

THE EMBROIDERED CORPSE

Book Two

Extract

The man opened a drawer in the Jacobean cabinet and slipped the framed tapestry inside.

With a push that suggested finality he shut the drawer tight. 'I am, I'm sad to say, the last of my line. There are no more William de Montforts left. William was always the name given to the eldest son and heir. That is my name, but alas, I have no heir, no son. And I am the last of my family.'

Belinda felt a wave of compassion for the old man. 'That's so sad.'

He cast watery eyes onto her. 'Sad? Yes, but the way of the world.' His glance took in the ancient room. 'I can only hope that whoever acquires the property and possessions treasures them as I have done.'

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William de Montfort accompanied the two women out into the garden and they said their farewells. He waved to them as Hazel started the engine. Belinda waved back.

As they drew away from the house, a small black car pulled up. Two figures emerged and approached the house. Belinda was surprised to see that they were monks, both wearing long grey habits tied at the waist with rope. Both had very close-cropped hair.

'That's something you don't often see these days.'

'What?' Hazel's eye was on passing traffic.

'Monks. And very young monks at that. They can't be more than twenty or so.'

Hazel grunted and turned the car onto the main road. Monks were not in her scheme of things. Competition with a possessive wife was one thing but she drew the line at fighting Holy Mother Church.

As they sped off Belinda glanced back over her shoulder at the house. She glimpsed the two monks talking to William. As they went out of her sight she saw that the three men were arguing violently. One of the monks was extremely aggressive.

The car hummed along the highway as Belinda and Hazel made their way south to Lincoln. Belinda found that her thoughts kept returning to the framed portion of tapestry. It had a strange fascination for her and she could not put it out of her mind.

‘He said it looked like the Bayeux Tapestry, didn’t he?’ she said, as she popped a sticky caramel into her mouth.

‘What?’

Belinda forced her jaws apart, the adhesive caramel cementing them together. ‘William de thingummy,’ she said with difficulty.

‘Who?’

Belinda swallowed and pushed the gooey caramel into her cheek. ‘William de whatever. The old man at Kidbrooke House.’

‘Oh, him. Yes, he did.’

Hazel’s attention was given to overtaking a large pantechicon, no doubt returning antiques from the Fair, and for a few moments Belinda shrank down in her seat and silently offered up a prayer for their survival.

‘It certainly looks like the Bayeux Tapestry, or at least in the same style,’ Hazel shouted through the roar of competing engines.

Belinda opened her eyes to find the large van securely behind them. She relaxed a little and squirmed upright in her seat. ‘From what I remember of English History, the tapestry is about the Norman invasion of 1066. Now it’s kept in France. In Bayeux. Right?’

‘Aren’t you a fountain of knowledge. At the Grand Seminaire. It used to be at the cathedral and only dragged out on feast days.’

‘How big is it?’ Belinda sucked at a fragment of caramel that was bonded to her tooth.

‘How the hell should I know? Fifty, sixty metres or something like that. But why this sudden interest in the Bayeux Tapestry?’

Belinda thought for a moment. ‘I’m not sure. It’s just that the bit we saw at Kidbrooke house interests me. And I thought I’d like to see it, the Tapestry I mean. But that means a trip to France.’

Hazel glanced in the rear vision mirror at a snappy sports car that was rapidly overtaking them. ‘Well, you can always see the fake one at Reading.’

Belinda was suddenly alert. ‘That’s right. You mentioned it before. You said it was Victorian.’

‘That’s right,’ replied Hazel, her eyes skimming over the young male driver of the sports car as it recklessly zoomed past. She gave a slight sigh.

Belinda, who hadn’t noted her companion’s distraction, had a sudden idea. She rummaged in the glove compartment for a road map. ‘Hazel. Let’s go see it.’

‘What?’

‘The fake Bayeux Tapestry. At Reading.’

Hazel glanced at her watch. ‘It’s a bit out of our way.’

‘No it’s not,’ cried Belinda excitedly, tracing a route on the map. ‘We just veer off a bit after Lincoln and head south to Reading. We can have lunch there, see the tapestry and be back home in Bath before nightfall.’

Hazel sighed in exasperation. After all this driving she wanted to soak in a hot tub with a cool drink in her hand. ‘Well, all right,’ she muttered grudgingly, ‘but you can pay for lunch. And by that I don’t mean pub grub.’

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The replica of the eleventh century tapestry extended its full two hundred and thirty feet. As she walked along the length of the embroidery, Belinda began to feel involved in the unfolding drama, the drama of one of the most legendary events in the history of England, the Norman Invasion of William the Conqueror. She saw the representation of Harold swearing allegiance to William—Harold enthroned as King of England—William learning of Harold’s accession—the Normans arriving at Pevensey and attacking the English— climaxing with Harold being slaughtered on the battlefield at Hastings.

There the duplicate tapestry came to an abrupt end with the English army in flight.

‘But what happened?’ exclaimed Belinda. ‘Why isn’t it finished? Did those Victorian ladies run out of cotton?’

‘It’s as complete as it is, my dear. No one knows if the original was ever completed or if part of it, the end of the story if you like, is missing. And that’s not the only thing missing,’ Hazel concluded with a snigger. Always observant where men were concerned, she pointed to the stitched outline of a naked man. ‘He’s lacking his fundamentals.’

Belinda saw that the Victorian embroiderers had castrated the man with needle and thread.

‘Oh, I see. Queen Victoria was not permitted to be amused.’

Hazel allowed Belinda to purchase a booklet that told the story and history of the Bayeux tapestry, then herded her back to the car and set off for home. Belinda saw little of the journey. The limited information in the book fascinated her. When she retired that night in her home at Milford she read the contents for the third time.

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The next morning Belinda opened the newspaper as she sipped her first cup of tea for the day. The usual government debacles, plus the latest frivolous antics of a young woman once remotely connected with the Royal Family, completed the headlines. Belinda was just about to turn the page when a small item at the bottom claimed her attention. As she read it she felt a chill of apprehension.

MAN FOUND MURDERED

Police last night were baffled by the unexplained death of William de Montfort, whose body was found in his ancestral home of Kidbrooke House in Yorkshire.

Mr de Montfort, whose family has been in the area for four hundred years, was discovered in a pool of blood by visitors on a day-tour to the historical house.

Police are treating the case as one of murder but have not been able to establish a motive for the killing. A police spokesman said it was a particularly violent crime and they are looking for a sadistic murderer.

Mr de Montfort had been stabbed in the eye and his thigh slashed.