

To Belinda's mind, describing Christmas as a catastrophe was an understatement, although search as she may, she couldn't find a more appropriate turn of phrase. The bridal party had dissolved into recriminations, tears, mud, hysterics, and a delayed honeymoon departure. Until late in the day police had been interviewing Belinda and Hazel. The house and garden had been declared a crime scene and forensic teams appropriated the grave and the corpse, while a police team made forays into the large garden for any clues that might aid in solving the crime. The team of gardeners who renovated the garden were to be interviewed, and housekeeper Mona Washington was recalled from Bristol where she had gone to spend the holiday with her daughter. Lights had been set up around the burial place and as night fell, the human remains were finally removed from the muddy grave and carried away for further analysis.

"It was a female," said Hazel, as she took a sip of her Walking Dead cocktail, "aged, I'm told, about seventyish. Or so the police officer told me."

"Do they have any idea who she is?" said Belinda, as she sank gratefully into an armchair. It had been an extraordinary and tiring day. Not to mention horrifying.

Hazel shrugged. "Not so far. And it may be difficult. Her face had been pretty well smashed in."

Belinda gave a shudder. "How horrible. But why? Why in my garden? It doesn't make sense."

"The police think it was convenient the garden was under repair and made it easy for the murderers to ditch the body where any disturbed soil would go unnoticed."

"And I suppose the heavy rain washed some of it away, which is why...what is her name? The bride?...why she fell in."

Hazel finished her cocktail. "But whoever it was, knew about your garden works, so the murderer must be someone either locally or in Bath." She wandered to the window and peered at the young police officer on duty who was assigned to protect the crime site overnight. "It looks very cold out there. I wonder if the young constable would like something to warm him up. A cocktail perhaps. Maybe a Walking Dead?"

Belinda smiled to herself. No matter how gross a situation might be, Hazel could be relied on to stir the embers of lust. "Given that he's watching over the site of an empty grave, perhaps something a little more cheerful?" Hazel bit her lip in thought. "Yes...you're right. I'll make him a Flaming Fanny."

It was decided not to celebrate Christmas dinner at a site tinged with the recent recovery of a corpse; not only was it disrespectful but more than a little Gothic, "Too close to M. R. James," said Hazel. Reluctantly they cancelled the date with Quentin and Charles and spent Christmas Day with Belinda's parents who were full of questions about the murder, most of which Belinda couldn't answer. They attended Christmas Mass at the Abbey and enjoyed a pleasant meal at an hotel. Quentin discovered an old girlfriend was visiting London and spent the day with her. At the Vicarage Miss Atkins and Muriel Meldrew, on learning the Vicar was free for the day, tried to outdo each other in tempting him to their table with an assortment of delicacies and homemade wines, which resulted in Charles suggesting they draw straws to settle the problem. This was done and Muriel Meldrew drew the short straw and so carried her prize home, while Miss Atkins, with thunderous expression, ate plum pudding alone in her quarters of the Alms House and drank several glasses of Elderberry wine, all under the judgmental eye of her cat, Beelzebub.

"And so," said Belinda's mother, "you don't have any idea who the poor soul is, or was I should say?"

Belinda sighed. She had been over all of this with her mother earlier, and there was nothing more she could add. "Mother, you know very well I was with you in Melbourne until a few weeks ago, so the whole thing is a mystery to me."

Mrs Lawrence looked unconvinced. "But surely you have some thoughts on who the victim was. I mean, did she come from Milford? Is anyone missing from the village? Any new residents? Strangers, that sort of thing."

"Leave it off, mother. The police are investigating. They're holding the body in the morgue, so they will get all the answers eventually."

Mrs Lawrence wondered if that was the case. "Yes, but it happened in your village, in your garden. Stabbed to death it says in the papers, and I gather the poor woman's face had been disfigured, obviously to make it harder to identify her. Why did they do that?"

Belinda thought. Yes, why? Harder to identify the woman, agreed. But why? What was so special about the woman that the murderer had to ensure her identity was to be a mystery?