampaging storm grew quieter and the stillness of the ancient building grew more ominous and more terrible than any noise that nature could dispense.

The faint light from the bedroom softly illuminated the staircase. It seemed to beckon to Belinda, urging her, coaxing her towards the bottom step. From the blackness of the hall each step grew more brightly lit as Belinda slowly ascended.

The door to the bedroom came into her field of vision and sounds of chaos reached her ears. And muttering. Strange guttural sounds, barely human.

Belinda paused at the doorway.

A black shape was bent over the dressing table, the contents of which were scattered across the bed.

In the mirror, Belinda saw the intruder's face as, grumbling, he stood erect. At the same time her reflection was revealed in the mirror and the man spun around to face her. His infuriated muttering ceased.

There was a silence filled with terror.

'So at last you had the sense to come in out of the rain.'

Mr Munro's voice was dry and harsh and mocking.

Belinda's eyes grew wide with shock and involuntarily she glanced at the picture of her aunt above the bed, the secret hiding place.

It was still intact.

Mr Munro caught the glance and with a satisfied smile he stepped over to the wall and lifted the picture gently onto the bed.

'Thank you, my dear.'

He tore the backing from the frame and his gnarled fingers closed about the prize he sought, the garden plan of Capability Brown.

He tossed the photograph onto the floor and stamped a resentful foot on the image of aunt Jane. The glass shattered and embedded shimmering razor sharp fragments into the smooth features of the faded debutante.

'Stubborn old bitch,' he muttered through twisted lips, 'even to the end she held onto the plans. She'd still be alive today if she had done as I wished.'

Belinda drew her breath in sharply, still mesmerised by the presence of the old man.

Mr Munro raised his eyes to Belinda. 'Oh yes,' he said softly, 'she knew I wanted the plans and the

property, and when she wouldn't give me what I wanted, I simply arranged to take it.'

With surprising swiftness he crossed the room and grasped Belinda's wrist. His strength astonished her as he dragged her from the room to the top of the stairs. Mr Munro angrily pushed the garden map close to Belinda's face.

'She found me here one day.' He spat the words out in a frenzy of hate. 'I came looking for the map. She was in the garden. It was easy to enter without her knowing and I searched the house.' A sour smile curved his thin mouth. 'I came from the bedroom just as she reached the top of the stairs. The stupid woman realised what I was searching for and threatened to call the police and charge me with trespass.'

He strengthened his grip on Belinda and drew her to the edge of the top stair.

'Look down, my dear,' he breathed softly into Belinda's ear, his voice filled with vindictive excitement.

'It's quite a long way, particularly when you are getting on in years. And a fall like that would have to prove fatal.'

'You murdered her!'

Munro shrugged. 'It was so easy. Just a gentle push and a kick to dispense with her reliable walking stick.'

He sniggered and raised his foot, miming the action of the kick.

The carpet beneath his other foot suddenly moved under him. Belinda looked down at the step.

The carpet, which had been firmly fixed, was now loose and stretched.

Mr Munro's eyes widened in alarm as he lost his balance, the carpet seemingly fluid beneath him.

He tottered back, his grip on Belinda loosening. The garden map fell from his fingers and he clutched at the air to regain it. The momentum forced him further back and with a frozen look of fear and bewilderment on his suddenly child-like face, the old man fell heavily down the stairs.

The banister shattered beneath his weight and a ragged shaft of wood tore into his face as he plummeted down into the darkness below.

With a thud he hit the floor and lay, a lifeless mockery, in the position in which Belinda discovered her aunt's corpse.

Belinda clutched at the remaining banister to prevent herself from falling. At her feet lay the ancient garden plan. With shivering fingers she reached for it. As she stood erect she was suddenly aware that the rain had stopped and the silence around her was almost tangible. Then there was another sound emerging from the stillness. A sound filled with horror and loathing.

It was the sound of her own scream.

Sixteen

The late evening summer sun beat down on the brown backs of the workmen as they toiled in the near completed garden. Belinda stood on the terrace and sipped her cup of tea. In her hand a sheaf of accounts fluttered in the warm breeze and she gave a soft sigh of pleasure. At long last the garden was almost realised. In a few weeks most of the plants would have been positioned and Jon Marshall, the landscape gardener Belinda had chosen, would have finished his re-creation. From then on it would be maintenance work and the glory that Capability Brown had envisaged all those years ago would exist again for all to see.

Hazel Whitby stood beside Belinda. The ice in her gin and tonic chinked softly as she lowered her glass.

'It's going to be wonderful, isn't it?' asked Belinda, her voice trembling with pride.

She recalled the chaos and confusion of uncontrolled jungle that greeted her when she arrived that winter's day in answer to aunt Jane's letter.

Hazel hesitated before replying. Her eyes were straying from barebacked workman to barebacked workman.

'Hmm ... wonderful. That's certainly the word for it.'

Belinda smiled at her companion.

'Hazel. I'm talking about the garden. Not what you're fantasising about.'

One of the workmen, a young Spaniard, paused to wipe his brow. He gave the two women a brazen smile and Belinda sensed Hazel's instinctive response.

'I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about,' Hazel responded dreamily. She glanced at her watch. 'I'd better be off. I want to catch the last viewing of old Munro's possessions before the start of the auction tomorrow. There are some particularly fine pieces I've got my eye on.' She guzzled the last of her gin. 'Imagine the old fool being so much in debt.'

Belinda nodded. 'That's why he was desperate to get the plans for Capability Brown's garden. If he reconstructed it he could have made a fortune and saved his manor house. It was his own garden that ran him into enormous debt. He kept spending money, adding to it year after year until he had used up all his savings. It became an obsession but had no real value as a garden. Only as a curiosity piece.'

'Didn't you say he had a nephew?'

Belinda shuddered as she recalled the repulsive Jack. 'It turned out that he wasn't really a relation at all. Just the son of a housekeeper that once worked for Mr Munro. The old man must have felt sorry for him and let him live with him.'

'Seems unlikely that Munro would have ever felt sorry for anyone but himself. So this person didn't inherit anything at all?'

'No one would have,' replied Belinda. 'After all that talk about the importance of having a will, it seems Mr Munro didn't take the time to write his own. Or at least, a will has never been found. Hence the auction of all his possessions.'

Hazel placed her empty glass on the stone balustrade and looked at Belinda in silence for a moment.

‘I’m going to ask you something,’ she said finally, ‘and I want you to be honest with me.’

Belinda turned to her with a quizzical expression.

Hazel hesitated a further moment. ‘You thought I might have been the murderer, didn’t you?’

Belinda felt her cheeks colouring and was about to deny the accusation fiercely. Hazel waved her attempts aside.

‘No, honestly. You did, didn’t you?’

Belinda sighed. ‘Not exactly. I knew that there was some mystery about the cottage and then when I found the Capability Brown design for the garden, I began to put two and two together and sensed its great value. You had been keen to get into the cottage and I assumed that perhaps you knew of the existence of the plan and wanted it.’

Hazel smiled. ‘Oddly enough I didn’t know about the plan, just that there was – “something” – and I sensed that others suspected that as well. I wanted to get in on the ground floor, so to speak, that is if there was any money to be made from it. It was your aunt who first aroused my suspicions when she kept on and on about locating an old map. She had obviously heard tales of Capability Brown designing a garden in the area and, knowing the history of her own cottage, wanted to confirm that it was her garden that he’d planned. Hopefully she could corroborate that by finding an old map that outlined the garden in detail.’

‘What she didn’t know is that the original was walled up in her own bedroom all the time,’ said Belinda ruefully.

‘Whatever I may be,’ chuckled Hazel, ‘and God knows I’ve been called all sorts of things, I am not a murderer.’

‘I’m glad to hear it.’

Mark Sallinger entered through the garden gate and paused as he took in the newly established garden. Hazel gave Belinda a knowing look and a sly wink.

‘Think over what I said. This garden and, if I can get the best pieces at the auction tomorrow, a house full of period furniture could make an excellent combination and attract the tourist riffraff. You have the garden and house and I’ll have the furniture.’

Belinda smiled. ‘I’ll let you know.’

Hazel smiled her acknowledgement and nodded a carnal welcome to Mark as she passed dangerously close to him. In the garden the Spanish workman flexed his muscles impressively as Hazel approached full of pertinent questions about stamens and carpels.

Sheepishly, Mark stood next to Belinda. Thrusting his hands deep in his pockets and leaning against the stone balustrade, he looked questioningly at her.

‘Are you still angry with me?’

‘Yes.’ Belinda kept her eyes on the workmen. The abrupt reply silenced Mark for a moment. He turned and leaned over the balustrade, not looking at Belinda.

‘You know I had no idea that the old boy was a murderer, don’t you?’

‘Do I?’ Belinda’s attention seemed fixed on the garden.

‘Come on, Belinda, be serious.’ Mark turned to her. ‘Munro only approached me to help him secure the property.’

‘But you knew about the plans for the garden?’ Belinda’s voice was accusing.

‘Of course I did, or rather that Munro knew of some designs that existed and he wanted the property so that he could reconstruct it. He was a garden nut, you know. Always babbling on about some new plant he’d found or read about, and forever trying to grow exotic species that were unsuited to this climate. He was perpetually ripping out dead trees and shrubs that shrivelled up in our winter and then planting others that snuffed it a few weeks later. A real nut! It wasn’t until later that I found out about the Capability Brown connection.’

‘None the less, you struck up a friendship with me, attempted to make love to me, all to get me to sell you the property.’

‘Not entirely.’

Belinda gave him a disbelieving look.

‘No. It’s true.’ Mark became defensive. ‘Certainly there was the business side to our friendship, but there was more to it than that. The problem was you were stuck on your neighbour.’ He nodded his head in the direction of Jacob’s cottage.

Belinda glanced down at the papers in her hand. For a moment tears filled her eyes but she blinked them away.

‘I’d rather not talk about Jacob, if you don’t mind.’

‘I’m sure you wouldn’t,’ replied Mark, knowingly, ‘after all, he used your friendship too in an effort to get this place, and it seems to me that he took the relationship further than —’

‘Shut up,’ Belinda snapped. ‘Have you forgotten he tried to kill me?’

Mark gave a sigh of exasperation.

‘No, I haven’t forgotten.’ He glared at Belinda. ‘But let me remind you that he, just as much as Munro, wanted this garden. Munro was using him initially to help acquire it. He planned to let Jacob do the reconstruction work but when he discovered that your neighbour wanted it for himself, he knew that he must secure the plans first, because without them the property was virtually worthless.’

Belinda put her hands to her face and leant against the stone wall.

‘Oh, it’s all so awful. All that hate and death over something so beautiful.’

She dropped her hands and looked once more into the garden where fresh green shrubs and young trees were bathed in the gold of the setting sun. For a moment the two stood in silence taking in the beauty before them.

‘Will you be selling?’ Mark asked hesitantly.

Belinda’s mouth twisted into a cynical smile.

‘Why? Do you think I’d sell it to you?’

‘I didn’t mean that.’ It was Mark’s turn to be affronted. ‘I simply meant ... are you leaving? Because if you’re not ... I’d like to see you, if I may.’

The two faced each other.

‘Mark, too much has happened for us to ...’

‘It doesn’t have to be now,’ said Mark urgently, ‘in a few weeks, months. When you feel comfortable.’

Belinda thought for a moment. The sun was getting low on the horizon and the workmen were preparing to pack away their tools for the night.

Mark waited patiently.

‘Mark, I’m not going to sell. This is my home now. When the garden is complete, probably next year, I am going to open it to the public so that others can see what Capability saw when he designed it.’

A smile of relief came over Mark’s face.

‘As to the friendship that you propose ... well, let’s wait and see. As I said, there is much to put in the past, and that will take time. In the meantime ...’ Belinda smiled, ‘I think a drink at the pub is not a bad way to contemplate the future.’

Mark’s smile brightened.

‘You’re on. My shout.’ He turned to go. Belinda laid a hand on his arm.

‘Before you go, Mark, there is something I’ve got to tell you.’

Mark turned back to her, a cheeky grin on his face.

‘I know, you got a husband and six kids in Australia.’

Belinda smiled weakly at his joke.

‘No, nothing like that.’ She grew serious. ‘Mark, the night that Mr Munro died ...’

Mark interrupted her.

‘I thought you wanted to put all that in the past. Why dig it up again?’

Belinda nodded.

‘Yes, I know, but something strange happened that night. Something that I can’t explain.’

The sun dropped behind the hills and the promise of black night flooded the terrace.

‘When my aunt died,’ Belinda continued, ‘they said she fell down the stairs, that the carpet was loose and she lost her footing. Yet when I inspected the cottage after her death, the carpet was firmly in place, not

loose, and it's been like that all the time I've been living here. That's why I was convinced that her death was not an accident.'

'So?'

'Well,' said Belinda slowly, 'when Mr Munro fell to his death, the carpet on the top stair was loose, as though it had never been fixed to the step. It moved under his feet when he trod on it, and that's how he lost his balance and fell.'

Belinda transferred her gaze to the facade of the cottage, which in the twilight was etched with pitch-black shadows.

'The next morning,' continued Belinda, 'after the police had taken his body away, after they'd all gone, I went up the stairs – and the carpet on the top step, which had been loose the night before – *was fixed firmly and solidly to the floor.*'

The End



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