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The ancient city of Wells lay before her, with the Cathedral dominating the skyline. Six hundred saintly stone eyes watched as Belinda entered the market place. Ahead she saw Hazel engaged in conversation with a sign-writer, while workmen carefully unloaded a few pieces of antique furniture. Hazel had taken a lease on this shop in Wells to handle the Jacobean, Elizabethan and Georgian furniture exclusively, keeping her small shop in Bath for her silver and bric-a-brac.

Parking her car, Belinda hurried to her friend. The sign-writer turned his attention to Hazel's window and set about practising his gilded craft.

'He's been murdered!'

Hazel's attention was on the safe advent of a Chippendale chair. 'There'll be a murder here if that chair is scratched.'

Belinda waved the newspaper under Hazel's nose. 'Will you listen to me? Read this.'

Hazel took the paper and glanced at the article Belinda was pointing at.

'William de Thingummy. He's dead.'

Hazel read the article in silence and handed the paper back to Belinda. 'So?'

Belinda gave an exasperated sigh. 'But don't you see? He was murdered. And it must have happened just after we left Kidbrooke House.'

Hazel thought this through as she entered the shop. 'And this affects us how?'

Hazel's indifference began to annoy Belinda. 'Well, only in as much as we were probably the last people to see him alive.'

'Supposition. You have no proof of that. And even if we were, again I ask, how does it affect us?'

For a moment Belinda was stumped for a reply. How did it affect her? In truth she could find no answer, short of the shock of the old man's murder and a genuine sorrow at his death.

'Well, it doesn't really, I suppose. Except that I am sure it happened just after we left him, and as he said, he was the last of his line and to die such a horrible death ... well, it upsets me, that's all.'

A gleam of interest sprang into Hazel's eyes. 'That's right.' She gave a self-satisfied laugh.

'What do you mean?'

Hazel busied herself with rearranging a nest of tables. 'As you said, he was the last of his line.'

'And?'

'And that means, now he's dead his possessions will be sold.' She turned to Belinda with a look of triumph. 'And I intend to buy some.'

The steak and kidney pudding served at the Red Lion hotel was cooked to perfection and both Belinda and Hazel sighed contentedly as they pushed their plates away. The crowded luncheon cabal was beginning to clear as the locals went back to their various jobs. A few late tourists lingered, like so many transmigratory

birds that had missed the opportunity to fly to warmer climes.

‘Why would anyone want to murder the old man?’

Hazel, who was rereading the newspaper’s report of the crime, shook her head in response. She reached for her glass of port. ‘Who knows? These days they’ll kill you for the price of a Big Mac.’

Belinda took up the paper. ‘It was a particularly violent attack. To stab him in the eye and then slash his thigh. Why go to such extremes?’

‘Perhaps the old man put up a fight. Tried to defend himself and whoever attacked him had to fight him off and in the process messed him about a bit.’

‘They certainly did that. If they were going to rob him they could have just tied him up or bopped him on the head. But to mutilate him? It seems inhuman.’

‘I thought all murder was inhuman. Besides, you said we were the last to see him alive.’

‘Well, we probably were.’

Hazel shook her head. ‘Always assuming that the murder took place soon after we were at the house, we were not the last to see him.’

‘How do you know?’

‘You’ve forgotten the monks.’ Hazel gave her a superior look and swallowed the last of her port.

‘The monks. Yes. I’d forgotten them,’ said Belinda. Then she shook her head. ‘But monks wouldn’t murder an old man.’

‘I didn’t say they did,’ replied Hazel as she reapplied lipstick. ‘I just suggested that they would have seen him after us. But you’re wrong, you know.’

‘Why?’

Just because they’re monks doesn’t exclude them from being murderers.’

