

Chapter One “Blood. She said there was blood on his head.” Hazel Whitby took a healthy gulp of gin. She and Belinda Lawrence were relaxing in their hotel lounge after a busy and intriguing first day making a tentative start on cataloguing the vast, seemingly endless, number of objects at the Manor House. Faintly in the background they could hear the boys’ choir, cloistered in the Cathedral, their blameless voices proclaiming an Advent Carol service. “But the doctor said it was a heart attack,” said Hazel cynically. “First time I’ve heard of a heart attack giving you a bloody head.” Belinda looked thoughtful as she contemplated what had happened in the past two days and the beginnings of a mystery surrounding the death of Professor de Gray. Christmas had come to Canterbury and so had Belinda and Hazel. They had left Bath in Somerset for Kent the day before and on arrival in Canterbury later that evening had parked Hazel’s Mercedes in the hoped for safety of a nearby car-park. The two women then made their way through the Christmas throng of excited children, weary mothers and jubilant tourists to Burgate and their hotel near Christchurch Gate, the entrance to the Cathedral grounds. Brightly lit shop interiors accentuated the darkness of the streets, offering warmth and comfort in exchange for the purchase of glittering and enticing riches. Christmas Carols assaulted their ears along with the excited chatter of the children, “Ho, Ho, Ho” from numerous Santas and the chimes of the bells from the nearby Cathedral. Fairy lights flickered in the chill dark of the early evening and added to the festive atmosphere. They wearily climbed the steps to the hotel reception desk in silence. Actually they had been silent for the last two hours, both women taking pleasure in what could only be called a fit of piqué. Belinda had wanted to visit Chawton and Jane Austen’s House on the way to Canterbury and was annoyed when they arrived to find that the Museum had just closed for the day. This she blamed on Hazel, who had been late arriving to collect her from her cottage in Milford, so the tension between the two women had been building all afternoon. Belinda’s irritation would have increased if she’d known that Hazel had purposely been late, as she had no intention of trudging around a stuffy museum looking at facsimiles of nineteenth century letters, decaying copies of books and twee lace mittens, and only wanted to get to Canterbury as quickly as possible, hopefully to kick off her shoes, have a drink and relax before the evening meal. After all they were starting work at the Manor House early the next day and from then on there wouldn’t be much time to relax. Much of Hazel’s annoyance came from her doctor’s orders to stop smoking. What did he mean a woman of my age? Forty, well all right, fifty. Well all right, fifty-plus if you’re going to be pedantic. So far, she had been successful in following his orders, but at the expense of what little good-will she normally felt for her fellow man. The way to their hotel rooms had led them on a path pilgrims to Canterbury trod centuries ago, to follow meandering corridors encircled by ancient tiled rooftops, over slanting floors, through low doorways, under a heavy beamed ceiling, past a guest lounge and a spectacular view of the great Cathedral, so close that Belinda felt she could almost reach out and touch it. Now, lit as it was, the medieval house of worship became a golden beacon of light amidst the sinewy fingers of skeletal winter trees and the shimmering white illuminated Christmas tree, by the South-West entrance, an invitation to worship and peace on earth. Its peaceful expectations seemed to have infected both women and, as soon as they had explored their rooms, unpacked and freshened up, the daftness of their spat passed off and they headed to the lounge, both chuckling over some curious item they’d found in a tourist brochure. Hazel had just taken her first sip of the longed for refreshing drink when the chimes of Belinda’s mobile phone ruined the calm of the lounge. “Mark?” Belinda rose and continued her conversation as she stood and looked out at the Cathedral. Hazel watched her young friend. Tall, slim, dark hair, blue eyes. Young? How old was Belinda now? Late twenties? How many years had they known each other? Four years? Five? Probably four since the young Australian had inherited the cottage in the tiny village of Milford on the outskirts of Bath. Since then she had become an enthusiastic partner in Hazel’s antique business, which had grown in leaps and bounds. Hazel envied her partner’s relaxed attitude to life that came from an Australian

upbringing and the informal lifestyle there. The restricted surroundings of England had not limited her nature and her inborn vivacity added to her natural beauty. Belinda had been a willing learner and Hazel relied on her keenness, skills and understanding as she initiated the younger woman into the world of antiques