

## IODextract

Max's body lay on the floor, his shirt open revealing matted grey hairs. His bound hands grasped in an attitude of prayer. There wasn't much left of his head.

The group gathered at the door, each face showing shock as they took in the horror before them. Charmaine gave a loud scream, covered her face and began to wail. Muriel, who seemed remarkably calm, placed an arm around her shoulder and drew her back into the passage. Sam started to retch and, covering his mouth, stumbled back down the stairs. Adele buried her face in Tommy's T-shirt his arms encircling her.

Belinda and Hazel edged their way to the front of the group. There was a stunned silence as each tried to adjust to the reality before them.

Jake was shivering with shock. "That's how I found him. I was just..." his voice trailed off. Yes, thought Belinda, what were you doing?

Muriel, a tower of strength in an emergency, hustled back and took Jake by the arm. "Come with me, dear. I'm making some strong sweet tea for Charmaine. You're both in shock." She guided him and Charmaine along the passage and downstairs.

The others exchanged worried glances. "What should we do?" whimpered Bridie.

Harry Winters edged closer to the corpse and bent to cover the old man's naked chest and untie the ropes around his legs.

"I wouldn't do that," said Belinda, sharply.

Harry turned to her. "What? Who are you to give orders?"

"Nothing should be touched until the police arrive."

"I don't need you to tell me what to do. We can't let him be found like this."

"Why not?" said Hazel. "D'you think he cares about his appearance now?"

Harry glared at the two women. He wasn't used to being told what to do by females.

Lance gave a slight cough. "They are right, Harry. Let him be and call the police." Harry grunted, stood up and stormed out of the room.

Tommy let go of Adele and fumbled in his jacket pocket. "I'll phone them." He produced a phone and punched in 000.

"I think we should all leave. Is there a lock on the door?" said Belinda.

The remaining group edged into the passage. "Yes," said Adele. There's a big old key." Belinda began to herd the others out of the room. She whispered to Hazel, "Have a quick look around and see if you can find any clues."

In the hallway Tommy was talking on the phone, giving the police the details and address. He switched off the call. "The cops will be here in a few minutes. They said to leave everything as it is."

As the group began to descend the staircase, Hazel joined Belinda at the door. "Some things of interest. I'll tell you later."

Belinda closed the door and locked it. Removing the key and holding it tightly, she and Hazel followed the others to await the arrival of the police. The group was silent but kept a distance from each other as though they could be contaminated by close contact.

Tommy was further away from them and talking quietly but furiously into his phone. Adele stood near him listening to his hushed conversation and watching the others as one would privately appraise the value in a herd of sheep, until she was gathered up to be comforted by Muriel and spirited away to be given her magic bullet, calming sweet tea.