The Body at the Village Fête



The Body at the Village Fête

A Bramblewick Mystery—Book Two

British village fête murder — bunting, competitive jam, roses, cakes, parish politics and murder

By Robin Wickens

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Disclaimer

Bramblewick is fictional.

This is probably just as well.

Any village containing this many committees, competitive gardeners, unresolved grudges and people willing to commit murder over apparently respectable hobbies would almost certainly have difficulty obtaining affordable insurance.

Readers are also advised that no horticultural advice contained in this novel should be regarded as authoritative, particularly if supplied by Mabel Finch.

Robs Books

Her gardening philosophy consists largely of watering things when they look miserable, threatening slugs and refusing to apologise to roses.

Monty's dietary recommendations should be ignored entirely.

Dedication

For everyone who has ever entered something into a village competition while insisting that winning did not matter.

It mattered.

Everybody knew it mattered.

Previously in Bramblewick

Clara Bellamy came to Bramblewick hoping for a quieter life.

After the death of her husband and the gradual rearrangement of a future she had once thought settled, she bought The Crooked Bookmark, a struggling second-

hand bookshop in a Cotswold village where almost everyone knew everybody else and nobody admitted to gossiping.

Her arrival coincided inconveniently with murder.

When Edwin Pritchard, chairman of the Bramblewick Historical Society, was found dead in the bookshop's rare-books room, Clara became involved in uncovering a decades-old village secret.

She had not intended to become an amateur detective.

Inspector Daniel Mercer had certainly not intended her to become one.

Nevertheless, between Clara's observation, Mabel Finch's complete disregard for social delicacy, Tom Arkwright's practical good sense and Monty's indiscriminate interest in anything edible, the truth was eventually uncovered.

Clara had hoped that solving one murder would prove sufficient for a lifetime.

Bramblewick had other ideas.

Prologue

The Judge Arrives

Sir Julian Marlowe disliked village fêtes.

He disliked handwritten signs, uneven grass, damp marquees, home-made cakes of uncertain age and people who described dahlias as if discussing members of their immediate family.

He particularly disliked competitive gardeners.

Professional horticulturists at least understood that plants were plants.

Amateur gardeners understood no such thing.

They developed attachments.

They held grudges.

They remembered results.

A man who could forgive his brother for borrowing money might remain furious for twenty-seven years because someone else's marrow had been awarded Highly Commended.

Julian knew this from experience.

He had judged flower shows, county competitions, national exhibitions, charity garden festivals and once, through a regrettable misunderstanding involving a railway delay, a children's sunflower contest in Gloucestershire.

He still received Christmas cards from the child who had come second.

There had been accusations.

There were always accusations.

Bias.

Favouritism.

Political interference.

Incorrect interpretation of the rules.

Unfair lighting.

Sabotage.

And, once in Dorset, witchcraft.

The Body at the Village Fête

Julian had learnt never to underestimate the emotional consequences of awarding a coloured rosette to a vegetable.

Yet at half past nine on Saturday morning, he stood on the village green in Bramblewick and looked at the large canvas produce marquee with the expression of a man approaching a minor but unavoidable medical procedure.

The morning was bright.

That annoyed him too.

A rainy day might have reduced attendance.

Instead, the village green was already crowded.

Stalls stretched along the edges of the field beneath striped awnings. There was a tombola, a cake table, a second-hand book stall, children's games, a bottle stall, a bric-a-brac table and a sign advertising something called the Traditional Ferret Demonstration at Two O’clock.

Julian had no intention of being present for that.

A brass band was tuning beneath the chestnut trees.

One trumpet appeared to be engaged in open conflict with the rest of the ensemble.

From the refreshment tent came the smell of bacon, tea and overheated urns.

A large cream-coloured dog passed Julian carrying what appeared to be half a bread roll.

"Monty!"

A woman's voice followed.

The dog increased his speed.

Julian watched him disappear behind a stall.

"Charming," he muttered.

"He's been told that before."

The speaker was a woman in her late fifties carrying a cardboard box filled with books.

She had silver beginning at her temples, practical shoes, intelligent eyes and the mildly resigned

expression of someone accustomed to discovering that the world had become ridiculous without consulting her.

"Although usually by people who haven't met him."

Julian glanced at the dog.

"I assume he belongs to you."

"I'm beginning to think that's an optimistic description of the relationship."

"Clara!"

Another woman approached carrying two jars of jam.

She was small, upright and elderly, with white hair, sharp eyes and the purposeful stride of a person who regarded age as something affecting other people.

"Your dog has eaten one of Edith Partridge's cheese straws."

"Only one?"

"That we know of."

"He's improving."

The older woman looked at Julian.

Her gaze travelled from his polished shoes to his linen jacket and settled on his face.

"You must be the flower man."

Julian stiffened.

"Sir Julian Marlowe."

"Yes. The flower man."

"Mabel," Clara said.

"What?"

"You know perfectly well who he is."

"I know perfectly well what he's here for."

Julian had appeared on television for twenty-three years.

He had written eleven books.

He had presented at Chelsea.

He had advised two members of the Royal Family.

He had been introduced many ways.

The flower man was new.

Clara shifted the box in her arms.

"I'm Clara Bellamy. I own The Crooked Bookmark."

"The bookshop."

"Yes."

"I visited last month."

Clara paused.

"I don't think I saw you."

"You were out."

"Ah."

Julian watched the smallest flicker of interest enter her expression.

He disliked observant people.

They were exhausting.

"I was looking for an old horticultural catalogue," he said.

"I remember. Mrs Preece mentioned someone had been asking."

"Did she?"

"She remembers everyone who comes into the shop. Mostly because she distrusts them."

"A useful employee."

"She's a volunteer."

"Less useful."

Mabel held up one of the jam jars.

"You've got raspberry on your sleeve."

Julian looked down.

There was no raspberry.

When he looked back up, Mabel was walking away.

Clara's mouth twitched.

"Does she do that often?"

"Only when she likes someone."

"She doesn't know me."

"That seldom gets in her way."

A bell rang from the produce marquee.

Julian checked his watch.

Nine thirty-five.

He was already five minutes behind schedule.

"Excuse me."

He walked towards the marquee.

Behind him, Clara called, "Sir Julian."

He turned.

"If you are still looking for the catalogue, I found another box of old gardening books yesterday."

For the first time that morning, Julian became genuinely interested.

"What sort?"

"I haven't gone through them properly."

"Victorian?"

"Some."

"Estate catalogues?"

"Possibly."

"Local?"

"One or two."

Julian considered.

"I'll come to the bookshop after judging."

"Provided you survive the roses."

He gave her a cool look.

Clara smiled.

"That was a joke."

"Was it?"

"Apparently not a very successful one."

He continued towards the marquee.

Had he looked back, he might have noticed the man standing beside the horticultural society tent.

Gerald Wainwright was watching him.

Gerald was seventy-one, broad-shouldered, immaculately dressed and possessed of the sort of white moustache that appeared to have been issued with authority.

He watched Julian until the judge disappeared inside the marquee.

Then Gerald looked down at the rose in his hand.

Its petals were deep red.

Not scarlet.

Not crimson in the ordinary sense.

Something darker.

Older.

The colour of dried wine.

He touched one petal with the tip of his finger.

His hand trembled.

"Gerald?"

He turned sharply.

Sheila Pomeroy stood behind him.

"If you're planning to stand there glaring at the judge all morning," she said, "you might at least move. You're blocking the entrance."

Gerald lowered the rose.

"I wasn't glaring."

"You've been glaring since half past eight."

"I was thinking."

"For you, that's often much the same expression."

Sheila swept past him.

Gerald looked again towards the produce marquee.

Julian Marlowe knew.

That was the problem.

Gerald had spent forty-three years waiting for this day.

Forty-three years protecting the plant.

Propagating it.

Losing it once.

Recovering it.

Refusing to speak of it.

Waiting until the right moment.

Today was supposed to be a triumph.

By four o'clock, half the county would know his name.

By Monday, perhaps the country.

Within a month, every serious rose grower in Britain would know who had rediscovered the Bramblewick Crimson.

But Julian had changed his mind.

Gerald knew it the moment he saw him.

There were certain expressions men wore when they intended to betray an agreement.

Gerald had seen enough of them.

The bell rang again.

Judging was about to begin.

Gerald looked at the rose.

Then he whispered, so quietly that nobody passing could hear:

"You promised."

Previously in Bramblewick

Bramblewick is the sort of Cotswold village where everybody knows everybody else's business.

Naturally, nobody admits this.

When fifty-eight-year-old widow Clara Bellamy arrived in the village, she was hoping for a fresh start.

She bought **The Crooked Bookmark**, a slightly struggling second-hand bookshop filled with old books, temperamental shelves and considerably more dust than the estate agent had mentioned.

What Clara did not expect was murder.

Shortly after taking over the shop, she discovered **Edwin Pritchard**, chairman of the Bramblewick

Historical Society, dead inside the locked rare-books room.

Edwin had spent decades collecting village history.

Unfortunately, he had also collected other people's secrets.

The police initially had reason to consider whether his death might have been accidental, but Clara quickly noticed that things inside the room did not make sense.

Books had been moved.

A valuable Victorian volume was missing.

And inside Edwin's pocket was a handwritten message:

You should have left her buried.

Clara had no intention of becoming an amateur detective.

This intention did not survive long.

Helping her — whether she asked for assistance or not — was her formidable neighbour and friend **Mabel Finch**, whose considerable knowledge of Bramblewick

came from decades of observation and absolutely not from gossip.

There was also **Tom Arkwright**, owner of the nearby café, whose contributions generally involved practical thinking, good tea and attempts to stop Clara and Mabel doing anything particularly unwise.

And then there was **Monty**.

Monty is Clara's enormous cream-coloured rescue dog.

His qualifications for detective work remain uncertain.

His enthusiasm for biscuits is beyond dispute.

The investigation also brought Clara repeatedly into the path of **Inspector Daniel Mercer**, a careful and experienced police officer who would have preferred Clara to leave the investigation to the professionals.

Clara would also have preferred this.

Events proved uncooperative.

By noticing the small inconsistencies others had overlooked, Clara eventually uncovered the truth behind Edwin's death and the old Bramblewick secrets surrounding it.

The murderer was exposed.

The Crooked Bookmark survived.

Clara remained in Bramblewick.

And Inspector Mercer was forced to accept that, although Clara had an alarming tendency to appear near crime scenes, she also had an inconveniently useful eye for detail.

Life gradually returned to normal.

Or at least to what Bramblewick considered normal.

The bookshop found its feet.

Clara made friends.

Monty continued his campaign against unattended food.

And everyone agreed that one murder was more than enough excitement for a small Cotswold village.

Then summer arrived.

With summer came bunting, cakes, competitive jam-making, rival gardening societies and the annual **Bramblewick Summer Fête**.

Clara intended to spend the day selling second-hand books.

Mabel intended not to care whether her raspberry jam won.

Tom had somehow been persuaded to enter a Victoria sponge.

And Monty had already developed an unhealthy interest in the refreshment tent.

It should have been perfectly peaceful.

Unfortunately, Bramblewick was about to discover that gardeners can be every bit as dangerous as historians.

And Clara Bellamy was about to find another body.

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Chapter One: A Perfectly Harmless Village Fête

Clara Bellamy had discovered that village fêtes were less an event than a temporary form of government.

By ten o'clock in the morning, Bramblewick green had developed borders, taxation, competing jurisdictions, rivalries, disputed territories and at least one person behaving as though a constitutional crisis had occurred because the coconut shy had been placed four feet too close to the cake stall.

Clara stood behind The Crooked Bookmark's second-hand book table and watched two members of the parish committee argue about extension cables.

"It isn't rated for outdoor use," said one.

"It was outdoors last year."

"That doesn't mean it enjoyed it."

Clara looked at Tom Arkwright.

Tom was carrying a tray containing three mugs of tea and a plate with two bacon rolls.

"Do extension cables have emotional lives?" she asked.

"In Bramblewick, apparently."

He set down the tray.

Tom owned the café two doors from The Crooked Bookmark.

He was in his early sixties, quietly spoken, capable and blessed with the rare ability to enter a room without immediately telling everyone how the room ought to be organised.

Clara appreciated this more than she had expected.

He slid a mug towards her.

"Tea."

"You're a good man."

"I know."

Clara looked at the plate.

"Two bacon rolls."

"One's for Mabel."

"Where is she?"

Tom nodded towards the produce marquee.

Mabel was standing outside it.

She had one hand on her hip and was talking to a steward with the forceful concentration of someone disputing an international boundary.

"What's happened?"

"Jam."

"Of course."

"Apparently there has been a complaint."

"About hers?"

"About the category."

Clara closed her eyes briefly.

The fête had been open for less than an hour.

"What's wrong with the category?"

"Preserves containing alcohol."

"That's a category?"

"It is now."

"Why?"

"Mabel."

Clara looked again.

Mabel pointed towards the marquee.

The steward raised both hands.

A second steward arrived.

"Should we help?"

Tom considered.

"No."

"Wise."

Mabel had entered raspberry jam, marmalade and something called Hedgerow Preserve, the ingredients of which she had refused to disclose on the grounds that this would give weaker competitors an unfair advantage.

Clara suspected blackberries, apples, sloes and enough brandy to affect vehicle insurance.

Winning did not matter to Mabel.

She had stated this repeatedly.

She had stated it while sterilising jars.

She had stated it while writing labels.

She had stated it while rejecting three different batches because the set was "not quite right".

She had stated it that morning while polishing one jar with a tea towel for twelve minutes.

Clara had known Mabel long enough to understand that when she repeated something more than three times, the opposite was usually true.

A shout came from the refreshment tent.

"Monty!"

Clara turned.

Her dog appeared beneath a flap of canvas.

He was carrying a sausage.

Not in the conventional manner.

The entire sausage protruded sideways from his mouth, giving him the appearance of an animal who had unexpectedly grown handlebars.

Behind him emerged Edith Partridge, head of the Women's Institute catering rota.

"Clara!"

"Oh dear."

Monty saw Clara.

He stopped.

For approximately one second, guilt passed across his face.

Then he swallowed.

The sausage disappeared.

Edith reached them.

"Your dog."

"Yes."

"He stole a sausage."

"I gathered."

"He was inside the refreshment tent."

"He's very interested in community events."

"He's banned."

"From the refreshment tent?"

"From the entire catering area."

Tom picked up his bacon roll.

"Probably wise."

Edith looked at him.

"And somebody has moved the Victoria sponge."

Tom lowered the roll.

"My Victoria sponge?"

"You entered it?"

"Yes."

Clara stared at him.

"You entered the baking competition?"

Tom looked almost embarrassed.

"Mabel insisted."

"I did not."

Mabel had arrived behind them.

"You said," Tom replied, "'If you're going to stand around criticising everyone else's sponge, you might as well produce one yourself.'"

"That isn't insisting. That's advice."

Tom looked at Clara.

"Apparently."

Edith folded her arms.

"The sponge has been moved from Class Twenty-Seven to Class Thirty-One."

"What is Class Thirty-One?" Clara asked.

"Decorated novelty cakes."

There was a brief silence.

Tom looked genuinely offended.

"My sponge is not a novelty."

Mabel nodded.

"Quite right."

"You've seen it?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

"Because you've made it."

Tom considered this.

"Thank you."

"I wasn't complimenting you."

Edith turned back towards the refreshment tent.

"I'll sort it."

"Much appreciated," Tom said.

She marched away.

Clara watched her.

"Does everyone become strange at fêtes?"

"No," Mabel said. "Some people start strange."

She took the second bacon roll.

"That's mine."

Tom nodded.

"I assumed."

Mabel inspected it.

"Brown sauce?"

"Of course."

"Good."

She took a bite.

Clara gestured towards the produce marquee.

"What happened with the jam?"

"Administrative incompetence."

"Anything more specific?"

"They've put my raspberry preserve in a category for alcohol-enhanced preserves."

"Does it contain alcohol?"

"That's not the point."

Clara waited.

Mabel chewed.

"Does it?"

"A little."

"How little?"

"Enough."

Tom sipped his tea.

"I don't think we're going to get a measurement."

"No."

Mabel pointed the bacon roll at Clara.

"And Gerald Wainwright is already behaving as though he's won the Rose Cup."

"Has judging started?"

"Started ten minutes ago. Marlowe's in there."

Clara remembered Sir Julian.

She also remembered his reaction when she mentioned the box of gardening books.

There had been something behind his interest.

Not merely collecting.

Urgency.

She had noticed it because people who dealt in old books learnt to recognise the distinction.

A person looking for a title because they wanted to own it behaved differently from a person looking because they needed what was inside.

"What do you know about him?" Clara asked.

"Who?"

"Sir Julian."

Mabel snorted.

"Television gardener."

"Yes, I gathered."

"Used to have that programme."

"What programme?"

Mabel stared.

"You don't know?"

"No."

"Everyone knows."

"I don't."

"Tom?"

"*The English Garden*."

Clara looked at him.

"You watched it?"

"My mother did."

"Convenient."

"It is."

Mabel finished half the bacon roll.

"He used to walk around large houses telling people their borders lacked structure."

"Perhaps they did."

"Nobody likes being told their borders lack structure."

Clara picked up a paperback from the table and rearranged it.

She had brought six boxes of stock to the fête.

Crime novels sold well.

Cookbooks sold surprisingly well.

Romance did steadily.

Military history attracted men who picked up books, read the back cover and returned them to precisely the wrong place.

Children's books had begun disappearing from the table in batches, usually accompanied by parents attempting to negotiate prices Clara had already deliberately set low.

She enjoyed it.

Bookshops could be solitary.

The fête was not.

Since arriving in Bramblewick, she had begun recognising people not simply as customers but as part of the village's daily pattern.

Mrs Preece from Church Lane, who bought crime fiction and always claimed it was for her sister.

George Ellison, who read naval history but hid western novels inside them.

The Choudhurys, whose daughter had begun working through every children's fantasy novel in the shop.

The vicar.

The butcher.

Two teachers.

Half the parish committee.

And a surprising number of people who entered The Crooked Bookmark announcing that they didn't really read.

Clara had learnt not to believe them.

Everyone read something.

Newspapers.

Gardening magazines.

Menus.

Crime novels.

Railway timetables.

Instructions.

Letters.

Even people who claimed not to read tended to become extremely interested if shown something somebody else did not want them to see.

She looked towards the produce marquee.

Sir Julian had wanted to see the old gardening books.

Perhaps later she would find out why.

A bell rang from inside.

Mabel stopped eating.

"That's the first judging bell."

"What does that mean?"

"No idea."

"Then why did you react?"

"Everyone else did."

People had indeed begun drifting towards the marquee.

Gerald Wainwright emerged from the entrance.

He looked furious.

Clara recognised him from village meetings, although she had never spoken to him for more than a few minutes.

Gerald chaired the Bramblewick Horticultural Society, a position he had held long enough for many residents to assume the two institutions had been founded simultaneously.

He walked across the grass towards the society's display tent.

Sheila Pomeroy intercepted him.

Even at a distance, Clara could see the argument beginning.

Sheila was president of the Green Fingers Club, an organisation created seventeen years earlier following what Mabel described as "the hosta incident".

Clara had asked for details once.

Mabel had said it was too complicated.

Tom had quietly advised her never to ask again.

Gerald pointed towards the marquee.

Sheila folded her arms.

He said something.

She laughed.

Gerald's face darkened.

"Friendly competition?" Clara asked.

"Absolutely," Mabel said.

"That looked friendly."

"They've hated each other since 2014."

"What happened in 2014?"

"The dahlias."

Clara waited.

Mabel did not continue.

"You're doing this deliberately."

"Yes."

A shadow fell across the table.

Clara looked up.

A man stood on the other side.

He was perhaps forty, thin, untidily handsome, with dark hair falling over his forehead and a camera hanging around his neck.

He held a gardening book.

"How much?"

Clara checked the small pencil mark inside.

"Three pounds."

"That's criminal."

"Four if you complain."

He smiled.

"Three it is."

He handed her a five-pound note.

As Clara counted change, he looked towards the marquee.

"Any trouble yet?"

"Apparently the jam categories are controversial."

"I meant with Marlowe."

Clara paused.

"You know him?"

"Everyone in horticulture knows Julian Marlowe."

"You don't sound impressed."

"I'm a writer. We're professionally jealous of anyone who's sold more books."

He took his change.

"Nathan Cole."

"Clara Bellamy."

"I know."

Clara raised an eyebrow.

Nathan looked at the stall banner.

THE CROOKED BOOKMARK — SECOND-HAND, RARE AND INTERESTING BOOKS

"Not difficult."

"Fair point."

"You found Edwin Pritchard."

There it was.

Clara had discovered that being associated with one murder produced a curious social afterlife.

People either avoided mentioning it altogether or did so within thirty seconds.

"Yes."

Nathan seemed to realise he had been too direct.

"Sorry."

"It's all right."

"I interviewed him once."

"Edwin?"

"Years ago. Local heritage piece."

"Did you like him?"

Nathan considered.

"No."

Clara appreciated the honesty.

"Most people say he was complicated."

"He was. That's polite."

Nathan opened the gardening book.

"Julian's complicated too."

"In what way?"

"Depends on who you ask."

"You?"

"He remembers every favour he's ever done for anyone and forgets every favour anyone has ever done for him."

Mabel leaned towards him.

"That's not complicated. That's unpleasant."

Nathan looked at her.

"Mabel Finch."

"You know me?"

"I've been warned."

"Good."

He smiled.

Mabel did not.

Nathan looked again towards the marquee.

"If Julian's judging the roses, someone will complain."

"They already are."

"They'll complain more when he announces what he's found."

Clara's attention sharpened.

"What has he found?"

Nathan looked at her.

For a moment she thought he regretted the sentence.

Then he shrugged.

"You'll hear soon enough."

"Hear what?"

"A rose."

Mabel stared.

"We're surrounded by them."

"Not this one."

Nathan lowered his voice.

"There's a rumour one of the entries might be something thought extinct."

Clara remembered Sir Julian's sudden interest in Victorian catalogues.

"What sort?"

"The Bramblewick Crimson."

Mabel stopped chewing.

For the first time that morning, she looked genuinely surprised.

"Nonsense."

"You've heard of it?"

"Everyone here has."

Clara looked between them.

"I haven't."

Mabel sighed.

"You haven't lived here long enough."

"Apparently."

Nathan leaned one elbow on the table.

"Victorian rose. Bred locally. Elias Vale, 1870s."

"Vale as in Bramblewick Manor?"

"Same family."

Mabel nodded.

"It vanished."

"Supposedly," Nathan said.

Clara looked towards Gerald Wainwright.

He was standing beside the horticultural tent, speaking to another man.

In his hand was a deep red rose.

Even from across the green, there was something unusual about the colour.

"That one?"

Nathan followed her gaze.

"Maybe."

"Gerald's?"

"Maybe."

"You say that a lot."

"I'm a journalist."

"I thought you were a gardening writer."

"Same evasive instincts."

Tom returned to the table carrying an empty plate.

"My cake is back where it belongs."

Mabel nodded.

"Good."

"Although somebody has entered a Battenberg in the savoury section."

"Could be deliberate."

"It has pink icing."

"Then probably not."

Nathan smiled.

"Village fêtes are brutal."

"You haven't seen anything yet," Mabel said.

Another bell rang.

This time the crowd near the marquee grew larger.

Nathan glanced at his watch.

"I should go."

"Working?"

"Watching."

"Difference?"

"Usually less typing."

He lifted the book.

"Thanks."

Clara watched him disappear into the crowd.

"Interesting man," she said.

Mabel grunted.

"Meaning?"

"I don't trust people who wear cameras around their necks and don't take photographs."

Clara looked.

Nathan had indeed disappeared without using the camera once.

Tom leaned against the table.

"What's this about an extinct rose?"

Mabel explained.

Tom listened without visible excitement.

"How much is a rare rose worth?"

Nathan's abandoned question seemed to hang between them.

Clara thought about it.

"Depends on what 'worth' means."

"Money."

"Probably less than people imagine."

Mabel shook her head.

"Not necessarily."

"You know about rose markets now?"

"I know about people. If somebody's told they can't have something, they immediately want it twice as much."

That, Clara thought, was probably true.

A woman approached the stall carrying three paperbacks, and the conversation shifted.

For the next twenty minutes Clara sold books.

She wrapped a children's annual for a grandmother.

Found an old detective novel for a man who insisted he had read every detective novel ever written.

Sold a battered Elizabeth David cookbook to a woman from Cheltenham.

Prevented Monty from investigating the tombola.

Answered six questions about whether The Crooked Bookmark bought books.

Then the shouting began.

It came from inside the produce marquee.

Not loud at first.

A sharp male voice.

Then another.

People turned.

The canvas entrance shifted as someone pushed through.

Gerald Wainwright emerged.

His face was red.

Sir Julian Marlowe followed.

He looked controlled.

Which made Gerald's anger seem worse.

"You agreed."

Gerald's voice carried across the grass.

Several nearby conversations stopped.

Julian glanced around.

"Not here."

"You agreed."

"I said not here."

"You gave me your word."

Julian lowered his voice, but Clara was close enough now to catch fragments.

"Things have changed."

"Nothing has changed."

"I've seen the records."

Gerald went still.

"What records?"

Julian looked at him.

"You know exactly which records."

The crowd had begun pretending not to listen.

This was difficult because at least thirty people were obviously listening.

Sheila Pomeroy appeared at the marquee entrance.

Her expression was one of undisguised pleasure.

Gerald noticed her.

That seemed to restore some of his self-control.

He straightened his jacket.

"This conversation is private."

"So have it privately," Sheila said.

Gerald ignored her.

He stepped closer to Julian.

"If you do this, you'll regret it."

Julian's expression barely changed.

"Is that a threat?"

"It's advice."

"Then I don't require it."

Gerald turned and walked away.

The crowd immediately began talking.

Julian remained where he was for a moment.

Then he saw Clara.

Their eyes met.

He walked towards her.

Mabel murmured, "Well."

Tom said nothing.

Julian stopped beside the book stall.

"I need to speak to you."

Clara looked at him.

"About the catalogue?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"As soon as possible."

"I can't leave the stall."

"I'll watch it," Tom said.

Clara glanced at him.

"Are you sure?"

"I know what books look like."

Mabel nodded.

"Most of the time."

Julian appeared impatient.

Clara stepped from behind the table.

"What exactly are you looking for?"

"An estate catalogue. Vale family. Late nineteenth century."

"I may have one."

"You said that earlier."

"I said I had old gardening books."

"Did you find the catalogue?"

"I haven't looked."

"Look."

Clara frowned.

"Sir Julian, I sell books. I don't generally take instructions from people who haven't bought them yet."

He exhaled.

Then, unexpectedly, some of the arrogance left his expression.

"Please."

That changed things.

Clara studied him.

"Why is it important?"

Julian looked towards Gerald Wainwright.

"Because somebody is about to become very famous for something he didn't discover."

Clara followed his gaze.

Gerald had disappeared.

"What did he discover?"

"He says he rediscovered the Bramblewick Crimson."

"And you don't believe him?"

"I believe the rose is genuine."

"Then what's the problem?"

Julian looked back at her.

"He didn't rediscover it."

"Who did?"

"That's what I need the catalogue to prove."

Clara waited.

He seemed reluctant to continue.

"Sir Julian."

He lowered his voice.

"The Bramblewick Crimson never became extinct."

That was the first surprising thing.

The second came immediately after.

"It was stolen."

Clara said nothing.

Julian continued.

"Years ago."

"From whom?"

"Someone who didn't know what they had."

"And Gerald did?"

"Eventually."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have letters."

"Whose letters?"

Julian looked towards the marquee.

"I shouldn't discuss this here."

"Then why are you?"

"Because I need that catalogue."

"Why?"

"It may contain the original propagation notes."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it proves ownership."

Clara thought about Gerald's threat.

"If Gerald knows you have this evidence—"

"He knows enough."

"That seems unwise."

Julian gave a humourless smile.

"Gerald Wainwright has spent forty years believing this moment belongs to him."

"And you're going to take it away."

"I'm going to correct the record."

"People have killed for less."

Julian looked at her.

There was a pause.

Clara regretted the sentence immediately.

Not because it was untrue.

Because after Edwin Pritchard, murder jokes had developed a habit of becoming administrative problems.

Julian glanced towards the green.

"I'll come to the shop at four."

"The fête doesn't finish until five."

"Then five."

"I'll find the box."

"Good."

He turned away.

"Sir Julian."

He stopped.

"Be careful."

He gave her a look somewhere between amusement and irritation.

"Mrs Bellamy, I have judged roses for thirty years. I think I can survive Bramblewick."

He walked back towards the produce marquee.

Mabel appeared at Clara's shoulder.

"That was ominous."

"You were listening."

"Obviously."

Tom looked concerned.

"What did he mean about the rose being stolen?"

Clara shook her head.

"I don't know."

"Do you have the catalogue?"

"Possibly."

"Where?"

"In the boxes delivered yesterday."

Mabel looked towards the marquee.

"Gerald won't like it."

"No."

"He doesn't like losing at anything."

"How badly?"

Mabel gave her a long look.

Then she said, "Gerald once demanded a recount in the courgette class."

"That's not reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be."

The brass band struck up.

Children began running towards the games.

The fête resumed.

For a while, nothing happened.

That was the deceptive thing about village disasters.

They often began by allowing everyone to believe the day was proceeding normally.

At eleven fifteen, Mabel's raspberry jam was reinstated into its original category.

At eleven twenty, Tom's Victoria sponge received a blue card confirming it had survived classification.

At eleven thirty-two, Monty was caught beneath the cake table.

At eleven forty, Sheila Pomeroy informed three people that Gerald Wainwright had "lost his nerve".

At eleven fifty-five, Sir Julian Marlowe left the produce marquee carrying a clipboard.

At twelve ten, he was seen speaking quietly to Nathan Cole behind the horticultural tent.

At twelve twenty-three, Gerald Wainwright entered the marquee alone.

At twelve thirty, the brass band began playing "Colonel Bogey".

At twelve forty-five, Clara sold a gardening encyclopaedia to a woman from Broadway.

At twelve fifty-two, Mabel announced that the tea was undrinkable.

At one o'clock, the produce marquee closed for the judges' lunch break.

At one twelve o’clock, someone saw Sir Julian Marlowe go back inside.

At one twenty, the marquee clock stopped.

Nobody noticed.

At one thirty-eight, Clara realised Monty was missing.

Again.

She left Tom with the stall and followed a trail of paw prints towards the rear of the produce marquee.

"Monty?"

No response.

"Monty!"

Something moved beneath the canvas.

Clara lifted the flap.

Monty's head appeared.

He was chewing something.

"What have you got?"

Monty backed away.

Clara ducked beneath the canvas.

The interior was dimmer than outside.

Long tables filled the marquee, covered with vegetables, flowers, preserves, cakes and handwritten entry cards.

The air smelled of damp grass, cut stems and sugar.

"Come here."

Monty moved sideways.

Then Clara saw the glove.

It was a gardening glove.

Dark green.

Monty held it in his mouth.

"Drop it."

He did not.

"Monty."

The dog looked past her.

His ears shifted.

Clara heard something.

A faint scrape.

From behind the tall flower display at the far end of the marquee.

"Hello?"

No answer.

She took a step.

"Sir Julian?"

Still nothing.

Monty dropped the glove.

Clara moved between the tables.

A large display of delphiniums blocked the corner.

Beyond it stood the silver Rose Cup on a small table.

Beside the trophy lay a broken vase.

Clara noticed the first shoe.

Polished brown leather.

Then the trouser leg.

Then the man.

Sir Julian Marlowe lay partly concealed behind the prize display.

For one second Clara's mind refused to accept what she was seeing.

Not again.

Not here.

Not surrounded by prize onions.

She went closer.

Julian's eyes were open.

One arm lay beneath him.

The other stretched towards the table.

There was blood at his temple.

Not much.

Enough.

Clara did not touch him.

She knew better now.

Behind her, Monty whined.

Clara looked at the display.

Something was missing.

There was an empty vase.

A judging card lay crooked beside it.

On the table, the Rose Cup gleamed.

Clara looked again at Julian.

Something white protruded from his jacket pocket.

A folded piece of paper.

She did not remove it.

Outside, the brass band reached the final bars of its tune.

People applauded.

Clara stepped backwards.

Then she called, very clearly:

"Tom."

No answer.

Louder:

"Tom!"

Footsteps approached outside.

"Clara?"

"Don't come in yet."

That got his attention.

"What happened?"

"Get Inspector Mercer."

There was a pause.

"Why?"

Clara looked at Sir Julian Marlowe.

Because she already knew what the answer would mean.

"Tell him we've got another one."

Outside the marquee, the fête continued.

Children laughed.

Crockery clattered.

Somewhere near the village green, Mabel Finch was complaining about tea.

And on a judging table inside the produce marquee, the empty vase waited for the rose that somebody had taken.

The Bramblewick Crimson was gone.

Chapter Two: The Missing Rose

Inspector Daniel Mercer arrived at the Bramblewick Summer Fête at one forty-seven in the afternoon.

Clara knew the exact time because the village clock struck the quarter just as his car pulled onto the grass beside the war memorial.

It struck with considerably more dignity than the situation deserved.

The fête did not immediately stop.

That was the difficulty.

There was no sensible mechanism for announcing that a murder investigation had begun while a children's three-legged race was assembling near the cricket pavilion and the brass band was preparing to play a selection from *My Fair Lady*.

For several minutes, Bramblewick existed in two realities.

In one, Sir Julian Marlowe lay dead behind the prize display inside the produce marquee.

In the other, the tombola continued.

Clara stood outside the marquee with Tom.

Monty sat beside them.

The gardening glove remained inside.

Clara had left everything exactly where she found it.

Mostly.

Getting Monty out without allowing him to collect anything else had required the removal of half a cheese sandwich from Tom's lunchbox.

Mercer crossed the green.

He was in plain clothes, although Clara had begun to suspect that even if he wore a Hawaiian shirt, people would somehow know he was a police officer.

He had that quality.

Straight-backed.

Controlled.

Observant.

A man who appeared to regard unnecessary excitement as an administrative failure.

He saw Clara.

Stopped.

Closed his eyes briefly.

Then continued walking.

Tom noticed.

"He doesn't look pleased."

"He rarely does when he sees me near a body."

"I suppose that's reasonable."

"I think it's becoming personal."

Mercer reached them.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Inspector."

"Mr Arkwright."

"Inspector."

Mercer looked at Monty.

The dog looked back.

"No."

Clara frowned.

"He hasn't done anything."

"Yet."

"That's prejudicial."

"Where is the body?"

Clara pointed towards the rear entrance.

"Behind the flower display."

"You went inside?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Monty had stolen a glove."

Mercer looked at Monty again.

The dog wagged his tail.

"Of course he had."

"I didn't touch anything."

"Anything at all?"

"The canvas flap."

"Anything else?"

"No."

"Did the dog?"

Clara hesitated.

"Define anything."

Mercer stared.

"He had the glove."

"What glove?"

"A green gardening glove."

"From where?"

"I don't know."

"Where is it now?"

"Inside. Near the entrance."

"Did you touch it?"

"No."

"Good."

Mercer turned to Tom.

"Did you enter?"

"No."

"Anyone else?"

"Not after Clara came out."

"Before?"

"We don't know."

Mercer looked towards the crowd.

"This area needs clearing."

A uniformed constable hurried across the green.

Another police vehicle arrived at the road entrance.

The transformation began.

It was subtle at first.

A cordon appeared around the produce marquee.

Stewards were asked to direct people away.

The chairman of the fête committee, Ronald Pease, materialised immediately and began insisting that somebody tell him whether the dog show could proceed.

Mercer ignored him.

Ronald persisted.

"We have twenty-three entrants."

"This is now a crime scene."

"I understand that."

"No, Mr Pease, I don't think you do."

"The dog show is on the opposite side of the green."

Mercer looked at him.

"There has been a suspicious death."

"Of course. Terrible. Absolutely terrible."

Ronald lowered his voice.

"But people have travelled."

Mercer stared at him for several seconds.

"Cancel the dog show."

Ronald looked stricken.

Clara almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

Mercer turned back to her.

"Start from the beginning."

Clara did.

She explained Sir Julian's earlier visit.

The gardening catalogue.

The argument with Gerald Wainwright.

The Bramblewick Crimson.

Julian's claim that it had been stolen.

Nathan Cole's comments.

Monty's disappearance.

The glove.

The body.

Mercer listened without interrupting.

That was usually when Clara became most uneasy.

Daniel Mercer had perfected the art of allowing people to continue until they said something they had not intended to say.

When she finished, he asked:

"What time did Marlowe speak to you?"

"Just after eleven."

"How sure?"

"Fairly."

"Not good enough."

Tom said, "Eleven twenty-five."

Mercer turned.

"You checked?"

"My sponge was returned to the correct category at eleven twenty-three."

Clara looked at him.

"You know that?"

"I had a blue card."

Mabel's voice came from behind them.

"He was very proud."

Mercer turned.

Mabel Finch stood outside the police cordon holding a cup of tea.

Nobody had seen her arrive.

Mercer's expression changed.

Only slightly.

But Clara recognised it.

It was the expression of a man who had discovered a second problem before solving the first.

"Mrs Finch."

"Inspector."

"You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should Sir Julian, apparently."

"Mabel," Clara said.

"What?"

Mercer pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Did you see or hear anything relevant?"

"Almost certainly."

"Anything specifically relevant?"

"Depends on what happened."

"He's dead."

"I gathered."

"Suspiciously."

"I gathered that too."

Mercer looked at Clara.

"Why does she always do this?"

"I don't control her."

"Nobody does," Tom said.

Mabel sipped her tea.

"Gerald threatened him."

Mercer looked back.

"When?"

"Just before half past eleven."

"You heard it?"

"Half the fête heard it."

"What exactly did he say?"

"'If you do this, you'll regret it.'"

Mercer made a note.

"Anything else?"

"He said Julian had given him his word."

"About what?"

"The rose."

"You're certain?"

Mabel shrugged.

"I wasn't sitting between them with a shorthand notebook."

Mercer gave her a tired look.

"Where is Gerald Wainwright now?"

Mabel looked towards the horticultural tent.

"Was there ten minutes ago?"

A constable went to check.

Clara watched the activity spreading around the green.

People had begun to realise something serious had happened.

The brass band had stopped.

The children's race had been postponed.

The cake stall was still selling.

Some institutions were apparently stronger than murder.

Mercer looked at Clara.

"You mentioned a missing rose."

"The vase beside the body was empty."

"How do you know there should have been a rose in it?"

"The judging card."

"What did it say?"

"I didn't read it closely."

"But?"

"It looked like an entry card."

"Anything else?"

"Nathan Cole said Gerald had entered the Bramblewick Crimson."

"Did you see Gerald carrying it?"

"Yes."

"Colour?"

"Dark red."

"Could you identify it again?"

Clara considered.

"Probably not."

"Why?"

"Because it's a rose."

Mabel snorted.

Mercer ignored her.

Clara continued.

"But it was distinctive."

"How?"

"The colour. Very dark."

"Anything else?"

"No."

A second constable approached.

"Sir, Mr Wainwright isn't at the horticultural tent."

Mercer looked at him.

"Find him."

"Yes, sir."

Mabel said, "Try the beer tent."

Everyone turned.

She shrugged.

"He goes there when he's angry."

Mercer looked at the constable.

"Beer tent."

The constable left.

Mercer turned to Clara.

"Stay here."

"Naturally."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

"You are not going inside again."

"I don't want to."

"Good."

"Although—"

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"I've learnt."

Mercer ducked beneath the canvas flap and disappeared into the marquee.

Clara folded her arms.

Mabel came closer.

"What did you see?"

"The body."

"I know that."

Clara looked at her.

Mabel's face had lost some of its usual sharp amusement.

Underneath was concern.

Real concern.

"Blood at the temple," Clara said quietly. "Not much."

"Weapon?"

"Didn't see one."

"The trophy?"

Clara stared.

"What?"

"The Rose Cup."

"It was on the table."

"Heavy?"

"Probably."

Tom looked between them.

"You're both thinking it."

Clara remembered the silver cup.

Large.

Solid.

Polished.

Positioned beside the empty vase.

"It looked clean."

Mabel said, "You noticed?"

"Apparently."

"Good."

Tom frowned.

"Could someone have hit him with it and put it back?"

"Of course," Mabel said.

Clara looked towards the marquee.

"Let's not decide anything yet."

Mabel raised an eyebrow.

"That sounded very police-like."

"I've been trained by irritation."

A stir passed through the crowd.

Gerald Wainwright was walking towards them.

He was accompanied by a constable.

Mabel had been correct.

He had been in the beer tent.

Gerald was not drunk.

But he was carrying a pint.

The constable had apparently decided removing it might create unnecessary complexity.

Gerald stopped when he saw the cordon.

"What happened?"

Nobody answered immediately.

Then he saw Clara.

Something changed in his face.

"Where's Marlowe?"

Clara said nothing.

Mercer emerged from the marquee.

He looked directly at Gerald.

"Mr Wainwright?"

"Yes."

"I'm Inspector Mercer."

"I know who you are."

"Sir Julian Marlowe is dead."

Gerald's hand tightened around the pint glass.

"What?"

"He was found inside the marquee."

For several seconds Gerald said nothing.

Then:

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"We're establishing that."

Gerald looked towards the canvas entrance.

"I want to see him."

"No."

"I was with him this morning."

"I know."

Gerald's gaze moved to Clara.

She realised he understood immediately.

She had told Mercer about the argument.

His expression hardened.

Mercer noticed.

"Mr Wainwright, I understand you and Sir Julian had a disagreement."

"We had a professional discussion."

Mabel coughed.

Gerald glared at her.

Mercer continued.

"Witnesses describe it as an argument."

"Witnesses are fond of drama."

"In Bramblewick?"

Mabel said, "Never."

Clara looked away to hide a smile.

Gerald ignored her.

"Marlowe had changed the judging criteria."

"How?"

"He hadn't."

Mercer waited.

Gerald realised the contradiction.

"He was going to."

"Regarding?"

Gerald's expression closed.

"The Rose Cup."

"The Bramblewick Crimson?"

Now Gerald looked surprised.

"Who told you?"

"Is that important?"

"It isn't public."

"It is now."

Gerald looked towards Clara again.

She said, "Nathan Cole mentioned it."

Gerald muttered something under his breath.

Mercer said, "Where is the rose?"

Gerald frowned.

"What?"

"Your entry."

"In the marquee."

"No."

A small pause.

"What do you mean, no?"

"The vase appears to be empty."

Gerald stared.

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I put it there myself."

"When?"

"Before judging."

"What time?"

"About nine."

"And you've not removed it?"

"Of course not."

"Did anyone have reason to?"

Gerald's face became cautious.

"Anyone might."

"Why?"

"It's valuable."

"How valuable?"

Gerald hesitated.

Mabel watched him closely.

"Not commercially," he said.

"Historically."

"Meaning?"

"If it's authenticated, it's the only known surviving Bramblewick Crimson."

"So Nathan Cole was correct."

Gerald's mouth tightened.

"He should have kept quiet."

"Why?"

"Because verification wasn't complete."

Mercer tilted his head.

"Sir Julian thought it was genuine?"

"Yes."

"And yet you argued."

"Not about authenticity."

"About ownership?"

Gerald froze.

Only for a fraction of a second.

Clara saw it.

Mercer certainly did.

"Who told you that?" Gerald asked.

Mercer did not answer.

Gerald looked at Clara.

"You."

Clara held his gaze.

"Sir Julian told me he believed the rose had been stolen."

Gerald's face changed.

Not anger.

Something closer to fear.

"That's a lie."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

Mercer stepped slightly closer.

"Perhaps we should continue this conversation somewhere private."

Gerald looked around.

People were watching.

Of course they were.

Bramblewick had developed the collective posture of a village pretending not to observe a police interview taking place twenty feet away.

Gerald set the pint on a nearby table.

"Fine."

Mercer gestured towards a police car.

They walked away together.

Mabel watched them go.

"Well."

Tom nodded.

"That's twice today."

"What?"

"You've said 'well' when you mean something else."

"I contain multitudes."

Clara looked back at the marquee.

The missing rose bothered her.

If Julian had been killed over the Bramblewick Crimson, taking it made sense.

But if it was valuable as evidence, why not destroy it?

And if the killer removed it simply because it carried pollen or some other trace, why leave the trophy?

Unless the trophy mattered differently.

Or not at all.

A woman approached the cordon.

She was in her late fifties, tall, broad-shouldered and wearing a green gardening apron over a floral dress.

Sheila Pomeroy.

She looked at Clara.

"Is it true?"

"About Sir Julian?"

"Obviously."

"Yes."

Sheila exhaled.

"Good Lord."

Her face showed shock.

But beneath it was something harder to read.

"Gerald's with the police," Mabel said.

Sheila glanced towards the car.

"Of course he is."

Clara studied her.

"Why, of course?"

"He threatened Julian in public."

"That doesn't mean he killed him."

"No."

"But?"

Sheila folded her arms.

"Gerald cared about that rose more than was healthy."

"How long has he had it?"

Sheila looked at Clara.

"That's the interesting question."

"You know something?"

"I know Gerald Wainwright has claimed for years that he was close to recreating a lost Vale rose from old breeding lines."

"Recreating?"

"Hybridising backwards. Selecting characteristics. He's given lectures about it."

"But this one isn't recreated."

"No."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw it."

Clara waited.

Sheila lowered her voice.

"I grew roses professionally before I retired. Not at Gerald's level, according to Gerald, but enough to know the difference between a modern recreation and an old cultivar."

"You think it's genuinely Victorian?"

"I think it's possible."

"What makes you say that?"

"Growth habit. Petal structure. Scent."

"Scent?"

Sheila gave her a look.

"Roses aren't only colours, Clara."

"Apparently I've been neglecting them."

"You have."

Mabel nodded.

"She has."

Clara ignored this.

"Did Gerald ever say where he got it?"

"No."

"Did you ask?"

"Repeatedly."

"And?"

"He said he'd been working on it privately."

"Did you believe him?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because Gerald cannot keep success private."

Mabel nodded approvingly.

"That's true."

Sheila continued.

"If Gerald had bred that rose himself, we'd have heard about every cross, every seedling and every disappointing bloom since 1983."

"So you think he found it."

"I think somebody found it."

"Who?"

Sheila looked towards the cordoned marquee.

"Ask Arthur Bell."

"Who's Arthur Bell?"

"Old gardener. Lives at Rosebank Cottage, near the manor estate wall."

"Why him?"

Sheila hesitated.

"Because twenty years ago Arthur told me something I thought was nonsense."

"What?"

"He said an old rose still grew in a neglected corner of the Vale estate."

Mabel stopped.

"Arthur said that?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"After the spring show, he'd had three whiskies."

"That improves the credibility enormously."

"It was Arthur. Three whiskies makes him more honest, not less."

Clara looked again towards Gerald.

"Did Gerald know Arthur?"

"Everyone knows Arthur."

"Did he know about the rose?"

"I don't know."

Sheila's expression sharpened.

"But Gerald spent a lot of time at Rosebank years ago."

"Why?"

"He said he was advising Arthur about pruning."

Mabel snorted.

"Gerald Wainwright doesn't advise. He occupies."

Sheila almost smiled.

Then her face sobered.

"I should tell the police."

"Yes," Clara said.

Sheila looked at her.

"You sound disappointed."

"I'm trying to improve."

"Don't overdo it."

Sheila walked towards the nearest constable.

Tom looked at Clara.

"Arthur Bell."

"Yes."

"You're going to see him."

"I haven't said that."

Mabel said, "You will."

Clara looked at her.

"Possibly."

"Today?"

"Probably not."

"Good."

Clara frowned.

"Why?"

"Because if the police let us out of here before five, I need to collect my jam."

Tom stared.

"There's been a murder."

"I'm aware."

"And you're worried about the jam?"

"It took two days."

Before Clara could reply, Mercer reappeared.

Gerald remained near the police car with another officer.

Mercer walked towards them.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Inspector."

"I need a formal statement from you."

"All right."

"And I need the bookshop catalogue you mentioned."

Clara nodded.

"I can find it after the fête."

"The shop is closed?"

"Yes."

"Keys?"

"In my bag."

"Good."

Mercer looked at Tom and Mabel.

"I will need statements from both of you."

Mabel sighed.

"I've already told you what I know."

"No, you've told me fragments while eating."

"That's my preferred method."

"Not mine."

He turned back to Clara.

"The pathologist is on the way."

"Do you know how he died?"

"Not definitively."

"But?"

Mercer glanced towards the marquee.

"Head injury."

"The trophy?"

His eyes returned to her.

"Why do you ask?"

"It was beside him."

"So were several dozen vegetables."

"Vegetables rarely cause blunt-force trauma."

"Some marrows could."

Mabel said, "I once grew one that could."

Mercer ignored her.

"The trophy is being examined."

Clara nodded.

"Anything else?"

He hesitated.

That interested her.

Mercer did not usually hesitate before withholding information.

"Yes."

"What?"

"There was a note in his pocket."

Clara remembered the folded paper.

"What did it say?"

Mercer looked at her.

"You didn't read it?"

"No."

"Good."

"What did it say?"

He remained silent for a moment.

Then:

"'You promised me first prize.'"

Mabel raised her eyebrows.

Tom looked towards Gerald.

Clara did not.

Too obvious.

Far too obvious.

Mercer watched her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That expression is never nothing."

"It points directly at Gerald."

"Yes."

"Which bothers me."

"Why?"

"Because if Gerald wrote it, why would Sir Julian keep it in his pocket?"

"People keep threatening notes."

"It doesn't sound threatening."

"No."

"It sounds disappointed."

Mercer's expression shifted.

A fraction.

Clara continued.

"And if Gerald killed him after writing it, he'd know the note existed."

"Unless he'd forgotten."

"Would you forget writing something like that to a man you later murdered?"

Mercer sighed.

"We've been investigating this for approximately twenty minutes."

"I know."

"Try not to solve it before tea."

Mabel said, "Tea's terrible."

Mercer looked at her.

"That isn't helping."

A constable approached carrying a clear evidence bag.

Inside was the green gardening glove.

"Sir."

Mercer took it.

Clara looked closely.

Mud stained the palm.

There were tiny red marks near the fingers.

Pollen?

Petal fragments?

She could not tell.

Mercer noticed where she was looking.

"Recognise it?"

"No."

Mabel leaned forward.

"I do."

Mercer looked at her.

"Whose?"

"Gerald's."

The air seemed to tighten.

"You're sure?" Mercer asked.

Mabel nodded.

"He wears that kind. Dark green leather, reinforced fingertips."

"Lots of gardeners might."

"Not with that."

She pointed.

On the cuff was a tiny embroidered emblem.

A pair of crossed pruning shears beneath a letter B.

Clara had not noticed.

Mercer brought the bag closer.

"What's the B?"

"Bramblewick Horticultural Society," Mabel said. "Committee gloves. Gerald had them made."

Tom stared at her.

"Committee gloves?"

"Don't ask."

Mercer looked towards the police car.

Gerald sat inside.

The glove had been found in Monty's mouth beside Julian's body.

The note seemed to point at him.

He had publicly threatened the victim.

His rare rose was missing.

His glove was at the crime scene.

Clara felt the first strong instinct that had served her during Edwin Pritchard's murder.

Not certainty.

Discomfort.

Things fitted.

Too quickly.

Too neatly.

She looked at Mercer.

He was thinking the same thing.

"You're not convinced," she said.

"I'm convinced we have evidence."

"That's not what I said."

Mercer placed the evidence bag back into the constable's hands.

"Bag it properly and log the location."

"Yes, sir."

The officer left.

Mercer faced Clara.

"Gerald Wainwright says the glove isn't his."

Mabel frowned.

"It is."

"He says one pair went missing from the society shed three weeks ago."

Clara looked towards the horticultural tent.

"Did he report it?"

"No."

"Convenient."

"Very."

"But possible."

"Also possible."

Tom said, "What about the rose?"

Mercer shook his head.

"Not found."

"Anywhere?"

"We're searching."

Clara's gaze travelled across the green.

Hundreds of people.

Dozens of cars.

Stalls.

Bins.

Canvas tents.

Flower arrangements.

A single rose could disappear almost anywhere.

Unless someone needed to keep it alive.

That thought arrived suddenly.

"Inspector."

Mercer looked at her.

"If you stole a rare rose worth preserving, you wouldn't put it in your pocket."

"No."

"You'd need water."

"Eventually."

"So whoever took it might have put it somewhere wet."

Mabel said, "Buckets."

Tom nodded towards the rear of the marquee.

"There's a whole row of flower buckets by the water stand."

Mercer looked at the constable nearest him.

"Check every bucket, vase, watering container and floral display on the green."

The officer nodded.

Clara said, "Also cars."

Mercer looked at her.

"Why?"

"If it's a cutting, someone wants it."

Mabel shook her head.

"No. Not a cutting."

Clara turned.

"What?"

"Gerald's entry wasn't just a flower."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him bringing it in."

Sheila, who had returned from speaking to the police, answered from behind them.

"She's right."

Mercer looked between them.

"What exactly was entered?"

Sheila said, "A potted specimen."

Clara stared.

"The whole plant?"

"Small one. Perhaps two feet tall. One main bloom and several buds."

Mercer's expression sharpened.

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely."

Clara looked towards the empty vase she remembered.

"But there was a vase."

Sheila frowned.

"Then someone cut the bloom."

That changed the problem.

The missing rose was not necessarily the missing plant.

Mercer said, "Where was the pot?"

"On the competition bench this morning."

"Was it still there when judging finished?"

Sheila thought.

"I don't know."

Mabel did.

"No."

Everyone looked at her.

"I noticed the gap."

"When?"

"Just before lunch."

"Why didn't you say?"

"Nobody asked me about flowerpots."

Mercer closed his eyes.

"Mrs Finch."

"What?"

"From now on, if you notice anything unusual in connection with a murder scene, assume I want to know."

"That's broad."

"It's supposed to be."

Clara thought aloud.

"So the plant disappeared before Julian died."

"Possibly," Mercer said.

"Or before we know he died."

"Also possible."

"And someone cut the main bloom."

"Maybe."

"What was in the vase?"

Sheila answered.

"Competition blooms are often displayed separately after judging. If Julian cut the flower to examine it, he might have placed it there."

Clara looked at her.

"Would he do that without Gerald?"

"No."

"Would Gerald allow it?"

"Not happily."

Clara remembered the argument.

Things have changed.

I've seen the records.

Perhaps Julian had decided the rose needed to be examined.

Perhaps authenticated.

Perhaps seized?

No.

He had no authority for that.

But he may have intended to announce something.

Someone had removed the plant.

Someone had removed the bloom.

And someone had killed him.

The three facts felt connected.

But perhaps not in the way everyone assumed.

A shout came from near the tea tent.

A constable raised his hand.

"Sir!"

Mercer turned.

The officer was standing beside a large galvanised water trough used for flower displays.

He held something with forceps.

Not a rose.

A card.

Wet.

Cream-coloured.

Mercer walked over.

Clara did not follow.

Technically.

She merely remained close enough to see when he returned.

The card had been sealed in another evidence bag.

Ink had bled across the surface, but some writing remained.

An entry number.

A judge's mark.

And a name.

Gerald Wainwright.

Mercer studied it.

"What is it?" Clara asked.

He gave her a look.

"Stay where you are."

"I am."

"Remarkably close."

"Accident."

He read the card.

Then his expression changed.

"Interesting."

Mabel said, "You're doing it now."

Mercer looked at her.

"Doing what?"

"Knowing something and not saying it."

"That's my job."

"Very irritating."

Mercer glanced at Clara.

"The judging card originally marked Gerald's entry as first."

Tom frowned.

"Originally?"

"Someone altered it."

"To what?"

Mercer turned the bag.

Beneath the blurred red ink, another word remained visible.

DISQUALIFIED

Clara stared.

"So Julian didn't just change his mind."

"No."

"He disqualified Gerald's rose."

"Looks that way."

"Before he died."

"Likely."

Mabel folded her arms.

"Well."

Tom sighed.

"There it is again."

Clara barely heard them.

She was thinking about the note.

You promised me first prize.

Not a threat.

A complaint.

A demand.

Possibly written before Gerald knew he'd been disqualified.

Or by someone else entirely.

Mercer said, "Mrs Bellamy."

"Yes?"

"You're doing the face."

"What face?"

"The one where you stop hearing everyone."

"I hear you."

"Good. Then hear this."

He lowered his voice.

"Do not go looking for Arthur Bell."

Clara blinked.

"I didn't say I would."

"Sheila Pomeroy told me what she told you."

"Efficient."

"I know you."

"That's worrying."

"If Arthur Bell knows anything about the provenance of the rose, we'll speak to him."

"Of course."

"You will not."

"Naturally."

Mercer stared at her.

Mabel looked at Tom.

Tom looked at the sky.

Nobody believed her.

That seemed unfair.

Clara had every intention of behaving responsibly.

At least until the police finished taking statements.

Possibly until after tea.

A uniformed officer hurried towards Mercer again.

"Sir."

"What?"

"We've found the plant."

Everyone went still.

"Where?"

The officer pointed towards the far edge of the green.

"Inside the Green Fingers Club tent."

Sheila Pomeroy's face drained of colour.

"What?"

Mercer looked at her.

"The missing Bramblewick Crimson."

"That's impossible."

"Apparently not."

"Who found it?"

"Officer Davies."

"Where exactly?"

"Behind your display boards."

Sheila shook her head.

"No."

Mabel said nothing.

Clara watched Sheila carefully.

Shock.

Anger.

Then fear.

Not the guilty kind, necessarily.

The fear of suddenly understanding that the investigation had changed direction.

Mercer said, "Ms Pomeroy, I'm afraid I'll need you to come with me."

Sheila looked at Clara.

"This is ridiculous."

Clara could not disagree.

The evidence against Gerald had seemed almost excessively neat.

Now the missing rose had been discovered in his rival's tent.

Too neat in another direction.

Someone was moving the pieces.

Perhaps literally.

Clara looked across the green.

Gerald's glove beside the body.

Gerald's note in Julian's pocket.

The disqualified judging card was dumped in water.

The rare plant hidden with Sheila.

Each clue pointed cleanly towards someone.

Too cleanly.

Too conveniently.

As Sheila walked away with Mercer, Mabel moved beside Clara.

"You know what you're thinking."

Clara watched the police lead Sheila towards the temporary interview area.

"Do I?"

"Yes."

Tom joined them.

"What?"

Mabel looked at him.

"Somebody wants this solved quickly."

Clara nodded slowly.

"And wrongly."

Across the green, the Rose Cup remained inside the sealed produce marquee.

Polished.

Bright.

Waiting.

And Clara suddenly wondered whether the most obvious object in the entire crime scene was the one nobody should have trusted.

Chapter Three: First Prize

By three o'clock, the Bramblewick Summer Fête had officially been cancelled.

This did not mean everyone left.

It meant people stopped pretending they were there for the fête.

The tombola closed.

The brass band packed away its instruments.

The children's races were abandoned.

The ferret demonstration never took place, which Mabel described as the day's one undeniable piece of good fortune.

But the village green remained crowded.

People stood in small groups beneath awnings, beside parked cars and around the edges of the cricket pitch, speaking in lowered voices that carried remarkably well.

Clara had never seen so many people simultaneously attempting not to gossip.

The police had taken names and contact details from everyone who had been inside the produce marquee or nearby during the likely time of Sir Julian Marlowe's death.

Statements were being collected in the parish hall.

Several people had been asked to remain available for further questioning.

Gerald Wainwright and Sheila Pomeroy were among them.

Neither appeared pleased.

They had been placed at opposite ends of the hall.

This was probably wise.

Clara sat at a trestle table near the entrance with a paper cup of tea.

Mabel sat opposite her.

Tom stood by the window.

Monty had been tied to a chair leg and was watching a packet of biscuits on a nearby table with the focused stillness of a professional sniper.

Mabel took a sip.

"This is worse than the fête tea."

Clara looked at her cup.

"I think it's the same urn."

"That would explain it."

Tom glanced towards the far end of the hall.

Gerald was speaking to a constable.

Sheila sat three tables away, arms folded.

"They've both been in there nearly an hour."

Mabel said, "Gerald will be enjoying himself."

Clara looked at her.

"Enjoying being questioned about murder?"

"Enjoying having a captive audience."

Tom smiled.

Clara did not.

She was still thinking about the evidence.

Gerald's glove near the body.

The note in Sir Julian's pocket.

The altered judging card.

The Body at the Village Fête

The missing Bramblewick Crimson is hidden in Sheila's tent.

Everything appeared to point somewhere.

But not in the same direction.

That bothered her.

It bothered Mercer too.

She had seen it in his face.

He was not ignoring the evidence.

He was refusing to fall in love with it.

That was sensible.

Evidence, Clara had learnt, could be seductive.

A clue arrived.

It pointed towards a person.

Another clue arrived and seemed to support the first.

Then a third.

Before long, the investigator stopped asking what the evidence meant and began asking how it proved what they already believed.

Clara had done something similar during the Edwin Pritchard case.

Mercer had corrected her.

Not gently.

She had resented him at the time.

Now she understood why.

Mabel placed her cup down.

"You've gone quiet."

"I'm thinking."

"Dangerous."

"About the rose."

"Also dangerous."

Tom turned from the window.

"What doesn't fit?"

Clara looked at him.

"What makes you think something doesn't?"

"Your eyebrows."

"My eyebrows?"

"They do that."

Clara touched them unconsciously.

Mabel nodded.

"They do."

"I don't want to know."

"You probably should."

Clara ignored them.

"The plant was found in Sheila's tent."

"Yes."

"Gerald's glove was beside the body."

"Yes."

"The note appears to implicate Gerald."

"Yes."

"The disqualification card suggests Julian had reversed the result."

"Yes."

Clara looked between them.

"That's too many separate clues pointing too obviously."

Mabel shrugged.

"Murderers can be obvious."

"They can."

"Village murderers especially."

"Why especially?"

"They know everyone. Makes them lazy."

Tom sat down.

"Who could have moved the plant?"

"Anyone who had access to the marquee."

"That's half the gardening society."

"More."

Mabel nodded towards the hall.

"Also the stewards, judges, exhibitors, committee, and volunteers."

"And whoever killed Julian," Clara said.

Tom folded his hands.

"So somebody takes the plant out of the marquee, hides it in Sheila's tent and leaves Gerald's glove near the body."

"Possibly."

Mabel said, "Or Gerald killed him and tried to blame Sheila."

"Possible."

"Or Sheila killed him and tried to blame Gerald."

"Also possible."

"Or somebody else killed him and tried to blame both."

Clara looked at her.

"That's where I'm leaning."

Mabel gave a small, satisfied nod.

Tom frowned.

"Why both?"

"Because rivalry is useful."

"Meaning?"

"Gerald and Sheila already dislike each other. Everyone knows that. If evidence points at each of them, people don't question why. They assume one was framing the other."

Tom considered.

"Which leaves the real killer outside the argument."

"Exactly."

Mabel looked towards Gerald.

"That assumes the killer is clever."

"Most killers aren't."

"Comforting."

"Most people aren't clever consistently," Clara said. "That's different."

Tom nodded slowly.

"So we look for the mistake."

Clara smiled.

"Mercer would object to that sentence."

"Why?"

"Because we're not looking for anything."

Mabel snorted.

"Of course we are."

Before Clara could answer, the parish hall door opened.

Inspector Mercer stepped inside.

He spoke quietly to one of the constables.

Then he saw Clara.

His expression suggested he had expected to find her exactly where she was and was disappointed by being correct.

He crossed the hall.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Inspector."

"Finished your statement?"

"Twenty minutes ago."

"Then why are you still here?"

Mabel answered.

"The tea."

Mercer looked at her cup.

"I don't believe you."

"Wise."

Clara said, "You told us to remain available."

"I did."

"So we're available."

"You're hovering."

"That's an interpretation."

"It's an observation."

Tom said, "We were waiting to know whether we can leave."

Mercer looked at him.

"Yes. You can."

Mabel stood immediately.

"Good."

Clara remained seated.

Mercer noticed.

"What?"

"Can I ask one question?"

"No."

"That's not very collaborative."

"I'm not collaborating."

"You told me last time—"

"I told you to give me information."

"Which is a form of collaboration."

"No. It's witness management."

Mabel picked up her handbag.

"You two have missed each other."

Mercer stared at her.

Clara looked away.

Tom coughed.

Mercer lowered his voice.

"One question."

Clara nodded towards Sheila.

"Was the plant definitely hidden?"

Mercer studied her.

"Why?"

"If it was simply stored in her tent, that matters."

"Behind two display boards."

"So concealed."

"Yes."

"Was it damaged?"

"No."

"Still potted?"

"Yes."

"Any soil disturbed?"

"I thought you said one question."

"That was one topic."

Mercer exhaled.

"Why do you care about the soil?"

"If someone carried it, they might leave traces."

"We know."

"Of course."

"Anything else?"

Clara hesitated.

"Julian's note."

Mercer's expression became firmer.

"No."

"Did it have an envelope?"

"No."

"Folded?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Mercer stared.

"How?"

"Once? Twice?"

"Why?"

"If someone handed it to him, perhaps casually, he'd fold it differently than if it arrived concealed."

"That's speculative."

"Yes."

"And why do you want to know?"

"Because the wording bothers me."

"'You promised me first prize.'"

"Exactly."

Mabel had paused halfway to the door.

Tom remained seated.

Mercer said, "What about it?"

"If Gerald wrote it, why phrase it like that?"

"He expected to win."

"He expected Julian to authenticate the rose."

"Possibly."

"That's not the same as promising first prize."

Mercer went quiet.

Clara continued.

"If Julian had agreed to authenticate it, Gerald wouldn't need to demand a competition result. Authentication would matter more than a village trophy."

Mabel nodded.

"Much more."

Tom added, "National publicity."

Mercer looked at him.

"You're all very helpful."

"Thank you," Mabel said.

"That wasn't praise."

"Often isn't."

Clara said, "Someone else may have been promised first prize."

Mercer looked towards the produce marquee through the hall window.

"Another category."

"Perhaps."

"Or another competition entirely."

"Perhaps."

"Or the note means exactly what it says."

"Also possible."

Mercer looked back at her.

"Now leave."

Clara stood.

"Gladly."

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Yes?"

"Do not interview Arthur Bell."

She paused.

"I wasn't planning to interview him."

"Good."

"Talking isn't interviewing."

Mercer's eyes narrowed.

"Do not talk to Arthur Bell about the case."

"That's very specific."

"It needs to be."

Mabel opened the door.

"We're going."

Clara followed.

Outside, the afternoon had changed.

The sunshine remained, but the fête atmosphere had gone.

Stalls were being dismantled.

Cars moved slowly off the grass.

Discarded paper cups rolled in the breeze.

A cluster of children watched two constables remove police tape from the games area while leaving the produce marquee sealed.

Monty trotted beside Clara.

Tom carried the unsold book boxes.

Mabel carried her jam.

Clara noticed.

"You got them back."

Mabel looked offended.

"Of course."

"Were the judges finished?"

"They had been."

"Did you win?"

Mabel said nothing.

Tom smiled.

Clara stopped.

"You did."

"Second."

"Which category?"

"Raspberry."

"Alcohol-enhanced?"

"No."

"Still unhappy?"

Mabel looked at the jar.

"Edith Partridge won."

"Ah."

"Her set was too loose."

"Of course."

"And she'd over-skimmed."

"I don't know what that means."

"It means second place is meaningless."

Tom said, "You kept the certificate."

Mabel glared at him.

"Evidence."

Clara laughed.

It felt strange.

A man was dead.

Yet village life continued around it.

That did not feel disrespectful.

It felt human.

People packed tables.

Counted cash.

Collected cakes.

Complained about results.

Somewhere, a family would soon be told Sir Julian Marlowe was never coming home.

Somewhere else, people were discussing whether the fête should be rescheduled.

Life did not stop cleanly for murder.

It merely bent around it.

They reached The Crooked Bookmark shortly after four.

Clara unlocked the door.

The familiar smell of paper, dust and polished wood greeted her.

For the first time all day, she relaxed.

"Tea?" Tom asked.

Mabel looked at him.

"Proper tea?"

"From the café."

"Yes."

He disappeared next door.

Clara switched on the lights.

The shop was quiet.

Rows of shelves.

A narrow counter.

A reading chair near the front window.

Boxes waiting beside the rear wall.

Monty went straight to his water bowl.

Mabel placed her jam on the counter.

"Catalogue."

Clara looked at her.

"Mercer told us not to investigate."

"He told you not to talk to Arthur Bell."

"True."

"He said nothing about books."

Clara smiled.

"You're a bad influence."

"I prefer precise."

They went into the back room.

Three boxes from a recent house clearance sat unopened beneath the desk.

Clara had bought them two days earlier from the niece of a retired nurseryman named Douglas Harcourt.

Most appeared to contain gardening books.

Nothing obviously valuable.

But old specialist collections could surprise you.

She cut the tape on the first box.

Mabel pulled up a chair.

"What exactly are we looking for?"

"Vale estate catalogue. Late nineteenth century."

"Helpful."

Clara lifted out a stack.

Roses for the Amateur.

The English Flower Garden.

Practical Fruit Culture.

A battered volume on greenhouse ventilation.

A seed merchant's catalogue from 1952.

Nothing.

Second box.

More promising.

Old pamphlets.

Nursery lists.

Handwritten notes tucked into books.

Clara opened one.

"D. Harcourt, 1967."

Mabel leaned closer.

"Harcourt?"

"Could be coincidence."

"Nothing in Bramblewick is ever coincidence."

"That's not statistically defensible."

"No."

Clara continued.

Then she found a slim, cloth-bound volume near the bottom.

No printed title on the cover.

She opened it.

Inside, in faded ink:

Vale Estate Gardens

Propagation and Stock Catalogue

1878–1884

Clara felt a small tightening in her chest.

"Found it."

Mabel moved beside her.

The catalogue was partly printed and partly handwritten.

Lists of fruit trees.

Shrubs.

Roses.

Propagation notes.

Dates.

Locations.

Clara turned pages carefully.

Many entries used abbreviations she did not understand.

Then she saw it.

Bramblewick Crimson

The name appeared midway down a page, headed:

Experimental Roses — E. Vale

Below it:

Seedling selected in 1878. Deep crimson, repeated flowering, strong perfume. Poor initial vigour. Retain under glass.

A later note:

Successful propagation from cuttings, 1879.

Another:

Three plants moved to the south wall garden.

Then, in different ink:

1883 — stock reduced after severe winter. One plant was retained with A. Crowther.

Mabel read it twice.

"Arthur."

"Could be another A. Crowther."

"Arthur Bell's grandfather was Crowther."

Clara turned.

"What?"

"His mother was Elsie Crowther."

"You know that?"

"Everyone my age knows everyone else's mother."

Clara looked back at the page.

One plant was retained with A. Crowther.

"What was Arthur's grandfather's name?"

"Albert."

Clara sat back.

Julian had said the catalogue might prove ownership.

This was probably why.

The rose had not simply vanished.

A plant had been entrusted to Albert Crowther.

Mabel said, "So Arthur's family had it."

"Possibly."

"Gerald spent time at Arthur's cottage."

"According to Sheila."

"Advising him about pruning."

Clara looked at her.

"You're enjoying that phrase."

"It's nonsense."

"Maybe Gerald discovered it there."

Mabel's face hardened.

"Or took it."

Clara turned another page.

There were later handwritten additions.

One dated 1891:

B.C. survives at Crowther's cottage. Weak but true.

Then nothing.

No extinction note.

No loss.

No sale.

No transfer.

Clara closed the book gently.

"Julian was right."

"Looks like it."

"At least partly."

The bell over the shop door rang.

Both women froze.

Tom's voice followed.

"It's only me."

Mabel called back.

"You took your time."

"I made tea."

"How long does that take?"

"When you're making yours, longer."

He entered carrying a tray.

Clara showed him the catalogue.

Tom read the entries.

"So Arthur Bell's family preserved the rose."

"That's what it suggests."

"And Gerald ended up with it."

"Yes."

Tom set down the tray.

"Did Arthur sell it?"

"We don't know."

Mabel said, "He wouldn't."

"Why?"

"Because Arthur doesn't sell plants."

"Never?"

"He gives them away. Swaps sometimes."

"Then Gerald could have received it legitimately."

Mabel shook her head.

"Not that rose."

"You don't know that."

"I know Arthur."

Clara looked at her.

"How well?"

"Well enough."

Something in Mabel's tone suggested history.

Not scandal.

Not necessarily.

But familiarity.

Clara decided not to push.

Yet.

Tom handed her tea.

"So what now?"

"We tell Mercer."

Mabel looked disappointed.

"Immediately?"

"Yes."

"You're no fun."

"I'm trying to avoid being arrested."

"For what?"

"Obstruction. Contamination. Excessive curiosity."

Tom said, "Is that an offence?"

"Mercer would create it."

Clara reached for her phone.

Before she could dial, the shop bell rang again.

This time nobody called out.

Clara stepped into the front room.

An elderly man stood just inside the door.

He wore a brown tweed jacket despite the warmth, a checked shirt and trousers held slightly too high by braces.

He was thin, stooped and deeply tanned from years outdoors.

His hands were large and scarred.

A flat cap was crushed between them.

Clara recognised him vaguely.

Mabel came up behind her.

"Arthur."

Inspector Mercer's warning echoed immediately.

Do not talk to Arthur Bell about the case.

Arthur Bell looked at Clara.

"Mrs Bellamy?"

"Yes."

"I'm Arthur Bell."

"I know."

He glanced at Mabel.

"Hello, Mabel."

"Arthur."

There was something between them.

Old friendship, perhaps.

Or simply village history.

Arthur looked towards the back room.

"You found it."

Clara went still.

"Found what?"

"The catalogue."

Mabel's eyes narrowed.

"How do you know?"

Arthur looked tired.

"Julian told me."

"When?"

"This morning."

Clara said, "Sir Julian spoke to you?"

"Aye."

"At the fête?"

Arthur nodded.

"Before judging."

"What did he say?"

Arthur hesitated.

Clara heard Mercer's voice in her head.

Do not talk to Arthur Bell about the case.

She held up one hand.

"Wait."

Arthur blinked.

Clara took out her phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling Inspector Mercer."

Arthur's face changed.

Fear.

Immediate and unmistakable.

"No."

Clara paused.

"Why not?"

Arthur looked towards the window.

"Because I can't talk to police."

Mabel stepped closer.

"Arthur."

"I can't."

"Why?"

He swallowed.

Then he said:

"Because I stole the rose."

Silence.

Tom appeared from the back room.

Nobody spoke.

Arthur looked at Clara.

"Not today."

His voice was rough.

"Forty years ago."

Mabel stared at him.

Arthur continued.

"It wasn't Gerald who stole it."

Clara felt the entire case shift again.

Arthur's hands tightened around his cap.

"It was me."

No one moved.

Outside, a delivery van passed along the high street.

The ordinary sound seemed absurdly loud.

Clara said carefully:

"Arthur, I think we should still call Inspector Mercer."

He shook his head.

"You don't understand."

"Then explain it to him."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"Because once I do, he'll ask where I got it."

"Yes."

"And then he'll ask why Gerald had it."

"Yes."

Arthur looked at Mabel.

Mabel's face had gone very still.

"Tell her," she said.

Arthur looked at Clara.

"Gerald didn't steal the Bramblewick Crimson from me."

Clara waited.

"I gave it to him."

That was unexpected.

"Why?"

Arthur looked towards the floor.

"Because I thought it was dying."

His voice softened.

"My granddad kept it alive. Then my mum. Then me."

He rubbed one thumb across the cap's brim.

"Never knew it was famous when I was little. It was just the old red rose behind the greenhouse."

Clara said nothing.

Arthur continued.

"Granddad called it Mr Vale's Crimson. Said his father had brought it home from the estate when the old glasshouses were cleared."

"Albert Crowther?"

Arthur nodded.

"That was his father."

Clara looked at the catalogue.

The generations fitted.

"Why do you say you stole it?"

Arthur gave a bitter smile.

"Because it belonged to the estate."

"Did your family know that?"

"We knew where it came from."

"That isn't necessarily theft."

"Granddad was told to keep it safe."

"By whom?"

Arthur swallowed.

"Elias Vale."

Mabel whispered, "Good Lord."

Arthur nodded.

"Family story. Thought it was nonsense."

"But?"

"I found the letter."

Clara's pulse quickened.

"What letter?"

"From Elias Vale to Albert Crowther. Telling him to keep the plant at the cottage until the disease passed through the estate glasshouses."

"Do you still have it?"

Arthur did not answer.

Clara understood.

"Sir Julian had it."

Arthur closed his eyes.

"Yes."

That explained the letters.

Julian had told Clara he possessed evidence.

"How did he get it?"

"I gave it to him."

"Why?"

"Because Gerald asked me to."

Mabel's voice sharpened.

"Gerald knew about the letter?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Years."

"Arthur."

He looked at her.

"How long?"

Arthur's shoulders sagged.

"Since 1983."

Mabel stared.

Clara remembered the original catalogue note.

The plant had survived in the Crowther family.

Gerald had spent decades claiming to recreate a lost rose.

But he had known the original survived.

Tom asked the question Clara was thinking.

"Why pretend he was recreating it?"

Arthur looked at him.

"At first, he didn't."

"What do you mean?"

"He said we'd keep quiet until the plant was strong enough."

"Then?"

"It recovered."

"And?"

Arthur looked towards the window.

"Gerald changed."

Mabel gave a short, humourless laugh.

"He didn't change."

Arthur ignored that.

"He said nobody would believe an old cottage rose was the real Bramblewick Crimson. Said we needed proof. Proper proof."

"The letter."

"Yes."

"And the catalogue."

"Yes."

"So why wait forty years?"

Arthur's eyes filled with something Clara recognised.

Shame.

"Because Gerald wanted to own the story."

There it was.

Not just the plant.

The story.

Arthur continued.

"He said if we announced it as something found at my cottage, people would argue about ownership. The estate might claim it. The Vale family might claim it. Nobody would know who had rights."

"So he developed another version."

Arthur nodded.

"He said we'd present it as a reconstruction."

Mabel said, "You agreed?"

Arthur looked at her.

"I was stupid."

"That isn't an answer."

"I believed him."

Mabel's expression softened slightly.

Arthur continued.

"Then years passed. Gerald bred other roses and crossed things. Made seedlings. Kept records. Built a whole story around how he'd recreated it."

"But the plant itself was original."

"Yes."

"And today he planned to unveil it as his work."

"Yes."

Clara felt anger rise.

Not murderous anger.

But disgust.

"Was Sir Julian going along with it?"

Arthur shook his head.

"At first he didn't know."

"Then how did he become involved?"

"Gerald contacted him six months ago."

"To authenticate the rose?"

"To endorse the reconstruction."

"And Julian discovered the truth."

"Not immediately."

Arthur's mouth tightened.

"I told him."

Mabel stared.

"You?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Why?"

"Because I'd had enough."

Clara thought of Gerald's missing committee gloves.

Three weeks ago.

Interesting.

Not enough to mean anything.

Yet.

Arthur said, "Julian came to see me. Quietly. I showed him the letter."

"And he took it?"

"I let him copy it."

"But you said he had it."

Arthur's face changed.

"He came back yesterday."

"Why?"

"He wanted the original."

"Did you give it to him?"

"Yes."

"Where is it now?"

Arthur looked at her.

"I don't know."

Clara went cold.

If the original letter proved Gerald had knowingly misrepresented the rose's history, then it was powerful evidence.

Sir Julian had possessed it.

Now he was dead.

"Was it on him?"

Arthur asked.

"I don't know."

"Police?"

"I haven't heard."

Arthur shook his head.

"Then somebody took it."

Clara looked at him.

"We don't know that."

"I do."

"How?"

"Because Julian kept it in a red document wallet."

"And?"

Arthur looked directly at her.

"I saw Gerald holding that wallet after Julian was dead."

The shop seemed to contract around them.

Mabel said quietly, "Where?"

"Behind the horticultural tent."

"When?"

"About one twenty."

Clara's mind snapped back to the timeline.

At one twelve, Julian was seen entering the marquee.

At one twenty, the marquee clock stopped.

Arthur claimed he saw Gerald with Julian's document wallet at roughly the same time.

"Did you see Gerald come out of the marquee?"

"No."

"Did you see where he got the wallet?"

"No."

"Could it have been his?"

Arthur shook his head.

"I'd seen Julian carrying it that morning."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"Did Gerald see you?"

Arthur hesitated.

"Maybe."

That mattered.

"Did you tell the police?"

"No."

"Arthur."

"I couldn't."

"Why?"

"Because then I'd have to explain the letter."

"And the rose."

"Yes."

Clara reached for her phone.

"This has gone beyond embarrassment."

Arthur grabbed her wrist.

Not hard.

But enough.

"Please."

Clara looked down at his hand.

Arthur released her immediately.

"Sorry."

"Arthur, Sir Julian is dead."

"I know."

"If Gerald had his papers—"

"I don't know that Gerald killed him."

"Neither do I."

"But you think it."

"I think Inspector Mercer needs this information."

Arthur looked at Mabel.

Mabel's voice was gentle now.

"She's right."

He closed his eyes.

For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then Arthur nodded.

Clara called Mercer.

He answered on the third ring.

"Mercer."

"It's Clara Bellamy."

Silence.

Then:

"What have you done?"

"Nothing."

"That isn't reassuring."

"Arthur Bell is in my shop."

Another silence.

Clara could almost hear him rearranging his patience.

"I told you not to go looking for him."

"I didn't."

"He came to you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because apparently the entire village has decided my bookshop is now a confessional."

Mabel nodded.

"Accurate."

Mercer said, "What did he tell you?"

Clara looked at Arthur.

"Quite a lot."

"Summarise."

"He says his family preserved the original Bramblewick Crimson from the Vale estate. He gave the plant to Gerald decades ago. Gerald has known all along it wasn't a recreated cultivar."

Mercer was silent.

Clara continued.

"Arthur gave Sir Julian an original letter from Elias Vale confirming the plant was entrusted to the Crowther family."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"Where's the letter?"

"Unknown."

"Anything else?"

Clara looked at Arthur.

"Yes."

"What?"

"Arthur says he saw Gerald Wainwright holding Sir Julian's red document wallet at about one twenty this afternoon."

Mercer's voice changed.

Professional.

Immediate.

"Keep Arthur there."

"I wasn't planning—"

"Keep him there."

"All right."

"Do not discuss anything else."

"Inspector—"

"Nothing else."

He ended the call.

Mabel looked at Clara.

"He hung up."

"He does that."

Arthur lowered himself into the chair by the counter.

He suddenly looked very old.

Tom placed a mug of tea in front of him.

Arthur wrapped both hands around it.

"Thank you."

Tom nodded.

Clara looked at the catalogue again.

"Arthur."

Mercer's instruction rang in her mind.

Do not discuss anything else.

She stopped.

Arthur noticed.

"Go on."

"I've been ordered not to."

"Never stopped you before."

Mabel nearly smiled.

Clara folded her arms.

"Fine. One thing."

Tom looked towards the door.

"This is how it starts."

Clara ignored him.

"Why did Sir Julian disqualify Gerald's entry?"

Arthur stared into the tea.

"He found something else."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Was it about ownership?"

"Maybe."

"Arthur."

He looked up.

"Julian said the rose was genuine. Said there was no doubt."

"Then why disqualify it?"

Arthur shook his head.

"He wouldn't tell me."

"Did he say anything?"

Arthur thought.

"One thing."

"What?"

"He said Gerald had made a mistake."

Clara's attention sharpened.

"What mistake?"

"He said, 'The plant tells the truth even when the paperwork doesn't.'"

Mabel frowned.

"What does that mean?"

Arthur shook his head.

"I don't know."

Clara looked towards the catalogue.

A plant could reveal age.

Propagation.

Rootstock.

Disease.

Genetics.

Something physical.

Something Gerald could not fake.

Before she could think further, a car stopped outside.

Mercer entered thirty seconds later with a constable.

He saw Arthur.

Then Clara.

Then the open Vale catalogue.

His expression darkened.

"I said nothing else."

Clara lifted both hands.

"We discussed botany."

"Of course you did."

Mercer turned to Arthur.

"Mr Bell, I'd like you to come with us."

Arthur stood.

"Am I under arrest?"

"No."

"Should I have a solicitor?"

"That's your decision."

Arthur nodded.

He picked up his cap.

Before leaving, he looked at Clara.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Yes?"

"There's one more thing."

Mercer said, "Mr Bell—"

Arthur continued.

"The rose Gerald entered today wasn't the plant I gave him."

Everyone went still.

Clara stared.

"What?"

Mercer stepped closer.

"What do you mean?"

Arthur looked at him.

"I know that rose."

"I'd grown it for sixty years before Gerald took it."

"And?"

"The plant at the fête wasn't the same one."

Clara's mind shifted again.

"Was it a cutting?"

Arthur nodded slowly.

"Maybe."

"From the original?"

"Could be."

"You're not sure?"

"No."

Mercer asked, "How can you tell?"

Arthur looked at Clara.

"Because mine had a scar."

"What kind?"

"Low on the main stem. Split in the winter of '62. Healed crooked."

"And the plant today?"

"No scar."

Silence.

Mercer said, "You saw it closely?"

"Close enough."

"So Gerald's supposedly unique surviving specimen may not have been unique."

Arthur's face was grim.

"That's what Julian found out."

Clara looked at the catalogue.

One plant retained with A. Crowther.

But if the old plant had been propagated successfully over decades, there could be others.

Cuttings.

Layered plants.

Hidden survivors.

Gerald's entire claim depended not merely on possessing the rose.

It depended on controlling its story.

Mercer guided Arthur towards the door.

Clara said, "Inspector."

He turned.

"The original plant."

"What about it?"

"If Gerald's entry wasn't Arthur's old specimen, where is the original?"

Mercer looked at Arthur.

Arthur stopped.

His face changed.

"I thought Gerald still had it."

Mabel said quietly, "Apparently not."

Clara felt the next question before she asked it.

"When did you last see the original plant was?"

Arthur thought.

"Two months ago."

"Where?"

"Gerald's greenhouse."

"And since then?"

"I haven't been back."

Mercer looked at the constable.

"Contact the team at Wainwright's address. Tell them we're looking for a mature rose plant with a distinctive scar low on the main stem."

"Yes, sir."

Arthur looked suddenly frightened.

"Why?"

Mercer did not answer.

But Clara understood.

The murder might not be about one rose.

It might be about two.

The plant was displayed at the fête.

And the original plant that proved Gerald's story was false.

If the original Bramblewick Crimson had disappeared before Sir Julian died, then somebody had already been moving pieces before the murder began.

Mercer took Arthur away.

Clara stood in the doorway watching the police car pull away.

Mabel came beside her.

Tom remained behind the counter.

For several seconds, none of them spoke.

Then Mabel said:

"Well."

Tom sighed.

Clara almost smiled.

"Yes."

Mabel looked at the Vale catalogue in Clara's hand.

"So Gerald wasn't showing the original rose."

"No."

"Julian knew."

"Probably."

"Arthur knew."

"Now."

"And somebody has the real plant."

"Possibly."

Tom said, "Or destroyed it."

Clara looked at him.

That was worse.

The original plant was living evidence.

Destroying it would remove the simplest way to expose Gerald.

Unless someone wanted it for themselves.

Clara remembered Nathan Cole's words.

You'll hear soon enough.

He had known about the rediscovery before it was public.

He had also spoken to Julian shortly before the murder.

And his camera had never left his neck.

Mabel followed her gaze towards nothing.

"What?"

"Nathan."

"What about him?"

"He knew too much."

Tom said, "That's not illegal."

"No."

"But?"

Clara picked up the catalogue.

"But I want to know what he photographed."

Mabel smiled.

"Now we're getting somewhere."

Clara looked at her.

"We're doing nothing."

"Of course."

"Mercer specifically—"

"Did not mention Nathan Cole."

Clara sighed.

"You're impossible."

"Yet useful."

Outside, the village had gone quiet.

The fête stalls were nearly gone.

The police tape around the produce marquee fluttered in the late-afternoon breeze.

And somewhere in Bramblewick, perhaps in a greenhouse, perhaps in a shed, perhaps already beyond

the village entirely, the original Bramblewick Crimson had vanished.

Not merely a flower.

A witness.

Chapter Four: The Photograph That Shouldn’t Exist

Nathan Cole was not difficult to find.

He was standing outside the King's Arms with a pint in one hand and his camera in the other.

Clara found this suspicious.

Mabel found it predictable.

Tom found it inconvenient because he had just locked the café.

"I thought we were going home," he said.

"We are."

"We're walking in the opposite direction."

"Temporarily."

Mabel nodded towards Nathan.

"She's investigating."

"I am not."

"You've brought the catalogue."

Clara looked down.

She had.

"That's irrelevant."

"Of course."

The high street had settled into the strange quiet that followed a village emergency.

The fête traffic was gone.

Stallholders had returned home.

Police vehicles remained near the green.

People stood in doorways pretending to sweep things.

Nathan occupied a wooden table outside the pub as though nothing unusual had happened.

His camera sat beside his pint.

A notebook lay open.

He was writing.

Clara approached.

Nathan looked up.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Mr Cole."

"Mabel."

"Journalist."

He smiled.

"Still suspicious?"

"I haven't improved."

Tom nodded politely.

Nathan looked between them.

"This feels organised."

"It isn't."

"Then Bramblewick has a very efficient system of spontaneous interrogation."

Clara sat opposite him without being invited.

Mabel took the second chair.

Tom remained standing.

Nathan looked at him.

"You might as well."

Tom pulled over a stool from the neighbouring table.

Nathan closed his notebook.

"Am I allowed to ask why?"

Clara nodded towards the camera.

"Photographs."

His expression changed only slightly.

"What about them?"

"You took photographs at the fête."

"Yes."

"You weren't taking any when you spoke to me."

"I had been."

"Of what?"

"Flowers. People. Displays."

"Gerald's rose?"

"Several times."

Mabel leaned closer.

"Before or after Sir Julian was killed?"

Nathan looked at her.

"Before."

"How much before?"

"Morning."

"How morning?"

Nathan laughed.

"You've definitely been spending too much time with the police."

Clara said, "Do your photographs have timestamps?"

"Yes."

"Can we see them?"

"No."

Mabel sat back.

"Interesting."

"It's not interesting. They're mine."

Clara studied him.

"Sir Julian spoke to you at twelve ten."

Nathan stopped smiling.

"Who told you?"

"I saw you."

That was not entirely true.

She had not personally seen the conversation.

But someone had.

The timeline came from witnesses.

Nathan did not know that.

He looked towards the green.

"Briefly."

"What about?"

"The rose."

"What about it?"

"Nothing important."

Mabel snorted.

Nathan looked at her.

"What?"

"Nobody says 'nothing important' when they mean nothing important."

Tom almost smiled.

Clara said, "Sir Julian believed Gerald had misrepresented the Bramblewick Crimson."

Nathan's expression sharpened.

"You know that?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Enough."

He glanced at the catalogue in her hand.

"Ah."

Clara noticed.

"You recognise this?"

Nathan looked annoyed with himself.

"No."

"You reacted."

"I reacted to an old book."

"You're a writer. Presumably you've seen one."

"Occasionally."

Mabel said, "Badly handled."

Nathan ignored her.

Clara placed the catalogue on the table.

"Sir Julian wanted this."

Nathan looked at it.

"He told me."

That was useful.

"When?"

"This morning."

"Why?"

Nathan hesitated.

Clara waited.

Eventually he said:

"He thought it contained propagation records."

"It does."

Nathan leaned forward.

"You found them?"

"Yes."

"May I see?"

"No."

He almost laughed.

"Fair."

"Why did Julian tell you?"

"Because I was writing about the rose."

"You said it wasn't public."

"It wasn't."

"Then what were you writing?"

"A feature."

"For?"

"*Garden Britain*."

Mabel frowned.

"Magazine?"

Nathan nodded.

"Monthly."

"People pay for that?"

"Some do."

Tom said, "My mother used to."

Nathan pointed at him.

"See?"

Mabel remained unconvinced.

Clara said, "Were you supposed to publish Gerald's rediscovery?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Next month."

"And Julian was part of the story?"

"Expert authentication."

"So he had agreed."

"Initially."

"What changed?"

Nathan looked at the pub door.

For a moment Clara thought he might leave.

Instead he drank from his pint.

"He found the letter."

"Arthur Bell's letter."

Nathan's eyes shifted.

"So you know about that too."

"Yes."

"Arthur told you?"

Clara did not answer.

Nathan sighed.

"Fine."

Mabel said, "He won't like being kept waiting."

"Who?"

"Inspector Mercer."

Nathan's expression became wary.

"Is he coming?"

"No."

"Then why—"

"He will eventually."

Nathan looked at Clara.

"Is that a threat?"

"Administrative inevitability."

Tom looked impressed.

Nathan rubbed one hand over his face.

"Julian contacted me three weeks ago."

"The same time Arthur gave him the letter?"

"Roughly."

"He said Gerald's story was wrong?"

"Not exactly."

"What did he say?"

"That there were provenance issues."

Mabel stared.

Nathan added, "That's what he called them."

"Of course he did."

Clara said, "And you?"

"I asked what that meant."

"Did he tell you?"

"Not immediately."

Nathan turned the camera slightly on the table.

"He wanted more evidence."

"The catalogue."

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

Nathan's thumb rested against the camera body.

"Photographs."

Clara's attention sharpened.

"Of what?"

"The plant."

"Why?"

"He thought something about it was wrong."

"The lack of a scar?"

Nathan stared.

"You know about that?"

"Arthur recognised that Gerald's entry wasn't the original mature plant."

Nathan sat back.

"God."

"Did Julian know?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I showed him."

Clara looked at the camera.

There it was.

"Show us."

Nathan remained still.

Mabel said, "This is becoming tiresome."

Nathan gave her a look.

"These photographs may be evidence."

"Exactly."

"So I should give them to the police."

Clara nodded.

"Yes."

"Not you."

"Also yes."

Nathan stared at her.

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I think you know something the police don't."

"That's an assumption."

"You're nervous."

"I'm sitting in a pub after somebody I knew was murdered."

"You're not nervous about the murder."

Mabel nodded.

"She's right."

Nathan frowned.

Clara continued.

"You're nervous about the photographs."

Nathan said nothing.

Then:

"I didn't kill him."

"No one said you did."

"You were all thinking it."

Tom said, "I wasn't."

Mabel looked at him.

Tom shrugged.

"I wasn't."

Clara said, "What is in the photographs?"

Nathan looked towards the green again.

Then he picked up the camera.

"Come inside."

The King's Arms was nearly empty.

A television above the bar showed cricket with the sound muted.

Two men at the far end stopped talking as Clara's group entered, then immediately began again in lower voices.

Nathan led them to a corner table beneath a framed photograph of Bramblewick High Street from 1924.

He sat.

Clara took the chair beside him.

Nathan switched on the camera.

"These start around nine fifteen."

He scrolled.

Images appeared one after another.

The green before it became crowded.

Stalls being arranged.

Volunteers carrying tables.

Children chasing each other between bunting poles.

The horticultural tent.

Gerald Wainwright.

Nathan stopped.

The photograph showed Gerald holding a potted rose.

Even on the small camera screen, the bloom was striking.

Deep red.

Almost black at the centre.

Clara leaned closer.

"Timestamp?"

"Nine twenty-two."

"Zoom in."

Nathan did.

The stem became clearer.

Arthur had been right.

No scar.

At least none visible.

Nathan moved to another photograph.

Nine twenty-six.

Gerald placing the plant on the competition bench.

Another.

Nine forty-three.

Sir Julian is inspecting it.

Another.

Ten eleven.

Julian crouching beside the pot.

Clara pointed.

"What's he doing?"

"Photographing the stem with his phone."

"Because of the scar."

"Possibly."

Nathan went forward.

Ten twenty-six.

Julian speaking to Gerald.

No obvious argument.

Eleven fourteen.

Gerald outside the marquee.

Eleven sixteen.

Sir Julian.

Eleven twenty-one.

The argument begins.

Nathan had taken several pictures from a distance.

Clara recognised the moment.

Gerald pointing.

Julian controlled.

Sheila is in the doorway.

Next.

Eleven twenty-two.

Gerald's hand raised.

Next.

Eleven twenty-two again.

Julian turning.

Something red beneath his arm.

Clara leaned closer.

"The document wallet."

Nathan nodded.

"You see it?"

"Yes."

"That's the one Arthur described."

Mabel said, "Gerald didn't have it then."

"No."

Nathan continued.

Twelve oh-four.

The rose bench.

Empty.

Clara stopped him.

"Go back."

He did.

The potted plant was no longer on the competition bench.

"At twelve four o’clock it's already gone."

"Yes."

"Where were you standing?"

"Inside the marquee entrance."

"Did you notice it missing?"

"Not then."

"Why take this?"

"General coverage."

Mabel leaned closer.

"What's that?"

She pointed at the background.

A figure stood behind the flower displays.

Only part of the body was visible.

Dark trousers.

Light shirt.

One hand.

Nathan zoomed.

Clara frowned.

"Can you identify them?"

"No."

"Male?"

"Probably."

Tom said, "Watch?"

The hand wore a wristwatch.

Metal band.

Nothing else distinctive.

Nathan went to the next photograph.

Twelve oh-seven.

The background figure was gone.

The vase on the judging table was visible.

Inside it:

The Bramblewick Crimson bloom.

Clara felt a small jolt.

"There."

Nathan nodded.

"The cut flower."

"Timestamp: twelve oh-seven o'clock."

"Yes."

"Meaning the plant had already been removed, but the bloom remained."

"Correct."

Clara stared.

"So someone removed the pot before Julian died."

"Looks like it."

"Unless Julian did."

"Possible."

Nathan scrolled.

Twelve ten.

Sir Julian is behind the horticultural tent.

Nathan speaking to him.

The photograph had been taken by someone else.

"Who took this?"

"A colleague."

"You had a colleague?"

"Freelance photographer. She left before lunch."

"Name?"

"Laura Bennett."

"Police know?"

"Yes."

Clara nodded.

Next.

Twelve eighteen.

Julian alone near the marquee.

Twelve twenty-five.

Gerald near the beer tent.

Twelve thirty.

Sheila at the preserves table.

Twelve forty-one.

The flower displays.

Clara watched.

"Stop."

Nathan did.

At the far end of the image, near the rear entrance to the marquee, stood a woman.

Clara had seen her before.

But could not place her.

Late fifties.

Elegant.

Blonde-grey hair.

Dark sunglasses.

Cream jacket.

"Who is she?"

Nathan looked.

"I don't know."

Mabel did.

"Oh."

Clara turned.

"What?"

Mabel's face had sharpened.

"That's Louisa Marlowe."

"Julian's wife?"

"Yes."

Nathan stared.

"His wife wasn't supposed to be here."

"Apparently she was."

Clara leaned closer.

"How do you know her?"

"Television."

"Of course."

"She appeared on his programmes sometimes."

Tom looked at the image.

"Did anyone mention her to the police?"

Nathan shook his head.

"I didn't know who she was."

Clara felt the case widen.

Louisa Marlowe had arrived at the fête without appearing publicly.

She had been photographed near the rear of the produce marquee shortly before the likely murder.

That mattered.

Nathan advanced.

Twelve forty-four.

Louisa was gone.

Twelve fifty-three.

The rear entrance is empty.

One oh-three.

Someone carrying a cardboard box.

One oh-eight.

Nothing.

One eleven.

Sir Julian walking towards the marquee.

Clara sat straighter.

"That's him."

Nathan nodded.

"Yes."

"What direction?"

"From the green."

"Alone?"

"In the frame."

"Next."

One thirteen.

Sir Julian at the rear entrance.

One fourteen.

He was gone.

Inside.

Nathan continued.

One sixteen.

Rear entrance.

Empty.

One eighteen.

A man approached.

Clara froze.

It was Gerald.

"Timestamp?"

"One eighteen."

"Arthur said he saw Gerald with Julian's red wallet at about one twenty."

Nathan's face tightened.

"Keep going."

One nineteen.

Gerald standing beside the canvas flap.

His left hand held something.

Nathan zoomed.

Red.

Rectangular.

Mabel whispered:

"The wallet."

Clara felt a chill.

The photograph clearly showed Gerald Wainwright carrying Sir Julian's red document wallet.

At one nineteen.

Near the rear entrance to the marquee.

The likely crime scene.

Tom said quietly:

"That's bad."

Nathan nodded.

"Very."

Clara studied the image.

Gerald's face was turned away.

His right hand was empty.

His left held the wallet.

"Next."

One twenty.

Gerald walking away.

One twenty-one.

The rear entrance is empty.

One twenty-two.

A woman crossing the background.

Not Louisa.

Younger.

Dark hair.

Long green jacket.

Nathan frowned.

"I didn't notice her."

Clara leaned closer.

"Do you know her?"

"No."

Mabel shook her head.

Tom did not.

Next.

One twenty-four.

The woman had disappeared.

One twenty-six.

A glimpse of Nathan's own shadow.

One twenty-nine.

The side of the marquee.

One thirty.

Nothing useful.

Nathan stopped.

"That's everything until after Clara found the body."

Clara stared at the camera.

"Not quite."

Nathan looked at her.

"What?"

"The clock."

"What about it?"

"In the marquee."

"The judging clock?"

"Yes."

Nathan scrolled back.

The photographs taken inside showed the large round clock mounted against the centre support.

Clara tried to remember.

At some point, the clock had stopped.

Mercer's timeline had noted it at one twenty.

But photographs might show more.

"Find the latest image where you can see it."

Nathan searched.

Twelve forty-one.

Clock visible.

It read twelve forty.

Next.

Twelve fifty-eight.

Clock partly obscured.

Just before one.

Next.

One oh-six.

Clock visible.

One oh-five.

Next.

One twelve.

The clock showed one eleven.

"Fine," Clara said. "Now after one twenty."

Nathan searched.

One twenty-three.

The clock was visible through the open side flap.

Clara leaned closer.

It showed—

One oh-five.

Tom frowned.

"That's wrong."

Nathan looked at him.

"What?"

"The timestamp is one twenty-three."

"Camera timestamps can drift."

"By eighteen minutes?"

Nathan shook his head.

"Not unless I set it wrong."

"Did you?"

"No."

Clara said, "Show us another clock in the same photograph."

Nathan zoomed around.

None.

Mabel leaned forward.

"Next photograph."

One twenty-five.

The clock still read one oh-seven.

It was running.

Not stopped.

Clara felt the pattern forming.

"Someone moved it backwards."

Tom nodded slowly.

"Before one twenty-three."

"Yes."

Nathan stared.

"Why?"

"To change the apparent time."

Mabel said, "Of the murder."

Clara did not answer immediately.

A clock being moved backwards was deliberate.

If someone expected people to rely on it, they were creating a false timeline.

But the photograph itself defeated the trick.

Unless nobody was supposed to see it.

"Go earlier," Clara said. "One fourteen onwards."

Nathan scrolled.

One fourteen.

Clock one thirteen.

One sixteen.

Clock not visible.

One eighteen.

No clock.

One nineteen.

Gerald with wallet, exterior.

One twenty.

Exterior.

One twenty-one.

No clock.

One twenty-three.

Clock one oh-five.

"So between one fourteen and one twenty-three, someone moved it back."

Tom said, "Roughly fifteen to eighteen minutes."

"Yes."

Mabel looked at Clara.

"That gives somebody an alibi."

"Potentially."

Nathan was staring at his own camera now as though it had betrayed him.

Clara said, "This has to go to Mercer."

"I know."

"Immediately."

Nathan looked at her.

"There's more."

Mabel sat back.

"Of course there is."

Nathan turned the camera off.

He did not look pleased.

Clara said, "What?"

"I deleted one photograph."

Tom's expression changed.

Mabel simply said:

"Idiot."

Nathan winced.

"Thank you."

"Accurate."

Clara kept her voice level.

"What photograph?"

"It was accidental."

"Accidental photograph or accidental deletion?"

"Photograph."

"Deletion?"

"Intentional."

Mabel sighed.

Nathan looked at Clara.

"At twelve fifty-nine, I took a burst while moving the camera."

"Of what?"

"The inside rear corner of the marquee."

"Why delete it?"

"Because it was blurred."

"Only reason?"

Nathan hesitated.

There it was.

Clara waited.

He rubbed his jaw.

"I thought it showed something private."

"What?"

"Julian."

"Doing what?"

"Talking to someone."

"Who?"

"I couldn't see clearly."

"Male or female?"

"Female."

"Louisa?"

"I don't know."

"Why delete it?"

"Because the way they were standing looked..."

He stopped.

Mabel said, "Intimate?"

Nathan nodded.

"I thought Julian might be having an affair."

Clara stared.

"And you decided not to keep the photograph."

"Yes."

"That's unexpectedly decent for a journalist."

"I'm not a tabloid reporter."

Mabel said, "Still foolish."

Nathan nodded.

"Yes."

Tom asked, "Can it be recovered?"

Nathan looked at the camera.

"Probably."

Clara said, "Don't touch anything else."

"I wasn't going to."

"Memory card?"

"Still in the camera."

"Good."

Mabel looked pleased.

"Mercer's going to love this."

Nathan finished his pint in one swallow.

"I was afraid you'd say that."

Clara stood.

"We're calling him."

This time, nobody argued.

Mercer arrived at the King's Arms seventeen minutes later.

He was accompanied by Detective Constable Rachel Shaw, whom Clara remembered from the Pritchard investigation.

Rachel was in her thirties, brisk, observant and considerably less outwardly exasperated by Clara than Mercer.

This probably meant she hid it better.

Nathan surrendered the camera immediately.

Rachel placed it into an evidence bag without opening it again.

Mercer looked at him.

"You deleted a photograph potentially relevant to a murder investigation."

"I deleted it before I knew there had been a murder."

"Still unhelpful."

"I know."

"When?"

"About one."

"And you haven't used the card since?"

"Only to review."

"No more photographs?"

"After the body was found, yes."

Mercer looked at Rachel.

"We'll need forensic recovery."

She nodded.

Mercer turned to Clara.

"Now."

Clara blinked.

"Now what?"

"Tell me what you saw."

She did.

Gerald with the red wallet.

Louisa Marlowe near the rear entrance.

The unknown younger woman.

The clock.

Mercer's expression became increasingly unreadable.

When Clara finished, he looked at Nathan.

"Your camera time is correct?"

"To within a minute."

"How do you know?"

"I synchronised it with my phone this morning."

"Why?"

"I was shooting for publication. Easier to merge files from two cameras."

Mercer looked at Rachel.

"Good."

She nodded.

Clara said, "So the clock was deliberately altered."

Mercer did not answer.

"Inspector."

"I heard you."

"Does Gerald's alibi depend on it?"

His eyes moved to hers.

That was answer enough.

Mabel noticed too.

"Ah."

Mercer said, "Mrs Finch."

"What?"

"You are not part of this conversation."

"I'm standing in it."

"Physically."

"That's generally how conversations work."

Rachel Shaw looked down quickly.

Clara suspected she was hiding a smile.

Mercer continued.

"Mr Wainwright told us he left the marquee shortly before one ten."

Clara glanced at the camera.

"But Nathan photographed him at the rear entrance at one eighteen."

"Yes."

"And with Julian's wallet."

"Yes."

"What did Gerald say about the wallet?"

"That Sir Julian gave it to him."

"When?"

"Earlier."

"How much earlier?"

"He said before lunch."

Clara looked at Nathan.

The photographs showed Julian still carrying the red wallet at eleven twenty-two.

That did not disprove "before lunch".

But Arthur claimed Julian had the original letter yesterday.

Gerald could conceivably have been given the wallet later.

Still.

One nineteen was awkward.

Mercer said, "Wainwright claims he was in the beer tent from one ten until approximately one thirty-five."

Tom said, "Witnesses?"

"Several."

Clara understood.

"If the marquee clock had been moved backwards, someone might believe they saw him at one ten when it was actually later."

"No."

Mercer shook his head.

"The beer tent has its own till records."

That was stronger.

"What time did he buy the pint?"

"One twelve."

Clara frowned.

"But the photograph shows him at the marquee six minutes later."

"Which means he left the beer tent."

"Did he admit that?"

"No."

Mabel said, "Gerald lies even when the truth would be simpler."

Mercer ignored her.

Clara said, "Why move the clock backwards, then?"

"Good question."

Rachel spoke for the first time.

"Maybe not to protect Gerald."

Everyone turned.

She shrugged slightly.

"If the victim was seen entering at one twelve and the clock was shifted backwards after that, it may be intended to alter when someone else was seen inside."

Clara nodded.

"The private meeting."

Mercer looked at her.

"What private meeting?"

Nathan answered.

"The deleted photograph."

Mercer's expression became darker.

"What time?"

"Twelve fifty-nine."

"Not one twelve?"

"No."

Clara said, "Julian may have met at least two people privately."

"Or one meeting continued."

Mercer looked at Nathan.

"Describe the woman."

"I couldn't see her face."

"Height?"

"Maybe five six."

"Hair?"

"Dark, I think."

"Clothing?"

"Light-coloured top. That's all I remember."

"Did you recognise her?"

"No."

"Could it have been Mrs Marlowe?"

Nathan hesitated.

"Maybe. But I thought the woman was younger."

Clara thought of the unidentified woman in the green jacket at one twenty-two.

Dark hair.

Younger.

Could be the same woman.

"Was the woman in the deleted photograph wearing green?"

Nathan closed his eyes.

"Maybe."

Mercer said, "Don't guess."

"Sorry."

Clara looked at him.

"We need the recovered image."

"We do."

Mabel said, "Who's the younger woman?"

Mercer looked at her.

"We don't know."

"Helpful."

"We're working on it."

Clara said, "Julian's family?"

"His wife has been contacted."

"She was at the fête."

Mercer nodded once.

"We know now."

"Did she tell you?"

"No."

"So she left before the body was found."

"Apparently."

"Where is she?"

"At home."

"How far?"

"Forty minutes."

"Why come secretly and leave?"

Mercer did not answer.

Clara knew better than to push that one.

For now.

Rachel's phone rang.

She stepped aside.

Mercer looked at Clara.

"You came here deliberately to speak to Cole."

"Yes."

"So you ignored the spirit of what I told you."

"You told me not to speak to Arthur Bell."

"I told you not to investigate."

"You did not."

"I strongly implied it."

"Legally shaky."

Mabel nodded.

"Very."

Mercer stared at both of them.

Tom looked at Nathan.

Nathan looked at his empty pint.

Rachel returned.

"Sir."

Mercer turned.

"The search at Wainwright's greenhouse is complete."

"And?"

"No mature Bramblewick Crimson matching Bell's description."

Clara felt the implications immediately.

"The original plant is gone."

Rachel nodded.

"However, they found propagation trays."

"Cuttings?"

"Several."

"Same rose?"

"Possibly. We need an expert."

Nathan said, "I can identify the cultivar."

Mercer looked at him.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you're now a witness."

"Fair."

Rachel continued.

"There is something else."

Mercer waited.

"Burn barrel behind the greenhouse."

His expression changed.

"Recent?"

"Still warm when officers arrived."

Clara stared.

"What was burned?"

Rachel looked at Mercer, not Clara.

"Paper mostly."

"Anything recoverable?"

"Fragments."

"Readable?"

"One."

Mercer said, "What does it say?"

Rachel checked her notes.

"Only part of a line."

She read:

"...retained with A. Crowther..."

Silence.

Clara looked at the Vale propagation catalogue in her hands.

The same words appeared inside it.

Someone at Gerald Wainwright's house had burned evidence relating to the original provenance of the rose.

Mabel said, "That's unfortunate."

Mercer gave her a look.

"Yes."

"For Gerald."

"Potentially."

Clara said, "If Gerald burned a copy of the catalogue note, why would he need mine?"

"Maybe he didn't know yours existed."

"Julian knew."

"And Gerald knew Julian was looking for it."

"Which gives him motive to stop Julian."

Mercer looked at her.

"It gives us something to investigate."

Nathan said, "There's a problem."

Everyone looked at him.

He leaned forward.

"If Gerald wanted to destroy evidence that the rose came from the Crowthers, he wouldn't burn the plant."

"Why?" Clara asked.

"Because the plant doesn't prove where it came from."

"The scar does."

"Only to Arthur."

"True."

Nathan continued.

"But the plant is valuable. The documentation is dangerous."

Mercer said, "Your point?"

"If Gerald killed Julian to protect the false rediscovery story, he would destroy the letter and records."

"Yes."

"But he'd keep the original rose."

Clara understood.

"Unless someone else took it."

Nathan nodded.

Mabel said, "Or Gerald's an idiot."

"Also possible."

Tom looked at Clara.

"Someone wants the real plant."

"Maybe."

"Why?"

No one answered.

Rachel's phone buzzed again.

She read the message.

"Sir."

"What now?"

"Mrs Marlowe's en route."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She says she needs to identify something belonging to her husband."

Clara looked at Mercer.

"What?"

He shook his head.

"Not your concern."

Mabel muttered, "That's never worked."

Mercer heard.

"Tonight it will."

The pub door opened.

Everyone turned.

A woman entered.

Not Louisa Marlowe.

The younger woman.

Dark hair.

Green jacket.

Exactly as she appeared in Nathan's photograph.

She stopped when she saw the police.

Then she saw Nathan's camera inside the evidence bag.

Her face changed.

Clara watched recognition become fear.

Mercer moved first.

"Can I help you?"

The woman looked at him.

Then at Clara.

Then back towards the door.

For one second, Clara thought she might run.

She did not.

"My name is Sophie Marlowe."

Mercer's expression sharpened.

"Relation to Sir Julian?"

The woman swallowed.

"I'm his daughter."

Nathan stared.

Clara remembered the suspect list from the early rumours around the fête.

Julian's estranged daughter.

Arrived in Bramblewick hours before his death.

Mercer said calmly:

"Were you at the fête this afternoon?"

Sophie looked at the evidence bag again.

Then she nodded.

"Yes."

"What time did you arrive?"

"About twelve thirty."

"Why didn't you come forward after your father was found?"

Her mouth tightened.

"Because I didn't know he was dead until an hour ago."

Mercer watched her carefully.

"Where were you?"

"Walking."

"For several hours?"

"Yes."

"In Bramblewick?"

"Outside the village."

"Why?"

Sophie looked at Clara.

Clara had no idea why.

Then Sophie said:

"Because my father had just told me he was going to ruin my mother's life."

The room became very quiet.

Mercer said, "I think we'd better talk somewhere else."

Sophie nodded.

He gestured towards the door.

She took one step.

Then stopped.

"There is something you should know."

Mercer waited.

Sophie looked towards Nathan's camera.

"I met my father in the produce marquee."

Clara felt Mabel shift beside her.

"When?" Mercer asked.

"Just before one."

Nathan's deleted photograph.

The woman.

The private meeting.

Mercer said, "What did you discuss?"

Sophie hesitated.

"My mother."

"And?"

"Money."

"And?"

Sophie looked suddenly exhausted.

"And a letter."

Clara felt a jolt.

"What letter?"

Mercer shot her a look.

Sophie answered anyway.

"A letter my father had taken from an old gardener."

Arthur's letter?

But Sophie continued:

"Not that one."

Clara froze.

Sophie looked at Mercer.

"He had two letters."

Mercer's voice became very calm.

"What was the second?"

Sophie swallowed.

"A letter written by Gerald Wainwright."

Silence.

"To whom?"

"My mother."

Mabel whispered:

"Oh."

Sophie looked down.

"It was written thirty-four years ago."

Mercer said, "What did it say?"

Sophie closed her eyes briefly.

Then opened them.

"It said he loved her."

Clara stared.

Gerald Wainwright.

Louisa Marlowe.

A decades-old love letter.

Sir Julian is carrying it.

A murder at a fête centred on a rose Gerald had spent forty years protecting.

The case had just acquired an entirely different history.

Sophie added:

"And my father said he was going to show it to everyone."

Nobody spoke.

Outside, a church bell struck six.

Nathan Cole's deleted photograph suddenly seemed much less like evidence of a secret affair.

It may have captured a daughter trying to stop her father from publicly destroying her mother.

And somewhere between the rose, the letters, the missing plant and the altered clock, Clara could feel the murder changing shape again.

Chapter Five: The Other Letter

Louisa Marlowe arrived in Bramblewick at six twenty-two.

Clara knew the time because Mabel checked.

Not discreetly.

Not approximately.

She looked at the clock above the bar, then at Louisa, then back at the clock as though verifying that both were functioning.

The King's Arms had emptied slightly by then.

Nathan Cole had been taken to the station to give a formal statement.

Sophie Marlowe was in a private room at the rear of the pub with Inspector Mercer and Detective Constable Shaw.

Tom had gone back to the café to close properly.

Mabel had not gone anywhere.

Clara had tried once to suggest that perhaps they should leave.

Mabel had said:

"Why?"

Clara had no satisfactory answer.

So they remained.

Louisa entered alone.

She was elegant in the deliberate way of someone who had spent many years being photographed unexpectedly.

Cream trousers.

Dark navy coat.

Silver-grey hair cut neatly at the jaw.

No visible make-up beyond lipstick.

No handbag.

No jewellery except a wedding ring.

She removed her sunglasses only after stepping inside.

Clara recognised her from Nathan's photograph immediately.

Mabel murmured:

"She looks better on television."

"That's unkind."

"Accurate."

Louisa's gaze moved across the room.

It stopped on Clara.

There was recognition.

Not personal recognition.

The recognition of a name already heard.

Clara stood.

Louisa approached.

"Mrs Bellamy?"

"Yes."

"I'm Louisa Marlowe."

"I know."

Louisa glanced at Mabel.

Mabel smiled without warmth.

"Mabel Finch."

"I don't believe we've met."

"No."

Louisa appeared uncertain whether this required further comment.

It did not.

Clara said, "I'm sorry about Sir Julian."

Louisa's expression tightened.

"Thank you."

The words were correct.

The grief behind them was less obvious.

Not absent.

Complicated.

Clara had learnt not to judge mourning by appearance.

Some people collapsed.

Some became practical.

Some became angry.

Some became calm enough to frighten everyone around them.

Louisa seemed to have become precise.

"Inspector Mercer asked me to come," she said.

"I believe so."

"He said something was found."

Clara did not answer.

Technically, she did not know what Mercer intended Louisa to identify.

Mabel, however, had fewer technical concerns.

"Your daughter is here."

Louisa went still.

"What?"

"Sophie."

Louisa looked towards the rear room.

"Where?"

"With the police."

Clara shot Mabel a look.

Mabel ignored it.

Louisa's composure cracked.

Only slightly.

"Why is Sophie here?"

Clara said carefully, "She was at the fête."

Louisa stared at her.

"No."

"Apparently."

"No. She's in Bristol."

"Not today."

Louisa looked towards the corridor again.

"Does Julian know?"

The question hung there.

Then Louisa realised what she had said.

Her face changed.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

Clara felt a small ache of sympathy.

Habits survived facts.

Of course Julian did not know now.

Louisa sat down.

For the first time, she looked older.

Mabel pushed the untouched cup of tea towards her.

Louisa looked at it.

"Tea?"

"It's terrible."

Clara said, "Mabel."

"What? It is."

Louisa almost smiled.

Almost.

Then the rear door opened.

Mercer came out.

He saw Louisa.

His attention shifted immediately.

"Mrs Marlowe?"

"Yes."

"I'm Inspector Mercer."

"I know."

"Thank you for coming."

"What happened to Julian?"

Mercer glanced at Clara and Mabel.

"This is better discussed privately."

Louisa stood.

"No."

Mercer paused.

"No?"

"I want to know now."

"There are things—"

"Inspector, my husband is dead. My daughter is apparently in your custody. I have driven forty minutes without anyone telling me whether Julian was murdered, collapsed, fell, or was hit by a flowerpot. I would like one clear sentence."

Mercer looked at her.

Then he gave it.

"Your husband's death is being treated as murder."

Louisa closed her eyes.

Only for a second.

When she opened them, she said:

"How?"

"Head injury."

"Weapon?"

"Under investigation."

"Who found him?"

Mercer's eyes flicked towards Clara.

Louisa turned.

"You?"

Clara nodded.

"Yes."

"Of course."

The phrase was strange.

Clara frowned.

"Of course?"

Louisa sat again.

"Julian mentioned you."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"What did he say?"

"That you had a book he needed."

The catalogue.

Clara looked at Mercer.

He noticed.

Louisa continued.

"He said you were difficult."

Mabel nodded.

"Correct."

Clara ignored her.

"What else?"

"That you noticed too much."

Mercer gave Clara a very small look.

Clara said, "He knew me for about three minutes."

"Apparently that was enough."

Louisa's voice had become dry.

That interested Clara.

There had been history in the marriage.

Not necessarily affection.

Not necessarily hatred.

Something long enough to develop texture.

Mercer said, "Mrs Marlowe, I'd like to ask you some questions."

"About Gerald Wainwright?"

There it was.

Mercer did not react visibly.

Mabel did.

Clara felt her sit straighter.

Mercer said, "Why Gerald Wainwright?"

Louisa gave him a tired look.

"Because Sophie told you."

"Your daughter mentioned an old letter."

"She would."

"You know what letter she means?"

"Yes."

"Did your husband have it?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see it?"

"Thirty-four years ago."

Mabel whispered, "Blimey."

Clara turned.

Mabel shrugged.

Louisa looked towards her.

"It wasn't quite as romantic as it sounds."

"No?"

"No."

Mercer pulled out a chair.

"Start at the beginning."

Louisa looked at the rear corridor.

"Sophie first."

"She's fine."

"Can I see her?"

"After we talk."

Louisa's mouth tightened.

Then she nodded.

"Fine."

Mercer sat opposite.

Clara realised this had become, despite everything, an informal interview in the middle of a pub.

She stood.

"We should go."

Mercer looked at her.

"Yes."

Mabel did not move.

Clara said, "Mabel."

Mabel sighed.

"Fine."

Louisa said, "Stay."

Everyone paused.

Mercer frowned.

"Mrs Marlowe—"

"Julian spoke to Mrs Bellamy yesterday. She found him today. She already knows about the rose."

Mercer said, "That doesn't make her part of this interview."

"No. But if I tell you something you think matters, you'll tell her later anyway because she will somehow find out."

Mabel nodded approvingly.

"She's perceptive."

Mercer looked at Clara as though this was somehow her fault.

Clara said, "I can leave."

Louisa shook her head.

"Stay."

Mercer considered.

Then:

"Fine. But you do not ask questions."

Clara sat.

Mabel sat.

Mercer looked at her.

"You especially."

Mabel folded her hands.

"Silent."

Nobody believed this.

Mercer turned to Louisa.

"Gerald Wainwright."

Louisa looked down at her wedding ring.

"We met in 1992."

"Where?"

"At a horticultural charity dinner in Cheltenham."

"You were married to Sir Julian?"

"Yes."

"Was Gerald married?"

"No."

"Relationship?"

Louisa exhaled.

"Complicated."

Mabel opened her mouth.

Clara kicked her ankle lightly under the table.

Mabel glared.

Louisa continued.

"Julian and I were already unhappy."

"Separated?"

"No."

"Gerald knew?"

"Yes."

"Did you have an affair?"

Silence.

Louisa looked at Mercer directly.

"Yes."

There was no drama in the admission.

Perhaps thirty-four years had exhausted it.

"How long?"

"About seven months."

"Did Sir Julian know?"

"Not then."

"How did it end?"

"I ended it."

"Why?"

"Because Gerald wanted me to leave Julian."

"And you didn't."

"No."

"Why not?"

Louisa's expression changed.

"Because real life is not improved by one clean decision. We had a daughter. Julian's career was growing. Gerald was intense."

"Intense how?"

"Everything mattered too much."

Clara thought of the rose.

Forty-three years.

Waiting.

Protecting.

Controlling the story.

Louisa said:

"He could be kind. Very kind. But if he believed something belonged to him, he struggled to understand why anyone else might disagree."

Mercer wrote that down.

"Did he threaten you?"

"No."

"Sir Julian?"

"No."

"Sophie?"

"Never."

"Then why is the letter relevant?"

Louisa's eyes hardened.

"Because Julian found it three weeks ago."

"Where?"

"In an old box of papers."

"At home?"

"Yes."

"Why had you kept it?"

"I hadn't."

Mercer stopped writing.

"What do you mean?"

"I thought I'd destroyed everything Gerald wrote."

"Everything?"

"Letters. Notes. Cards."

"But this one survived."

"Apparently."

"How?"

Louisa gave a short, humourless laugh.

"Julian."

"Explain."

"He kept it."

Clara felt the implications before Mercer spoke.

"Your husband knew?"

Louisa nodded.

"For years."

"How long?"

"I don't know."

"Before the affair ended?"

"No."

"After?"

"Almost certainly."

"Why keep the letter?"

"Control."

The word came quickly.

Too quickly.

Mercer said, "Control over you?"

"Over both of us."

"Did he confront you at the time?"

"No."

"Gerald?"

"Not as far as I know."

"So he kept evidence of your affair for more than three decades and said nothing."

"Not nothing."

Louisa looked down.

"He used it."

"How?"

"When he wanted me reminded of who had more to lose."

Mabel's face hardened.

Clara understood.

Julian's private cruelty.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Stored.

Deployed.

Mercer said, "Blackmail?"

"No."

"Threat?"

"Sometimes."

"To expose the affair?"

"Yes."

"Why now?"

Louisa looked towards the rear room again.

"Because of the rose."

Mercer waited.

"Gerald contacted Julian months ago about authenticating the Bramblewick Crimson."

"Yes."

"Julian was interested. He liked discoveries."

"Then?"

"He started asking questions."

"About Gerald?"

"About everything."

"Did he discover the affair was connected to the rose?"

Louisa hesitated.

"No."

That hesitation mattered.

Mercer noticed.

"Mrs Marlowe."

Louisa folded her hands tightly.

"He believed Gerald had used me."

"In what way?"

"He thought the affair was partly why Gerald gained access to certain Vale estate records."

Clara felt the case shift again.

"What records?"

Mercer looked at her.

She closed her mouth.

Louisa answered anyway.

"I was working part-time for an auction house then. We handled papers from several Cotswold estates."

"Vale papers?"

"Yes."

"Did Gerald ask you to obtain anything?"

"Not at first."

"But later?"

Louisa nodded.

"A catalogue reference."

Clara looked down at the old Vale book.

"Propagation records."

Louisa noticed.

"That."

Mabel muttered, "Oh dear."

Mercer said, "Did you give him access?"

"Once."

"Legally?"

"No."

"Did Sir Julian know?"

"Eventually."

"What did Gerald find?"

"Something about the Bramblewick Crimson surviving outside the estate."

"At the Crowther cottage?"

"Yes."

Clara felt a knot tighten.

So Gerald may have known about the plant even before Arthur Bell gave it to him.

That mattered.

Mercer asked, "Did he go to Arthur Bell because of information you gave him?"

Louisa looked ashamed.

"Probably."

Arthur believed Gerald had discovered the rose through him.

Perhaps not.

Perhaps Gerald had gone there already knowing exactly what he wanted.

Mabel said quietly:

"That's why he spent time at Rosebank."

Louisa looked at her.

"You knew?"

"No. But I know now."

Mercer said, "Mrs Finch."

"Silent. Sorry."

He turned back.

"Did Gerald know Sir Julian had the old love letter today?"

Louisa nodded.

"Yes."

"How?"

"Julian told him."

"When?"

"This morning."

"At the fête?"

"I think so."

"You weren't there then?"

"No."

Clara frowned.

Nathan had photographed Louisa at twelve forty-one.

She had arrived later.

Mercer said, "When did you arrive?"

"About twelve thirty-five."

"Why?"

"Julian called me."

"What did he say?"

"That he had decided to make everything public."

Mercer stopped writing again.

"Everything?"

"The rose fraud. The old records. The affair."

"Why expose the affair?"

Louisa's jaw tightened.

"Because Julian enjoyed winning."

The sentence was simple.

Ugly.

Mercer said, "Winning what?"

"Gerald."

"Explain."

"Julian believed Gerald had deceived him professionally. Once he realised the rose wasn't a recreation, he felt humiliated."

"So he wanted revenge."

"Yes."

"By exposing the affair?"

"He knew Gerald would hate it."

"Why?"

Louisa laughed once.

"Because Gerald still loved me."

Silence.

Even Mabel said nothing.

Mercer asked:

"Did you still love him?"

Louisa looked at the table.

"Not in the way he wanted."

"Did Sir Julian know that?"

"Yes."

"Did Sophie?"

"No."

"Until today."

Louisa closed her eyes.

"Until today."

Mercer said, "What happened when you arrived?"

"I went behind the produce marquee."

"Why there?"

"Julian told me to."

"Did you meet him?"

"Yes."

"Time?"

"About twelve forty."

Nathan's photograph.

"How long?"

"Five minutes. Maybe less."

"What did he say?"

"That he had Gerald's letter and Arthur Bell's letter. He said he would announce the truth after judging."

"Publicly?"

"Yes."

"At the fête?"

"Yes."

"Did you ask him not to?"

"Of course."

"What did he say?"

"No."

"Anything else?"

"He said if I was embarrassed, I should have thought about that in 1992."

Mabel's mouth tightened.

Clara felt anger again.

This time towards Julian.

Dead men could still have been unpleasant.

Mercer asked:

"Did you threaten him?"

"No."

"Argue?"

"Yes."

"Raise your voice?"

"No."

"Did anyone see you?"

"I don't know."

"Nathan Cole photographed you near the marquee."

Louisa's face changed.

"Of course he did."

"Did you enter?"

"Briefly."

"Which entrance?"

"Rear."

"Did you touch anything?"

"No."

"See anyone else?"

Louisa thought.

"Someone moved behind the flower displays."

"Who?"

"I couldn't see."

"Male? Female?"

"Male, I think."

"Why?"

"Build."

"Clothing?"

"Dark trousers."

Clara thought of Nathan's earlier photograph.

The unidentified figure behind the flower displays.

Dark trousers.

Metal watch.

Mercer said, "Did you see Gerald?"

"Not then."

"Sophie?"

"No."

"Did you see the Bramblewick Crimson?"

"The plant?"

"Yes."

"No."

"It had already been removed."

Louisa looked puzzled.

"Removed from where?"

Mercer did not answer.

"After speaking to Julian, what did you do?"

"I left."

"Immediately?"

"I walked to my car."

"Where was it?"

"Lane behind the church."

"Why not the main parking area?"

"I didn't want to be seen."

"Why?"

"I didn't want village gossip before Julian made his announcement."

Mabel nearly laughed.

Clara nudged her again.

Louisa continued.

"I sat in the car for a while."

"How long?"

"Maybe ten minutes."

"Then?"

"I drove home."

"Did you speak to Gerald?"

"No."

"Did he know you'd been there?"

"Possibly."

"Did Julian call you again?"

"No."

"Message?"

"No."

Mercer looked at her.

"Your daughter says Julian intended to ruin your life."

Louisa flinched.

"She said that?"

"Yes."

"Was she wrong?"

Louisa took a breath.

"No."

Mercer glanced towards the rear corridor.

"How did Sophie know about the letter?"

"She came to the house yesterday."

"Why?"

"Family argument."

"About?"

"Julian."

"Again?"

Louisa's mouth tightened.

"Sophie and Julian had been estranged for months."

"Reason?"

"Several."

"Specific?"

"Money. Control. His behaviour towards her partner. Nothing relevant."

"Let us decide relevance."

Louisa looked annoyed.

Then:

"Julian had been funding Sophie's business."

"What business?"

"Landscape design."

"Did he stop?"

"Threatened to."

"Why?"

"He didn't approve of her partner."

"Who is?"

"Anna Reid."

"Did Sophie confront him?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"And during that argument, the letter was mentioned?"

"Julian waved it around."

Clara almost winced.

Louisa continued.

"He thought the whole thing amusing."

"Did Sophie know who Gerald was?"

"Only by name."

"Did she know you had an affair?"

"No."

"So she found out yesterday."

"Yes."

"And came here today because?"

"To stop Julian exposing it."

"Did you ask her?"

"No."

"Did she tell you?"

"No."

"Then why do you think that?"

"Because I know my daughter."

Mercer looked at his notes.

"Mrs Marlowe, I need to ask directly. Did you kill your husband?"

Louisa met his eyes.

"No."

"Did Gerald?"

"No."

The speed of the answer surprised Clara.

Mercer noticed too.

"You're certain?"

"No."

"Then why say no?"

Louisa's expression changed.

"Because if Gerald had killed Julian, he would not have left that letter behind."

Clara felt the room sharpen.

Mercer leaned forward.

"What do you mean?"

"The love letter."

"Where is it?"

Louisa stared.

"Don't you have it?"

Mercer said nothing.

That was enough.

Louisa's face went pale.

"It was in the red wallet."

"With Arthur Bell's letter?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Julian showed me."

"When?"

"At twelve forty."

Clara's mind jumped.

At twelve forty, Julian still had the red document wallet.

But Nathan's photograph showed Gerald carrying it at one nineteen.

So somewhere between those times, Gerald got the wallet.

Mercer asked:

"Did you see both letters physically?"

"Yes."

"Originals?"

"Gerald's was original. I recognised it."

"Arthur Bell's?"

"I assume."

"What did Gerald's letter say?"

Louisa went quiet.

Mercer waited.

She finally said:

"It wasn't just a love letter."

Clara looked at her.

"What else?"

Mercer gave Clara a look.

Louisa answered anyway.

"It mentioned the rose."

Mabel whispered:

"There it is."

Mercer said, "How?"

Louisa looked at the Vale catalogue.

"Gerald wrote that he had found proof the old plant still survived."

"What date?"

"August 1992."

Clara's mind stopped.

August 1992.

She looked at Mabel.

Mabel looked back.

Something was wrong.

Mercer saw it.

"What?"

Clara hesitated.

Then she opened the Vale catalogue.

She turned to the propagation note.

One plant was retained with A. Crowther.

Another entry.

1891 — B.C. survives at Crowther cottage. Weak but true.

She looked at Louisa.

"Gerald wrote in August 1992 that he'd found proof the rose survived?"

"Yes."

"Before Arthur gave him the plant?"

Louisa frowned.

"I don't know when Arthur gave it to him."

Mabel did.

"1983."

Everyone went still.

Louisa stared.

"What?"

Clara felt the contradiction settle.

Arthur said Gerald had known since 1983.

Had possessed the plant since then.

Yet in 1992, nine years later, Gerald wrote to Louisa that he had *found proof* the rose still survived.

That phrase made no sense if he already had the living original.

Unless Arthur's dates were wrong.

Or Gerald's letter was not written in 1992.

Or the plant Gerald received in 1983 was not what he believed.

Mercer said:

"Mrs Finch, you're certain Arthur gave Gerald the rose in 1983?"

"Arthur said so."

"Did you know independently?"

"No."

Clara said, "Arthur may be mistaken."

Mabel shook her head.

"Not by nine years."

"Memory can."

"Arthur remembers plants better than birthdays."

Mercer looked at Louisa.

"Do you still remember the date on Gerald's letter?"

"Very clearly."

"Why?"

Louisa's expression softened unexpectedly.

"Because it was written two days before Sophie's ninth birthday."

Clara blinked.

"So you're certain."

"Yes."

Mercer said, "Did the letter refer to finding the plant?"

Louisa thought carefully.

"No."

"Exact wording."

She closed her eyes.

Then:

"'I have finally found the proof I needed. The Crimson is still alive, and soon I will be able to show you.'"

Clara looked at the catalogue.

Proof.

Not plant.

That was different.

Gerald may have had the plant already but lacked documentary proof.

In 1992, perhaps Louisa gave him access to estate records.

But then another problem emerged.

"Why write 'soon I will be able to show you'?"

Louisa opened her eyes.

"That's what I wondered today."

Mercer said, "Meaning?"

"If he had the plant already, why hadn't he shown me?"

Silence.

Clara looked down at the old page.

The plant's history had begun to split into versions.

Arthur's version.

Gerald's version.

Louisa's letter.

The catalogue.

They did not align.

Mercer said, "Did Gerald ever show you the Bramblewick Crimson in 1992?"

"No."

"When did you first see it?"

"Today."

Mabel sat forward.

"Today?"

"Yes."

"At the fête?"

"From a distance."

"Did Gerald know you were there?"

"I don't know."

Clara said, "What did you think?"

Louisa frowned.

"Of the rose?"

"Yes."

"It looked wrong."

Everyone stopped.

Mercer said, "Wrong, how?"

Louisa looked at the catalogue again.

"Gerald used to describe it."

"Describe what?"

"The original rose."

"From Arthur?"

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Details?"

"Dark crimson. Almost purple in shade. Strong perfume. Uneven bloom. He said the outer petals folded back strangely."

Mabel said, "Reflexed."

Louisa nodded.

"That."

"Today's rose?"

"Beautiful. But too perfect."

Clara felt another small shift.

Nathan had already said something about the plant being physically wrong.

Julian had said:

The plant tells the truth even when the paperwork doesn't.

Mercer said, "Could today's rose have been a modern recreation?"

Louisa nodded.

"That's what I assumed."

"But Gerald was claiming it was the rediscovered original?"

"Yes."

Clara looked at Mercer.

Now it made sense.

Perhaps Julian's disqualification had not been because Gerald falsely claimed a surviving original as his own.

Perhaps the reverse.

Perhaps Gerald had entered a modern rose while claiming it was the original Bramblewick Crimson.

But why?

Arthur said the true original had existed.

Where was it?

Mercer asked Louisa:

"Did Sir Julian say why he disqualified the entry?"

"Yes."

Clara and Mabel both turned.

"What did he say?" Mercer asked.

Louisa's voice was quiet.

"He said Gerald had substituted the plant."

There it was.

Mercer leaned forward.

"Substituted it for what?"

"The real one."

"Did he say where the real one was?"

"No."

"Did he know?"

"I think so."

"Why?"

"Because he said, 'Gerald thinks I don't know where he moved it.'"

Clara felt a chill.

Gerald had moved the original plant.

Somewhere.

Julian knew or believed he knew where.

And now Julian was dead.

Mercer said, "Anything else?"

Louisa looked at him.

"Yes."

"What?"

"He said the real plant wasn't at Gerald's house."

Clara remembered the police search.

No mature Bramblewick Crimson.

"Where was it?"

Louisa shook her head.

"He didn't tell me."

"Did he mention Arthur Bell?"

"No."

"Vale estate?"

"No."

"Greenhouse?"

"No."

"Any location?"

Louisa thought.

Then:

"He said, 'It went back where it belonged.'"

Clara looked at Mabel.

Mabel's face had changed.

She knew something.

Mercer saw it too.

"Mrs Finch?"

Mabel hesitated.

This was unusual enough to become alarming.

"What?"

"You know what that means."

Mabel looked towards the window.

Then back.

"Maybe."

"Tell me."

She sighed.

"There's an old glasshouse."

Clara felt the book's earlier threads tighten.

"At Bramblewick Manor?"

Mabel nodded.

"Abandoned. South side. Behind the old kitchen garden."

Louisa stared.

"The Vale glasshouse?"

Mabel looked at her.

"Yes."

Clara remembered the plot underlying the entire mystery.

Julian had been asking about the abandoned Victorian glasshouse.

This was it.

Mercer stood.

"How accessible?"

"Locked, supposedly."

"Supposedly?"

"Everything in Bramblewick is locked supposedly."

He looked at Rachel, who had re-entered during the conversation.

"Call the Manor. Nobody goes near the old glasshouse until we arrive."

Rachel nodded and stepped away.

Louisa said:

"Inspector."

Mercer turned.

"You still haven't told me what you needed me to identify."

He paused.

Then removed an evidence photograph from a folder.

He placed it face down on the table.

"Before I show you, I need to explain that this was found inside your husband's jacket."

Louisa's expression changed.

Mercer turned the photograph over.

Clara could not see at first.

Then Louisa picked it up.

A small object.

Silver.

Oval.

A locket.

Louisa's hand trembled.

"Where did he get this?"

"You recognise it?"

"Yes."

"Whose is it?"

Louisa looked towards the rear room where Sophie was waiting.

Then she said:

"Mine."

Mercer said, "When did you last see it?"

"1992."

Clara felt another thread tighten.

"Why does Julian have it?"

Louisa looked sick.

"Because I gave it to Gerald."

Silence.

Mabel whispered:

"Oh, for heaven's sake."

Louisa looked at the photograph.

"Gerald wore it on a chain under his shirt for years."

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

"Did you ever get it back?"

"No."

"So if Sir Julian had it today—"

Louisa finished:

"He took it from Gerald."

Mercer looked at her.

"Or Gerald gave it to him."

"No."

"Why not?"

Louisa's voice was suddenly certain.

"Because Gerald would never give that away."

Clara looked towards the darkening window.

Gerald's old letter.

Louisa's locket.

The original rose.

All three belonged to the same period.

All three had survived for decades.

And all three now appeared to have passed through Julian Marlowe's hands shortly before his death.

The murder was not simply about a flower competition.

It was about 1992.

About what Gerald found.

About what Louisa gave him.

And perhaps about something else that happened that summer which nobody had yet mentioned.

Mercer picked up the evidence photograph.

"We're going to the glasshouse."

Mabel stood.

Clara did too.

Mercer stared.

"No."

Clara opened her mouth.

"No."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

"I was going to say we should go home."

Mabel looked at her.

Clara ignored her.

Mercer pointed towards the door.

"Do that."

Clara picked up the Vale catalogue.

Louisa remained seated.

For the first time, she looked genuinely frightened.

Not of the police.

Of the past.

As Clara reached the door, Louisa called:

"Mrs Bellamy."

Clara turned.

Louisa looked at the old catalogue.

"There's something Gerald never knew."

Mercer stopped.

Clara waited.

Louisa said:

"The estate records he saw in 1992 were incomplete."

"What was missing?"

Louisa looked at Mercer.

"A second propagation ledger."

Clara felt her pulse jump.

"Where is it?"

Louisa shook her head.

"I don't know."

"But it existed?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Because I saw it once."

"When?"

"At the auction house."

"What did it contain?"

Louisa's voice dropped.

"An entry from 1901."

Mabel had gone very still.

Louisa continued:

"It said the Bramblewick Crimson had been propagated successfully at two locations."

Clara stared.

"Two?"

"Yes."

"Arthur's family only knew about one."

"Apparently."

Mercer said, "What was the second location?"

Louisa looked towards the dark window.

"Bramblewick Manor."

"The glasshouse?"

She nodded.

"One plant retained with Crowther."

A pause.

"And one retained under glass."

Clara looked at the catalogue in her hands.

That second line was not there.

Someone had removed it from the version she held.

Or it had been recorded elsewhere.

Two surviving plants.

Two family lines.

Two possible originals.

Gerald may never have owned the only Bramblewick Crimson.

He may not even have owned the oldest.

And if a second line had survived secretly at Bramblewick Manor, then Sir Julian's announcement would have destroyed Gerald's entire claim to rediscovery.

Mabel said quietly:

"That's why he moved the plant."

Clara looked at her.

"Which one?"

No one answered.

And that, Clara realised, was now the most important question in the case.

Continuing directly with Chapter Six — “The Glasshouse”.

Chapter Six

The Glasshouse

Clara did go home.

Technically.

She entered The Crooked Bookmark, placed the Vale catalogue on the counter, filled Monty's water bowl and stood for nearly three minutes pretending she had no intention of leaving again.

Mabel watched her from the doorway.

Tom had returned to the café next door.

Louisa Marlowe remained with the police.

Mercer and Detective Constable Shaw had already left for Bramblewick Manor.

Clara looked at the clock.

Seven fifteen.

Mabel said:

"No."

Clara turned.

"I haven't said anything."

"You don't need to."

"I was going to make tea."

"No, you weren't."

"Possibly."

"You were going to Bramblewick Manor."

Clara folded her arms.

"Mercer told us to go home."

"And you did."

"Exactly."

"For three minutes."

"Closer to four."

Mabel looked at the clock.

"Three and a half."

Clara sighed.

"I only want to know what they find."

"Naturally."

"I'm not proposing to interfere."

"Naturally."

"I thought we might walk past."

"Past the manor?"

"Yes."

"Which is half a mile outside the village."

"It's a pleasant evening."

"It's nearly dark."

Clara looked through the shop window.

The sky had deepened to violet, but a ribbon of pale summer light remained over the rooftops.

"It isn't dark."

"It's thinking about it."

Monty stood.

His ears lifted.

Clara picked up his lead.

Mabel pointed.

"There."

"What?"

"The evidence."

"This is Monty's evening walk."

"He had his evening walk."

"He can have another."

Monty wagged his tail.

Mabel looked at him.

"You're an accomplice."

Monty sneezed.

Clara locked the shop.

They had gone less than twenty yards when Tom emerged from the café carrying his jacket.

Clara stopped.

"You too?"

Tom locked the door behind him.

"I assumed you'd need supervision."

Mabel nodded.

"Excellent."

Clara stared at both of them.

"I am fifty-eight."

"Yes," Mabel said.

"That generally means I can walk without supervision."

"Not towards crime scenes."

"This is not a crime scene."

Tom looked towards the hill.

"Yet."

Clara gave him a look.

He smiled.

They walked north through Bramblewick.

The evening was warm.

Most shops were closed.

Lights glowed behind cottage windows.

The village green remained cordoned around the produce marquee, although the rest of the fête had vanished so completely that only flattened grass and scraps of bunting proved it had existed.

A police car remained beside the war memorial.

Clara deliberately did not look towards it.

Mabel noticed.

"Very restrained."

"Thank you."

"Didn't suit you."

They passed St Anne's and took the lane towards Bramblewick Manor.

The road narrowed between high stone walls.

Beyond them lay fields glowing faintly in the last light.

Monty trotted ahead, investigating hedges.

The manor appeared gradually above the trees.

Bramblewick Manor was not grand enough to intimidate from a distance.

Up close, it tried harder.

Honey-coloured stone.

Tall sash windows.

A broad central block with two lower wings.

Parts of the house dated from the seventeenth century, although successive Vales had added enough

architectural opinions to confuse anyone trying to identify a single style.

The kitchen gardens lay south of the house behind a brick wall.

Beyond them stood the old glasshouses.

Or what remained of them.

Clara had seen them only once before from a distance.

Long low structures of brick and iron.

Broken panes.

Ivy.

Collapsed roofs.

The sort of place children would be warned not to enter and adults would secretly wish to.

Mabel pointed.

"Police."

Two vehicles stood near the kitchen-garden gate.

Tom said:

"We're not going in."

"Obviously."

Clara stopped beside the stone wall.

From there, the glasshouse was partly visible through an iron gate.

Lights moved inside.

Torches.

People.

One beam swept across the broken roof.

Monty pulled gently on the lead.

"No."

He pulled again.

"Monty."

His nose lifted.

He sniffed.

Mabel said:

"He smells something."

"He always smells something."

"Could be a clue."

"Could be a rabbit."

Tom looked at the dog.

"More likely a sandwich."

A voice came from behind them.

"Mrs Bellamy."

Clara closed her eyes.

Mabel whispered:

"Excellent."

Inspector Mercer stood in the lane.

He carried a torch.

His jacket was open.

His expression was not.

Clara turned.

"Inspector."

"I told you to go home."

"We did."

He stared.

Mabel said:

"For nearly four minutes."

Mercer's eyes closed briefly.

Tom said:

"We were walking the dog."

Mercer looked at Monty.

Monty wagged.

"Of course."

Clara lifted the lead slightly.

"He requires exercise."

"He requires an alibi."

"You're becoming cynical."

"I'm becoming experienced."

Mercer looked towards the manor gate.

"You are not going inside."

"We weren't planning to."

Mabel said, "She was."

Clara turned.

"Mabel."

"What?"

Mercer looked at Clara.

"I wasn't," she said.

He did not believe her.

"Good. Then continue your walk in another direction."

Clara glanced towards the glasshouse.

"Did you find the rose?"

"No."

That answer came too quickly.

Interesting.

Mercer realised.

"Go."

"One question."

"No."

"Was there evidence someone had been cultivating plants recently?"

He stared at her.

Mabel said:

"That's a yes."

Mercer looked at Mabel.

"How?"

"Your face."

Clara almost smiled.

Mercer did not.

Then, perhaps because he knew refusing would achieve nothing, he said:

"There are recent signs of use."

"What kind?"

"That's two questions."

"Same topic."

"Do not start."

Tom stepped slightly closer.

"Inspector, if someone was cultivating a rare rose there, it could be relevant to what Arthur told us."

Mercer looked at him.

Tom rarely pushed.

That seemed to matter.

Mercer exhaled.

"Fresh compost. Watering cans. Recently replaced panes. A functioning irrigation line."

Mabel raised her eyebrows.

"So abandoned except for the gardening."

"Apparently."

Clara said:

"Who had access?"

"We're establishing that."

"Beatrice Vale?"

"Yes."

"Staff?"

"Some."

"Gerald?"

Mercer's silence answered.

Clara leaned forward.

"He did."

"He has had informal access to the estate gardens for years."

"Why?"

"Horticultural society projects. Heritage planting. Rose surveys."

Mabel muttered:

"Convenient."

Mercer said:

"That word is losing meaning."

Clara looked through the gate.

"So Gerald could have moved the original plant there."

"Possibly."

"And Julian knew."

"Possibly."

"Did you find anything linking Julian to the glasshouse?"

Mercer went still.

That was answer enough.

Clara saw it.

Tom saw it.

Mabel saw everything.

"What?" Mabel asked.

Mercer looked towards the gate.

Then back at them.

"You are going home."

Clara folded her arms.

"What did you find?"

"Evidence."

"What kind?"

"Police evidence."

"Very descriptive."

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Inspector."

They looked at each other.

Finally Mercer said:

"His shoe print."

Clara's irritation vanished.

"Inside?"

"Yes."

"Fresh?"

"Likely today."

"Where?"

"Near the rear bench."

"So Julian was here before the fête?"

"We don't know when."

"Could be after?"

"Before he died, certainly."

Mabel said:

"Helpful."

Mercer ignored her.

Clara looked at the old glasshouse again.

Sir Julian had secretly visited it.

That meant he had done more than rely on Arthur's letter and the estate catalogue.

He had seen something.

Perhaps the second rose.

Perhaps the real plant Gerald had moved.

Perhaps evidence of who had been cultivating it.

Clara said:

"Did you find a plant label?"

Mercer frowned.

"Why?"

"The Vale catalogue used labels."

"Most gardens use labels."

"Yes, but if the Bramblewick Crimson survived there—"

A torch beam flashed from inside.

Detective Constable Shaw appeared at the gate.

"Sir."

Mercer turned.

Rachel saw Clara.

Then Mabel.

Then Tom.

Her expression suggested mild surprise followed by complete lack of surprise.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Hello."

Rachel looked at Mercer.

"Should they be here?"

"No."

Mabel said:

"We agree."

Rachel almost smiled.

Then her face became serious.

"We found something."

Mercer stepped towards the gate.

"What?"

"Under the potting bench."

She glanced towards Clara.

Mercer noticed.

"Say it."

Rachel nodded.

"Red leather document wallet."

Clara felt the evening sharpen.

Mercer said:

"Sir Julian's?"

"Likely. Mrs Marlowe described it accurately."

"Contents?"

"Empty."

Clara looked at Mercer.

Gerald had been photographed carrying the wallet at one nineteen.

Arthur had seen him with it.

Yet now the wallet was hidden under a bench at Bramblewick Manor.

If Gerald had taken it from Julian, he either brought it here later or someone else did.

But when?

And why leave the wallet but remove the letters?

Mercer said:

"Bagged?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

Rachel hesitated.

"One item beneath it."

"What?"

"A metal plant label."

Mabel whispered:

"There."

Rachel continued.

"Old. Corroded. Stamped."

"What does it say?" Mercer asked.

Rachel checked the photograph on her phone.

"BC. E.V. 1879."

Clara's pulse jumped.

The same form she had expected.

Bramblewick Crimson. Elias Vale. 1879.

Mabel said:

"That's the original."

Mercer looked at her.

"Maybe."

"That's what the catalogue says."

Clara opened her mouth.

Then remembered she had left the catalogue at the shop.

Mercer asked:

"Was the label under the wallet?"

Rachel nodded.

"Yes."

"Recent disturbance?"

"Hard to tell. Soil's dry beneath the bench."

"Photograph everything."

"Already done."

Mercer looked towards the glasshouse.

Clara said:

"If the label belongs to the second Vale plant, it proves one survived here."

"Potentially."

"And Sir Julian found it."

"Potentially."

"And someone hid his wallet in the same place."

"Yes."

Mabel said:

"Potentially."

Mercer gave her a look.

She smiled.

Clara stared through the gate.

Something still felt wrong.

If Julian had found the historical label here, why hide his wallet beneath the bench?

He would not.

Someone else hid it.

Or dropped it.

Gerald had been carrying it at one nineteen.

If Gerald came here after the murder, he could have dumped the wallet.

But the timeline would matter.

The manor was twelve minutes' brisk walk from the green.

Five or six minutes by car.

If Gerald had been in the beer tent around one thirty-five, there might not be enough time.

Unless the clock manipulation distorted more than one observation.

Clara said:

"When did Gerald return to the beer tent?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Why?"

"If he had the wallet at one nineteen and later dumped it here—"

"We are checking."

"How much time?"

"Enough."

"Inspector."

He sighed.

"His bank card purchase at the beer tent was one twelve. Witnesses saw him again there around one thirty-two."

"So twenty minutes unaccounted for."

"Approximately."

"Enough to walk here and back?"

"Barely."

"Run?"

"Gerald is seventy-one."

Mabel said:

"He runs when there's free manure."

Tom looked at her.

"What?"

"Spring allotment delivery."

Clara ignored this.

"Drive?"

"His car remained parked."

"Someone else's?"

"Possible."

Rachel said:

"We found tyre marks near the kitchen-garden gate."

Mercer turned.

"Fresh?"

"Very. One vehicle. Narrow tyres."

"Photographed?"

"Yes."

"Check against staff vehicles."

Rachel nodded.

Clara asked:

"Could a bicycle get here from the green?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Yes."

"How long?"

Tom answered.

"Five minutes if you're fit."

Mabel said:

"Gerald isn't."

Clara thought.

Someone could move between the fête and manor quickly without being noticed in a car.

A bicycle.

A service track.

Perhaps someone younger.

She thought of Nathan.

Sophie.

The unidentified figure.

Even Louisa.

Mercer said:

"Enough."

He gestured down the lane.

"Go home."

Clara sighed.

"Fine."

This time she meant it.

Probably.

They had walked perhaps fifty yards when Monty stopped.

He pulled towards the hedge.

"Monty."

The dog sniffed furiously at the base of the stone wall.

Then he shoved his head between two clumps of nettles.

Tom said:

"Rabbit?"

"Hopefully."

Monty backed out.

Something hung from his mouth.

Clara's heart sank.

"No."

He trotted towards her.

Mabel leaned closer.

"Not a rabbit."

Monty held a strip of cloth.

Dark blue.

Clara crouched.

"Drop it."

He did.

Progress.

The fabric was narrow.

Torn.

Perhaps from clothing.

One edge was caught with a small thorn.

Clara did not touch it.

Tom shone his phone torch.

"Looks like jacket lining."

Mabel said:

"Or ribbon."

Clara looked along the wall.

The hedge bordered a narrow opening.

Not exactly a gate.

More like an old service gap partly concealed by vegetation.

Beyond it, a path ran towards the manor grounds.

Tom saw it too.

"Shortcut."

Clara's pulse quickened.

The main gate was not the only route.

Someone could move between the lane and the glasshouse unseen.

Mercer's voice came from behind them.

"What now?"

Clara stood.

"Monty."

"Of course."

Mercer approached.

He saw the cloth.

His expression changed immediately.

"Nobody touch it."

"We haven't."

He crouched.

Rachel followed with an evidence bag.

The fabric was dark blue wool.

One side carried a tiny smear of reddish-brown.

Dirt, perhaps.

Rust.

Maybe blood.

Clara looked towards the hidden path.

Mercer did too.

"Where does that go?"

Mabel answered.

"Old gardeners' entrance."

"You know it?"

"I used it as a girl."

Mercer stared.

"Why?"

"Blackberries."

He decided not to ask.

Tom pointed.

"Direct to the kitchen gardens?"

"Yes," Mabel said. "Comes out near the boiler shed."

Rachel bagged the cloth.

Mercer shone his torch through the gap.

"Any reason it's not on the estate plan?"

"Because it's not really a path anymore."

"Apparently somebody disagrees."

Clara looked at the thorn where the cloth had caught.

The tear was fresh.

The fibres bright.

Someone had used the route recently.

Perhaps today.

Mercer said:

"Now you are definitely leaving."

Clara nodded.

"We are."

He looked at Monty.

"And take the evidence detector."

Mabel smiled.

"He's improving."

Monty wagged.

They continued towards Bramblewick.

For once, Clara did not attempt to turn back.

Her mind was busy enough.

The wallet.

The plant label.

The hidden path.

The torn blue cloth.

Sir Julian's shoe print.

Someone had visited the glasshouse.

Possibly several people.

And if the second Bramblewick Crimson had survived there for more than a century, the old building was not simply where Gerald hid a plant.

It was where the truth had been growing quietly while everyone else argued about who owned it.

Back at The Crooked Bookmark, Clara locked the door behind them.

Tom made tea.

Mabel found biscuits.

Monty slept.

Clara reopened the Vale catalogue.

She read every surviving entry concerning the Bramblewick Crimson.

Seedling selected 1878.

Successful propagation from cuttings, 1879.

Three plants moved to south wall garden.

1883 — stock reduced after severe winter. One plant retained with A. Crowther.

Nothing about the second plant Louisa remembered.

Clara turned the page.

Blank.

Then another.

Fruit trees.

Another.

Greenhouse repairs.

Something bothered her.

She returned to the rose page.

The bottom margin had been cut.

Not torn.

Cut.

A narrow strip removed cleanly across the lower edge.

"Mabel."

Mabel came over.

"What?"

"Look."

Mabel adjusted her glasses.

"Someone trimmed it."

"Yes."

"Recently?"

"No. Old cut."

Tom leaned over.

"What was there?"

"I don't know."

Clara studied the page against the lamp.

Indented handwriting.

Very faint.

Someone had written on the missing strip while the page beneath carried pressure marks.

She angled it.

Letters emerged imperfectly.

Mabel whispered:

"Can you read that?"

"Partly."

Clara traced the impressions without touching.

Something like:

...retained under glass...

Then:

...south house...

And beneath it:

...Crowther not informed...

Clara went still.

Tom read over her shoulder.

"Why wouldn't Crowther be informed?"

"Because he was told his was the surviving plant."

Mabel frowned.

"So the Vale family deliberately kept the second one secret."

"Looks like it."

"Why?"

Clara turned back to the earlier entries.

Disease.

Severe winter.

Propagation failures.

Perhaps insurance against losing the line.

But secrecy?

That suggested ownership.

Control.

Elias Vale entrusted one plant to Crowther.

Kept another.

If later generations forgot the arrangement, both families might believe they possessed the last survivor.

Two separate histories.

Two claims.

Gerald found Arthur's line.

But perhaps someone else had known about the estate line all along.

Tom said:

"Could Sir Julian have removed the strip?"

"No. The cut is too old."

Mabel said:

"Someone wanted the second plant forgotten."

"Yes."

The shop telephone rang.

All three looked at it.

Clara answered.

"The Crooked Bookmark."

"Mrs Bellamy."

Mercer.

"Inspector."

"Before you ask, yes, I'm calling voluntarily."

"I hadn't asked."

"Good."

He sounded tired.

"What did you find?"

"That sounds remarkably like investigating."

"You called me."

"Because I need the Vale catalogue."

Clara looked down.

"Why?"

"Comparison."

"With the label?"

"And another document."

Clara straightened.

"What document?"

"Bring the catalogue to the station tomorrow morning."

"Inspector."

"Eight thirty."

"That's cruel."

"Eight thirty."

"What's the document?"

Silence.

Then:

"A page from a second propagation ledger."

Clara's pulse jumped.

"You found it at the glasshouse?"

"No."

"Where?"

Another pause.

"Sir Julian's car."

Louisa had been right.

The second ledger existed.

"Original?"

"Photocopy."

"What does it say?"

"Tomorrow."

"Inspector."

"Eight thirty."

"You're enjoying this."

"No."

"Hard to tell."

He almost hung up.

Then said:

"One more thing."

Clara waited.

"The cloth Monty found."

"Yes?"

"It's not jacket lining."

"What is it?"

"A rosette sash."

Mabel stood.

Clara repeated:

"A sash?"

"Dark blue competition sash."

"From the fête?"

"Likely."

"Whose?"

"We're checking."

Mabel was mouthing something at Clara.

"What?" Clara whispered.

Mabel pointed towards the jam certificate.

Then towards the fête programme on the counter.

Clara picked it up.

She scanned the competition sections.

Roses.

Preserves.

Vegetables.

Floral displays.

Then she saw it.

BEST IN SHOW — BLUE SASH

Not first prize.

A separate award.

Presented by Sir Julian.

Clara's mind returned immediately to the note.

You promised me first prize.

Perhaps they had all been assuming the note referred to the Rose Cup.

Maybe it did not.

Maybe someone else expected a prize.

Someone whose sash had torn on the hidden path between the fête and the glasshouse.

Clara said:

"Inspector."

"Yes."

"Best in Show used a blue sash."

Silence.

"I know."

"Was it awarded?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Sir Julian hadn't completed judging."

"So whoever expected it—"

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow."

He hung up.

Clara slowly lowered the receiver.

Mabel looked pleased.

Tom did not.

"What?"

Clara opened the fête programme.

"Sir Julian wasn't only judging roses."

Mabel nodded.

"He judged overall horticultural Best in Show."

"And the winner would receive a blue sash."

"Yes."

"The cloth Monty found may have come from it."

Tom frowned.

"But if the sash hadn't been awarded, how did it get onto the hidden path?"

Clara looked at him.

Exactly.

The sash should have remained with the organisers until the ceremony.

Unless someone had taken it.

Or been given it early.

Or believed it already belonged to them.

Mabel said:

"Who was expected to win Best in Show?"

Clara scanned the programme.

"I don't know."

Mabel did.

Her expression changed.

"Oh."

"What?"

"Not Gerald."

Clara looked up.

"Who?"

Mabel tapped the programme.

"Arthur Bell."

Clara stared.

"Arthur entered?"

"Heritage roses. Old-fashioned garden class."

"But his rose was disqualified."

"No."

Mabel shook her head.

"Different rose."

Clara remembered Sheila's comment.

An elderly gardener whose magnificent rose had been disqualified.

Perhaps that assumption was wrong too.

Mabel continued:

"Arthur had a white climbing rose. Forty years old. Everyone said it was the best exhibit there."

Tom said:

"Would Julian have promised him first prize?"

"Arthur wouldn't ask."

"Someone else might."

Clara stared at the blue sash line.

Arthur had already concealed decades of history.

He had lied by omission to police.

He had possessed the Bramblewick Crimson.

He had known Julian.

And now a piece of the unawarded Best in Show sash had been found on the secret route to the glasshouse.

Still, Clara did not believe it.

Not yet.

Something else was missing.

She turned back to the cut page.

Crowther not informed.

Two rose lines.

Two hidden histories.

Two letters.

Two women at the marquee.

Two possible motives.

Perhaps the case kept doubling because everyone involved had been seeing only half the story.

Tom said:

"Clara."

She looked up.

"What?"

"There's something outside."

All three turned towards the shop window.

A shadow moved.

Then disappeared.

Clara's heart quickened.

Tom crossed to the door.

"Don't."

He stopped.

A moment later, something slid through the letterbox.

An envelope.

No stamp.

No name.

Mabel looked at Clara.

"That's never good."

Tom picked it up using the corner of a tea towel.

Clara almost smiled despite herself.

"Mercer is training us."

"Open it?"

"Without touching."

Tom placed it on the counter.

Clara used a letter opener.

Inside was a single photograph.

Old.

Black and white.

A glasshouse.

Two men stood beside a rose bed.

One was labelled on the back:

Albert Crowther

The other:

Elias Vale

Between them stood a woman.

No name.

Clara turned the photograph over again.

Written beneath the image in newer ink were six words:

“Ask who really bred the Crimson.”

Silence.

Mabel sat down.

Tom looked at Clara.

Clara looked at the unknown woman.

The Bramblewick Crimson had always been attributed to Elias Vale.

Every surviving catalogue said so.

Every village history said so.

But someone now wanted Clara to question that too.

The rose's ownership was uncertain.

Its survival was divided.

Its provenance had been manipulated.

And now even its creator might have been erased.

Clara looked towards the dark high street.

Someone in Bramblewick knew the history.

More than that.

Someone wanted her to find it.

And whoever had pushed the photograph through the door had been close enough to watch them come home.

The mystery was no longer simply about who killed Sir Julian Marlowe.

It was becoming a question of how many lies had been planted around one rose.

And how long they had been allowed to grow.

Chapter Six: The Glasshouse

Clara did go home.

Technically.

She entered The Crooked Bookmark, placed the Vale catalogue on the counter, filled Monty's water bowl and stood for nearly three minutes pretending she had no intention of leaving again.

Mabel watched her from the doorway.

Tom had returned to the café next door.

Louisa Marlowe remained with the police.

Mercer and Detective Constable Shaw had already left for Bramblewick Manor.

Clara looked at the clock.

Seven fifteen.

Mabel said:

"No."

Clara turned.

"I haven't said anything."

"You don't need to."

"I was going to make tea."

"No, you weren't."

"Possibly."

"You were going to Bramblewick Manor."

Clara folded her arms.

"Mercer told us to go home."

"And you did."

"Exactly."

"For three minutes."

"Closer to four."

Mabel looked at the clock.

"Three and a half."

Clara sighed.

"I only want to know what they find."

"Naturally."

"I'm not proposing to interfere."

"Naturally."

"I thought we might walk past."

"Past the manor?"

"Yes."

"Which is half a mile outside the village."

"It's a pleasant evening."

"It's nearly dark."

Clara looked through the shop window.

The sky had deepened to violet, but a ribbon of pale summer light remained over the rooftops.

"It isn't dark."

"It's thinking about it."

Monty stood.

His ears lifted.

Clara picked up his lead.

Mabel pointed.

"There."

"What?"

"The evidence."

"This is Monty's evening walk."

"He had his evening walk."

"He can have another."

Monty wagged his tail.

Mabel looked at him.

"You're an accomplice."

Monty sneezed.

Clara locked the shop.

They had gone less than twenty yards when Tom emerged from the café carrying his jacket.

Clara stopped.

"You too?"

Tom locked the door behind him.

"I assumed you'd need supervision."

Mabel nodded.

"Excellent."

Clara stared at both of them.

"I am fifty-eight."

"Yes," Mabel said.

"That generally means I can walk without supervision."

"Not towards crime scenes."

"This is not a crime scene."

Tom looked towards the hill.

"Yet."

Clara gave him a look.

He smiled.

They walked north through Bramblewick.

The evening was warm.

Most shops were closed.

Lights glowed behind cottage windows.

The village green remained cordoned around the produce marquee, although the rest of the fête had vanished so completely that only flattened grass and scraps of bunting proved it had existed.

A police car remained beside the war memorial.

Clara deliberately did not look towards it.

Mabel noticed.

"Very restrained."

"Thank you."

"Didn't suit you."

They passed St Anne's and took the lane towards Bramblewick Manor.

The road narrowed between high stone walls.

Beyond them lay fields glowing faintly in the last light.

Monty trotted ahead, investigating hedges.

The manor appeared gradually above the trees.

Bramblewick Manor was not grand enough to intimidate from a distance.

Up close, it tried harder.

Honey-coloured stone.

Tall sash windows.

A broad central block with two lower wings.

Parts of the house dated from the seventeenth century, although successive Vales had added enough architectural opinions to confuse anyone trying to identify a single style.

The kitchen gardens lay south of the house behind a brick wall.

Beyond them stood the old glasshouses.

Or what remained of them.

Clara had seen them only once before from a distance.

Long low structures of brick and iron.

Broken panes.

Ivy.

Collapsed roofs.

The sort of place children would be warned not to enter and adults would secretly wish to.

Mabel pointed.

"Police."

Two vehicles stood near the kitchen-garden gate.

Tom said:

"We're not going in."

"Obviously."

Clara stopped beside the stone wall.

From there, the glasshouse was partly visible through an iron gate.

Lights moved inside.

Torches.

People.

One beam swept across the broken roof.

Monty pulled gently on the lead.

"No."

He pulled again.

"Monty."

His nose lifted.

He sniffed.

Mabel said:

"He smells something."

"He always smells something."

"Could be a clue."

"Could be a rabbit."

Tom looked at the dog.

"More likely a sandwich."

A voice came from behind them.

"Mrs Bellamy."

Clara closed her eyes.

Mabel whispered:

"Excellent."

Inspector Mercer stood in the lane.

He carried a torch.

His jacket was open.

His expression was not.

Clara turned.

"Inspector."

"I told you to go home."

"We did."

He stared.

Mabel said:

"For nearly four minutes."

Mercer's eyes closed briefly.

Tom said:

"We were walking the dog."

Mercer looked at Monty.

Monty wagged.

"Of course."

Clara lifted the lead slightly.

"He requires exercise."

"He requires an alibi."

"You're becoming cynical."

"I'm becoming experienced."

Mercer looked towards the manor gate.

"You are not going inside."

"We weren't planning to."

Mabel said, "She was."

Clara turned.

"Mabel."

"What?"

Mercer looked at Clara.

"I wasn't," she said.

He did not believe her.

"Good. Then continue your walk in another direction."

Clara glanced towards the glasshouse.

"Did you find the rose?"

"No."

That answer came too quickly.

Interesting.

Mercer realised.

"Go."

"One question."

"No."

"Was there evidence someone had been cultivating plants recently?"

He stared at her.

Mabel said:

"That's a yes."

Mercer looked at Mabel.

"How?"

"Your face."

Clara almost smiled.

Mercer did not.

Then, perhaps because he knew refusing would achieve nothing, he said:

"There are recent signs of use."

"What kind?"

"That's two questions."

"Same topic."

"Do not start."

Tom stepped slightly closer.

"Inspector, if someone was cultivating a rare rose there, it could be relevant to what Arthur told us."

Mercer looked at him.

Tom rarely pushed.

That seemed to matter.

Mercer exhaled.

"Fresh compost. Watering cans. Recently replaced panes. A functioning irrigation line."

Mabel raised her eyebrows.

"So abandoned except for the gardening."

"Apparently."

Clara said:

"Who had access?"

"We're establishing that."

"Beatrice Vale?"

"Yes."

"Staff?"

"Some."

"Gerald?"

Mercer's silence answered.

Clara leaned forward.

"He did."

"He has had informal access to the estate gardens for years."

"Why?"

"Horticultural society projects. Heritage planting. Rose surveys."

Mabel muttered:

"Convenient."

Mercer said:

"That word is losing meaning."

Clara looked through the gate.

"So Gerald could have moved the original plant there."

"Possibly."

"And Julian knew."

"Possibly."

"Did you find anything linking Julian to the glasshouse?"

Mercer went still.

That was answer enough.

Clara saw it.

Tom saw it.

Mabel saw everything.

"What?" Mabel asked.

Mercer looked towards the gate.

Then back at them.

"You are going home."

Clara folded her arms.

"What did you find?"

"Evidence."

"What kind?"

"Police evidence."

"Very descriptive."

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Inspector."

They looked at each other.

Finally Mercer said:

"His shoe print."

Clara's irritation vanished.

"Inside?"

"Yes."

"Fresh?"

"Likely today."

"Where?"

"Near the rear bench."

"So Julian was here before the fête?"

"We don't know when."

"Could be after?"

"Before he died, certainly."

Mabel said:

"Helpful."

Mercer ignored her.

Clara looked at the old glasshouse again.

Sir Julian had secretly visited it.

That meant he had done more than rely on Arthur's letter and the estate catalogue.

He had seen something.

Perhaps the second rose.

Perhaps the real plant Gerald had moved.

Perhaps evidence of who had been cultivating it.

Clara said:

"Did you find a plant label?"

Mercer frowned.

"Why?"

"The Vale catalogue used labels."

"Most gardens use labels."

"Yes, but if the Bramblewick Crimson survived there—"

A torch beam flashed from inside.

Detective Constable Shaw appeared at the gate.

"Sir."

Mercer turned.

Rachel saw Clara.

Then Mabel.

Then Tom.

Her expression suggested mild surprise followed by complete lack of surprise.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Hello."

Rachel looked at Mercer.

"Should they be here?"

"No."

Mabel said:

"We agree."

Rachel almost smiled.

Then her face became serious.

"We found something."

Mercer stepped towards the gate.

"What?"

"Under the potting bench."

She glanced towards Clara.

Mercer noticed.

"Say it."

Rachel nodded.

"Red leather document wallet."

Clara felt the evening sharpen.

Mercer said:

"Sir Julian's?"

"Likely. Mrs Marlowe described it accurately."

"Contents?"

"Empty."

Clara looked at Mercer.

Gerald had been photographed carrying the wallet at one nineteen.

Arthur had seen him with it.

Yet now the wallet was hidden under a bench at Bramblewick Manor.

If Gerald had taken it from Julian, he either brought it here later or someone else did.

But when?

And why leave the wallet but remove the letters?

Mercer said:

"Bagged?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

Rachel hesitated.

"One item beneath it."

"What?"

"A metal plant label."

Mabel whispered:

"There."

Rachel continued.

"Old. Corroded. Stamped."

"What does it say?" Mercer asked.

Rachel checked the photograph on her phone.

"BC. E.V. 1879."

Clara's pulse jumped.

The same form she had expected.

Bramblewick Crimson. Elias Vale. 1879.

Mabel said:

"That's the original."

Mercer looked at her.

"Maybe."

"That's what the catalogue says."

Clara opened her mouth.

Then remembered she had left the catalogue at the shop.

Mercer asked:

"Was the label under the wallet?"

Rachel nodded.

"Yes."

"Recent disturbance?"

"Hard to tell. Soil's dry beneath the bench."

"Photograph everything."

"Already done."

Mercer looked towards the glasshouse.

Clara said:

"If the label belongs to the second Vale plant, it proves one survived here."

"Potentially."

"And Sir Julian found it."

"Potentially."

"And someone hid his wallet in the same place."

"Yes."

Mabel said:

"Potentially."

Mercer gave her a look.

She smiled.

Clara stared through the gate.

Something still felt wrong.

If Julian had found the historical label here, why hide his wallet beneath the bench?

He would not.

Someone else hid it.

Or dropped it.

Gerald had been carrying it at one nineteen.

If Gerald came here after the murder, he could have dumped the wallet.

But the timeline would matter.

The manor was twelve minutes' brisk walk from the green.

Five or six minutes by car.

If Gerald had been in the beer tent around one thirty-five, there might not be enough time.

Unless the clock manipulation distorted more than one observation.

Clara said:

"When did Gerald return to the beer tent?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Why?"

"If he had the wallet at one nineteen and later dumped it here—"

"We are checking."

"How much time?"

"Enough."

"Inspector."

He sighed.

"His bank card purchase at the beer tent was one twelve. Witnesses saw him again there around one thirty-two."

"So twenty minutes unaccounted for."

"Approximately."

"Enough to walk here and back?"

"Barely."

"Run?"

"Gerald is seventy-one."

Mabel said:

"He runs when there's free manure."

Tom looked at her.

"What?"

"Spring allotment delivery."

Clara ignored this.

"Drive?"

"His car remained parked."

"Someone else's?"

"Possible."

Rachel said:

"We found tyre marks near the kitchen-garden gate."

Mercer turned.

"Fresh?"

"Very. One vehicle. Narrow tyres."

"Photographed?"

"Yes."

"Check against staff vehicles."

Rachel nodded.

Clara asked:

"Could a bicycle get here from the green?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Yes."

"How long?"

Tom answered.

"Five minutes if you're fit."

Mabel said:

"Gerald isn't."

Clara thought.

Someone could move between the fête and manor quickly without being noticed in a car.

A bicycle.

A service track.

Perhaps someone younger.

She thought of Nathan.

Sophie.

The unidentified figure.

Even Louisa.

Mercer said:

"Enough."

He gestured down the lane.

"Go home."

Clara sighed.

"Fine."

This time she meant it.

Probably.

They had walked perhaps fifty yards when Monty stopped.

He pulled towards the hedge.

"Monty."

The dog sniffed furiously at the base of the stone wall.

Then he shoved his head between two clumps of nettles.

Tom said:

"Rabbit?"

"Hopefully."

Monty backed out.

Something hung from his mouth.

Clara's heart sank.

"No."

He trotted towards her.

Mabel leaned closer.

"Not a rabbit."

Monty held a strip of cloth.

Dark blue.

Clara crouched.

"Drop it."

He did.

Progress.

The fabric was narrow.

Torn.

Perhaps from clothing.

One edge was caught with a small thorn.

Clara did not touch it.

Tom shone his phone torch.

"Looks like jacket lining."

Mabel said:

"Or ribbon."

Clara looked along the wall.

The hedge bordered a narrow opening.

Not exactly a gate.

More like an old service gap partly concealed by vegetation.

Beyond it, a path ran towards the manor grounds.

Tom saw it too.

"Shortcut."

Clara's pulse quickened.

The main gate was not the only route.

Someone could move between the lane and the glasshouse unseen.

Mercer's voice came from behind them.

"What now?"

Clara stood.

"Monty."

"Of course."

Mercer approached.

He saw the cloth.

His expression changed immediately.

"Nobody touch it."

"We haven't."

He crouched.

Rachel followed with an evidence bag.

The fabric was dark blue wool.

One side carried a tiny smear of reddish-brown.

Dirt, perhaps.

Rust.

Maybe blood.

Clara looked towards the hidden path.

Mercer did too.

"Where does that go?"

Mabel answered.

"Old gardeners' entrance."

"You know it?"

"I used it as a girl."

Mercer stared.

"Why?"

"Blackberries."

He decided not to ask.

Tom pointed.

"Direct to the kitchen gardens?"

"Yes," Mabel said. "Comes out near the boiler shed."

Rachel bagged the cloth.

Mercer shone his torch through the gap.

"Any reason it's not on the estate plan?"

"Because it's not really a path anymore."

"Apparently somebody disagrees."

Clara looked at the thorn where the cloth had caught.

The tear was fresh.

The fibres bright.

Someone had used the route recently.

Perhaps today.

Mercer said:

"Now you are definitely leaving."

Clara nodded.

"We are."

He looked at Monty.

"And take the evidence detector."

Mabel smiled.

"He's improving."

Monty wagged.

They continued towards Bramblewick.

For once, Clara did not attempt to turn back.

Her mind was busy enough.

The wallet.

The plant label.

The hidden path.

The torn blue cloth.

Sir Julian's shoe print.

Someone had visited the glasshouse.

Possibly several people.

And if the second Bramblewick Crimson had survived there for more than a century, the old building was not simply where Gerald hid a plant.

It was where the truth had been growing quietly while everyone else argued about who owned it.

Back at The Crooked Bookmark, Clara locked the door behind them.

Tom made tea.

Mabel found biscuits.

Monty slept.

Clara reopened the Vale catalogue.

She read every surviving entry concerning the Bramblewick Crimson.

Seedling selected 1878.

Successful propagation from cuttings, 1879.

Three plants moved to south wall garden.

1883 — stock reduced after severe winter. One plant retained with A. Crowther.

Nothing about the second plant Louisa remembered.

Clara turned the page.

Blank.

Then another.

Fruit trees.

Another.

Greenhouse repairs.

Something bothered her.

She returned to the rose page.

The bottom margin had been cut.

Not torn.

Cut.

A narrow strip removed cleanly across the lower edge.

"Mabel."

Mabel came over.

"What?"

"Look."

Mabel adjusted her glasses.

"Someone trimmed it."

"Yes."

"Recently?"

"No. Old cut."

Tom leaned over.

"What was there?"

"I don't know."

Clara studied the page against the lamp.

Indented handwriting.

Very faint.

Someone had written on the missing strip while the page beneath carried pressure marks.

She angled it.

Letters emerged imperfectly.

Mabel whispered:

"Can you read that?"

"Partly."

Clara traced the impressions without touching.

Something like:

...retained under glass...

Then:

...south house...

And beneath it:

...Crowther not informed...

Clara went still.

Tom read over her shoulder.

"Why wouldn't Crowther be informed?"

"Because he was told his was the surviving plant."

Mabel frowned.

"So the Vale family deliberately kept the second one secret."

"Looks like it."

"Why?"

Clara turned back to the earlier entries.

Disease.

Severe winter.

Propagation failures.

Perhaps insurance against losing the line.

But secrecy?

That suggested ownership.

Control.

Elias Vale entrusted one plant to Crowther.

Kept another.

If later generations forgot the arrangement, both families might believe they possessed the last survivor.

Two separate histories.

Two claims.

Gerald found Arthur's line.

But perhaps someone else had known about the estate line all along.

Tom said:

"Could Sir Julian have removed the strip?"

"No. The cut is too old."

Mabel said:

"Someone wanted the second plant forgotten."

"Yes."

The shop telephone rang.

All three looked at it.

Clara answered.

"The Crooked Bookmark."

"Mrs Bellamy."

Mercer.

"Inspector."

"Before you ask, yes, I'm calling voluntarily."

"I hadn't asked."

"Good."

He sounded tired.

"What did you find?"

"That sounds remarkably like investigating."

"You called me."

"Because I need the Vale catalogue."

Clara looked down.

"Why?"

"Comparison."

"With the label?"

"And another document."

Clara straightened.

"What document?"

"Bring the catalogue to the station tomorrow morning."

"Inspector."

"Eight thirty."

"That's cruel."

"Eight thirty."

"What's the document?"

Silence.

Then:

"A page from a second propagation ledger."

Clara's pulse jumped.

"You found it at the glasshouse?"

"No."

"Where?"

Another pause.

"Sir Julian's car."

Louisa had been right.

The second ledger existed.

"Original?"

"Photocopy."

"What does it say?"

"Tomorrow."

"Inspector."

"Eight thirty."

"You're enjoying this."

"No."

"Hard to tell."

He almost hung up.

Then said:

"One more thing."

Clara waited.

"The cloth Monty found."

"Yes?"

"It's not jacket lining."

"What is it?"

"A rosette sash."

Mabel stood.

Clara repeated:

"A sash?"

"Dark blue competition sash."

"From the fête?"

"Likely."

"Whose?"

"We're checking."

Mabel was mouthing something at Clara.

"What?" Clara whispered.

Mabel pointed towards the jam certificate.

Then towards the fête programme on the counter.

Clara picked it up.

She scanned the competition sections.

Roses.

Preserves.

Vegetables.

Floral displays.

Then she saw it.

BEST IN SHOW — BLUE SASH

Not first prize.

A separate award.

Presented by Sir Julian.

Clara's mind returned immediately to the note.

You promised me first prize.

Perhaps they had all been assuming the note referred to the Rose Cup.

Maybe it did not.

Maybe someone else expected a prize.

Someone whose sash had torn on the hidden path between the fête and the glasshouse.

Clara said:

"Inspector."

"Yes."

"Best in Show used a blue sash."

Silence.

"I know."

"Was it awarded?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Sir Julian hadn't completed judging."

"So whoever expected it—"

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow."

He hung up.

Clara slowly lowered the receiver.

Mabel looked pleased.

Tom did not.

"What?"

Clara opened the fête programme.

"Sir Julian wasn't only judging roses."

Mabel nodded.

"He judged overall horticultural Best in Show."

"And the winner would receive a blue sash."

"Yes."

"The cloth Monty found may have come from it."

Tom frowned.

"But if the sash hadn't been awarded, how did it get onto the hidden path?"

Clara looked at him.

Exactly.

The sash should have remained with the organisers until the ceremony.

Unless someone had taken it.

Or been given it early.

Or believed it already belonged to them.

Mabel said:

"Who was expected to win Best in Show?"

Clara scanned the programme.

"I don't know."

Mabel did.

Her expression changed.

"Oh."

"What?"

"Not Gerald."

Clara looked up.

"Who?"

Mabel tapped the programme.

"Arthur Bell."

Clara stared.

"Arthur entered?"

"Heritage roses. Old-fashioned garden class."

"But his rose was disqualified."

"No."

Mabel shook her head.

"Different rose."

Clara remembered Sheila's comment.

An elderly gardener whose magnificent rose had been disqualified.

Perhaps that assumption was wrong too.

Mabel continued:

"Arthur had a white climbing rose. Forty years old. Everyone said it was the best exhibit there."

Tom said:

"Would Julian have promised him first prize?"

"Arthur wouldn't ask."

"Someone else might."

Clara stared at the blue sash line.

Arthur had already concealed decades of history.

He had lied by omission to police.

He had possessed the Bramblewick Crimson.

He had known Julian.

And now a piece of the unawarded Best in Show sash had been found on the secret route to the glasshouse.

Still, Clara did not believe it.

Not yet.

Something else was missing.

She turned back to the cut page.

Crowther not informed.

Two rose lines.

Two hidden histories.

Two letters.

Two women at the marquee.

Two possible motives.

Perhaps the case kept doubling because everyone involved had been seeing only half the story.

Tom said:

"Clara."

She looked up.

"What?"

"There's something outside."

All three turned towards the shop window.

A shadow moved.

Then disappeared.

Clara's heart quickened.

Tom crossed to the door.

"Don't."

He stopped.

A moment later, something slid through the letterbox.

An envelope.

No stamp.

No name.

Mabel looked at Clara.

"That's never good."

Tom picked it up using the corner of a tea towel.

Clara almost smiled despite herself.

"Mercer is training us."

"Open it?"

"Without touching."

Tom placed it on the counter.

Clara used a letter opener.

Inside was a single photograph.

Old.

Black and white.

A glasshouse.

Two men stood beside a rose bed.

One was labelled on the back:

Albert Crowther

The other:

Elias Vale

Between them stood a woman.

No name.

Clara turned the photograph over again.

Written beneath the image in newer ink were six words:

“Ask who really bred the Crimson.”

Silence.

Mabel sat down.

Tom looked at Clara.

Clara looked at the unknown woman.

The Bramblewick Crimson had always been attributed to Elias Vale.

Every surviving catalogue said so.

Every village history said so.

But someone now wanted Clara to question that too.

The rose's ownership was uncertain.

Its survival was divided.

Its provenance had been manipulated.

And now even its creator might have been erased.

Clara looked towards the dark high street.

Someone in Bramblewick knew the history.

More than that.

Someone wanted her to find it.

And whoever had pushed the photograph through the door had been close enough to watch them come home.

The mystery was no longer simply about who killed Sir Julian Marlowe.

It was becoming a question of how many lies had been planted around one rose.

And how long they had been allowed to grow.

Next: **Chapter Seven — "The Woman in the Photograph"**, where Clara identifies the forgotten figure beside Elias Vale and Albert Crowther, the second propagation ledger reveals an altered attribution, and

the promised “first prize” begins to point away from Gerald altogether.

Chapter Seven: The Woman in the Photograph

At eight twenty-nine the following morning, Clara Bellamy walked into Bramblewick police station carrying a Victorian horticultural catalogue, an anonymous photograph and a paper bag containing two croissants.

Inspector Daniel Mercer looked at the bag.

"What's that?"

"Breakfast."

"You were told eight thirty."

"It is eight twenty-nine."

"Exactly."

"I've grown."

Mabel Finch entered behind her.

Mercer's expression changed.

"No."

Mabel stopped.

"No what?"

"No."

"That's vague."

"I asked Mrs Bellamy to bring the catalogue."

"She has."

"I did not ask you."

"I know."

"Then why are you here?"

"Transport."

Clara looked at her.

"We walked."

Mabel nodded.

"Moral transport."

Mercer stared at them both.

Detective Constable Rachel Shaw, seated behind a desk, became suddenly absorbed in her computer screen.

Clara suspected she was smiling.

Tom had declined to accompany them.

He had claimed the café needed opening.

Mabel had described this as cowardice.

Clara considered it evidence of sound judgement.

Mercer held out his hand.

"Catalogue."

Clara gave it to him.

"And the photograph."

She paused.

His eyes narrowed.

"What photograph?"

Clara placed the anonymous envelope on his desk.

"Someone pushed it through the bookshop letterbox last night."

Mercer's entire manner changed.

"When?"

"About ten."

"You didn't call."

"It seemed historical."

He closed his eyes.

Mabel said:

"I suggested we should."

Clara turned.

"You did not."

"I thought it."

Mercer looked between them.

"From now on, anonymous material connected to an active murder investigation is reported immediately."

Clara nodded.

"Fair."

"Not in the morning."

"Understood."

"Not after tea."

"Understood."

"Not once you've had time to examine it."

Clara hesitated.

Mercer pointed.

"Especially that."

"Fine."

He opened the envelope carefully.

The photograph slid onto his desk.

Rachel came over.

Mercer examined the image.

"Who are they?"

"Albert Crowther on the left. Elias Vale on the right."

"And the woman?"

"We don't know."

Mabel said:

"Yet."

Mercer ignored her.

He turned the photograph over.

Ask who really bred the Crimson.

His expression tightened.

"Handwriting?"

"Not familiar."

"Original photograph?"

"Looks old."

"We'll have it examined."

Clara nodded.

Mercer looked at her.

"Where exactly were you when this arrived?"

"Inside the shop."

"Anyone outside?"

"We saw a shadow."

"Description?"

"A shadow."

"Male?"

"Possibly."

"Height?"

"Human."

Mabel nodded.

"Definitely not Monty."

Mercer stared at Clara.

"Useful."

"I didn't see enough."

"Tom?"

"Same."

"Mrs Finch?"

Mabel shook her head.

"No."

Mercer placed the photograph into an evidence sleeve.

Then he opened the Vale catalogue to the rose entries.

"You found the cut margin."

Clara blinked.

"You noticed."

"Yes."

"Good."

"You sound surprised."

"I've become accustomed to being told not to investigate."

"You are not investigating."

"We'll call it attentive reading."

Mercer took a second document from a folder.

A photocopy.

Old handwriting.

Different paper.

He placed it beside the catalogue.

"This was in Sir Julian's car."

Clara leaned closer.

Mabel did too.

Mercer looked at her.

Mabel moved back perhaps half an inch.

The heading read:

South Glasshouse Propagation Ledger, 1898–1904

Below were several entries concerning fruit trees, winter losses and experimental roses.

Then Clara found the line.

Bramblewick Crimson — old stock recovered from Crowther line, two successful grafts established under glass.

She frowned.

"Recovered from Crowther line."

Mercer nodded.

"Keep reading."

The next entry was dated April 1901.

Plant A retained the south glasshouse. Plant B moved to the wall border. Vigour superior to Crowther specimen. Flowers true in colour, though form improved.

Then another, written in different ink:

Mrs A. Wren advises continued propagation from B rather than original stock.

Clara went still.

"Mabel."

"I saw it."

Mercer looked between them.

"What?"

Clara pointed.

"Mrs A. Wren."

"Who?"

"We don't know."

Mabel said:

"I might."

Of course she might.

Mercer sat back.

"Go on."

Mabel adjusted her glasses.

"There was a Wren family attached to the Vale estate."

"When?"

"Late nineteenth century. Early twentieth."

"Gardening staff?"

"No."

She frowned.

"Not exactly."

Clara waited.

Mabel looked annoyed at her own memory.

"Seed room. Records. Something like that."

Mercer said:

"You're guessing."

"I'm remembering slowly."

"There's a difference."

"At my age, less than you'd hope."

Rachel pulled a chair closer.

"Could A. Wren be the woman in the photograph?"

Clara looked at the image inside its sleeve.

Possible.

The woman stood between Elias Vale and Albert Crowther.

Not behind them.

Not posed as staff.

She was holding pruning shears.

Her dress was practical.

Dark skirt.

Light blouse.

Hair pinned up.

There was confidence in the way she faced the camera.

Not servant-like deference.

Not aristocratic formality.

Someone at work.

Clara said:

"If she advised which stock to propagate, she knew roses."

Mercer nodded.

"Likely."

Mabel's eyes narrowed.

"Wait."

Everyone looked at her.

"My grandmother mentioned a woman."

Clara leaned forward.

"Who?"

"Agnes Wren."

Mercer made a note.

"Relation?"

"None to me."

"What did your grandmother say?"

Mabel looked towards the ceiling, searching memory.

"That she could make roses behave."

Clara smiled slightly.

"That sounds like village mythology."

"It probably was."

"Anything else?"

"She worked with Elias Vale."

"As a gardener?"

"No."

Mabel frowned.

"That's the odd bit. She wasn't listed as one."

Rachel said:

"Maybe estate records didn't formally employ women in that role."

"Quite possibly," Clara said.

Mabel nodded.

"She was described as a botanical assistant."

Mercer looked at the photograph again.

"Where would we verify that?"

"Bramblewick Manor archive."

Clara said:

"Or parish records."

Mercer pointed at her.

"We will verify it."

"I said 'we' in the civilisational sense."

"You never do."

Clara ignored him.

She returned to the ledger.

Another entry.

Crimson selection attributed E.V. for exhibition purposes.

She stopped.

The room seemed to quiet.

"Inspector."

"I see it."

Mabel read aloud:

"'Attributed E.V. for exhibition purposes.'"

Rachel frowned.

"E.V. Elias Vale."

Clara nodded.

"Meaning the attribution may have been deliberate rather than accurate."

Mercer said:

"Could simply mean his estate submitted it."

"Could."

"But the anonymous photograph suggests otherwise."

"Yes."

Clara turned another page.

The next notes were more fragmented.

A.W. objects to naming.

Then:

E.V. insists estate designation remains.

And, later:

No public reference to Wren selection.

Mabel sat back.

"Well."

Clara looked at her.

"That's becoming your word for historical fraud."

"It covers a lot."

Mercer read the entries again.

"So Agnes Wren may have bred the Bramblewick Crimson."

Clara said:

"Or selected the seedling."

"Difference?"

"Potentially important. Breeding can involve deliberate crosses. Selection might mean identifying the best seedling from a batch."

Rachel nodded.

"But either way, Elias Vale may have taken the credit."

"Yes."

Mercer looked towards the anonymous photograph.

"And someone wants us to know."

Clara said:

"Not us."

He looked at her.

"Me."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Someone thinks you'll investigate."

Mabel smiled.

"Correct."

Mercer ignored her.

Clara looked again at Agnes Wren.

"Perhaps because the bookshop has the catalogue."

"Or because of Edwin Pritchard."

Clara's expression changed.

Mercer continued.

"Word travels. You solved one historical tangle. Someone may think you'll solve another."

"I didn't solve it alone."

"No."

"That sounded almost generous."

"Don't get used to it."

Rachel's phone buzzed.

She checked the message.

"Sir. Identification on the sash fragment."

Mercer looked up.

"Yes?"

"It matches the Best in Show presentation sash."

Clara's attention sharpened.

"Any trace?"

Rachel read.

"Fibres match. Tear edge consistent with missing section."

"Where's the rest of the sash?"

"Recovered from the fête committee lockbox."

Mabel frowned.

"If the sash was in the lockbox, how did a piece end up on the path?"

Rachel nodded.

"Exactly."

Mercer stood.

"Was it already torn?"

"Yes."

"When logged?"

"The steward who packed the prizes says she noticed damage after the body was found."

"Name?"

"Patricia Lowe."

"Who had access before?"

"Judges, stewards, committee chair."

Clara said:

"And whoever was promised first prize."

Mercer looked at her.

"Possibly."

Mabel said:

"Not Gerald, then."

"Not necessarily."

Clara shook her head.

"The note said 'first prize', not Best in Show."

Mercer nodded.

"Yes."

"Who won Best in Show?"

"It was never formally awarded."

"Who was leading?"

Rachel checked her notes.

"Arthur Bell."

Mabel looked unsurprised.

Clara said:

"But Arthur never received the sash."

"No."

"So how did it tear on the hidden path?"

Mercer said:

"Someone carried it."

"Why?"

"Good question."

Clara thought of the note.

You promised me first prize.

Perhaps the writer expected Sir Julian to award something privately.

Perhaps Sir Julian used promises freely.

Gerald.

Arthur.

Someone else.

She looked at Mercer.

"Who else had been told they might win?"

"We're asking."

"Preserves?"

"Not Julian's category."

"Vegetables?"

"Some."

"Floral arrangement?"

"Yes."

"Heritage class?"

"Yes."

Mabel frowned.

"Arthur wasn't expecting first prize."

"How do you know?"

"He was annoyed his entry was accepted."

Everyone looked at her.

Clara said:

"Why?"

"Because he'd entered it accidentally."

Mercer stared.

"How do you accidentally enter a flower show?"

"His niece filled in the form."

"Which niece?"

Mabel paused.

Then:

"Lucy Bell."

Clara frowned.

"Arthur has a niece called Lucy?"

"Great-niece. She's staying with him."

"Age?"

"Thirty-something."

"Gardener?"

"Botanical illustrator."

Something moved in Clara's memory.

Nathan's photograph.

The younger woman.

Dark hair.

Green jacket.

Near the marquee at one twenty-two.

"Does she have dark hair?"

Mabel looked at her.

"Yes."

"Green jacket?"

"Often."

Mercer immediately picked up his phone.

Clara said:

"She may be the unidentified woman in Nathan's photographs."

Mercer nodded.

"Rachel."

Rachel was already moving.

"I'll get a photograph."

Mercer made the call.

Clara looked at Mabel.

"Why hasn't Arthur mentioned her?"

"Maybe nobody asked."

"She was staying with him while all this happened."

"Yes."

"She knew about the rose?"

Mabel's face changed.

"Almost certainly."

"Why?"

"She's been drawing Arthur's plants for years."

Clara stared.

"So if the Bramblewick Crimson grew at Rosebank, Lucy had seen it."

"Yes."

"Could she distinguish the original plant from Gerald's fête entry?"

"Better than most."

That mattered.

Mercer ended his call.

"Arthur confirms Lucy Bell was at the fête."

"Where is she now?"

"Rosebank Cottage."

"Did he know she went near the marquee?"

"He says no."

"Did she have access to the 'best in Show sash?"

"Unknown."

Mabel said:

"She helped with the floral displays."

Mercer looked at her.

"You really do know everyone."

"I've been trying to explain this."

Rachel returned with a phone.

She showed Nathan's photograph.

Mabel leaned in.

"That's Lucy."

Clara felt the case widen again.

"Did Lucy meet Julian?"

"Likely," Mercer said.

"Why?"

"Arthur says Julian spoke to both of them three weeks ago."

"About the rose."

"Yes."

"What did Lucy tell him?"

"We don't know."

Mabel's eyes narrowed.

"Arthur won't like this."

Mercer looked at her.

"Why?"

"He's protective of her."

"How protective?"

"Raised her half the time."

Clara thought about Arthur's behaviour at The Crooked Bookmark.

Fear.

Reluctance.

Confession.

Perhaps he had not been hiding only his own history.

Perhaps he was protecting Lucy.

Rachel said:

"There's another identification."

Mercer looked at her.

"The dark blue cloth had plant material embedded in the fibres."

"What kind?"

"Rose pollen and tiny petal fragments."

Clara looked towards the sash photograph.

"The Bramblewick Crimson?"

"Preliminary match says possibly."

Mabel said:

"Meaning someone carrying the sash also handled the rose."

"Or brushed against it."

Clara thought.

The sash fragment was found on the hidden gardeners' path leading to the glasshouse.

It carried rose material.

The whole sash had been recovered from the prize lockbox.

So someone had taken it out, carried it towards the glasshouse, torn it, and returned the rest.

Why?

That was not a murderer's obvious act.

Unless the sash had been wrapped around something.

Clara said:

"Could the sash have been used to carry the cut bloom?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Why?"

"To protect it."

Mabel nodded slowly.

"Or hide it."

Rachel said:

"Blue cloth around a dark red rose. Possible."

Mercer said:

"Why return the sash?"

Clara shrugged.

"Because its absence would be noticed."

"Then why take it at all?"

"Because it was handy."

Mabel said:

"Or because someone thought it belonged to them."

The note again.

You promised me first prize.

Clara's gaze moved to the second ledger.

Agnes Wren objected to the attribution.

Elias Vale insisted.

No public reference to Wren selection.

A woman denied credit.

A rose assigned to someone else.

First prize.

Recognition.

Ownership.

The same themes kept repeating.

"Inspector."

Mercer looked at her.

"What if the note isn't about the fête?"

He frowned.

"Explain."

"'You promised me first prize.' We assume someone meant today's competition because it was in Julian's pocket."

"Reasonable."

"Yes. But what if it referred to something older? A publication prize. A competition. An award."

Mabel said:

"Or the article."

Nathan's magazine feature.

Clara turned to her.

"What?"

"Gerald expected the magazine story."

"Yes."

"But Nathan said Julian was the expert authentication."

Tom wasn't there to contribute, but Clara could hear his earlier question in her head: what did first prize really mean?

Mercer said:

"We'll keep it open."

That was as close to agreement as he gave.

Rachel returned to her desk.

Mercer looked at Clara.

"Anything else in the ledger?"

Clara turned pages.

A section from 1902.

More propagation.

Then a note that made her stop.

A.W. specimen awarded first certificate at county trial under E.V. name.

Mabel leaned in.

"There."

Clara read it again.

Agnes Wren's specimen.

Awarded under Elias Vale's name.

First certificate.

First prize, in effect.

She looked at the anonymous photograph.

Perhaps the note in Julian's pocket echoed old language deliberately.

Or coincidentally.

Then another entry.

Agnes refuses further exhibition unless attribution corrected.

Below it:

Dispute unresolved.

And then:

A.W. departed estate, October 1902.

Clara looked at Mercer.

"What happened to her?"

"We'll find out."

Mabel said quietly:

"I think I know."

Everyone turned.

"What?" Clara asked.

Mabel looked unusually serious.

"Agnes Wren married."

"Whom?"

"Albert Crowther."

Silence.

Clara looked at the photograph again.

The woman stood between Elias Vale and Albert Crowther.

If Agnes married Albert, the Bramblewick Crimson was not merely entrusted to the Crowther family.

Its likely creator became part of that family.

Arthur Bell was not simply descended from the caretaker of the rose.

He might be descended from the woman who bred it.

That changed ownership completely.

Mercer said:

"You're certain?"

Mabel nodded.

"My grandmother knew their daughter."

"Name?"

"Elsie."

Arthur's mother.

Clara sat back.

"Arthur is Agnes Wren's grandson."

"Yes."

"The rose wasn't entrusted to his family by chance."

"No."

Mabel's voice was quiet.

"It was hers."

That sentence settled over the room.

For more than a century, the Bramblewick Crimson had been credited to Elias Vale.

Gerald had built his reputation on supposedly rediscovering or recreating it.

Sir Julian had been preparing to expose the deception.

But the deepest deception belonged to the Vale estate itself.

Agnes Wren bred or selected the rose.

Elias Vale took the credit.

Agnes left.

Married Albert Crowther.

And one plant went with them.

Perhaps because it was never Elias Vale's to give.

Clara said:

"Then Gerald's entire claim becomes even worse."

Mercer nodded.

"He took a plant from the breeder's descendants and presented himself as its rediscoverer."

"Assuming Arthur didn't knowingly give him those rights."

"We'll establish that."

Mabel said:

"He didn't."

Mercer looked at her.

"You cannot know."

"I can know Arthur."

"Not legally useful."

"Still true."

Rachel's phone rang.

She listened.

Then looked at Mercer.

"Sir."

Something in her expression changed the room.

"What?"

"Officers at Rosebank Cottage can't locate Lucy Bell."

Mercer stood.

"Vehicle?"

"Still there."

"Phone?"

"Off."

"Arthur?"

"Says he thought she was upstairs."

Clara felt unease rise.

"When was she last seen?"

Rachel listened again.

"Approximately seven last night."

Mabel frowned.

"That late?"

Rachel nodded.

"A neighbour saw her cycling towards the manor lane."

Clara looked at Mercer.

The hidden path.

The tyre marks near the kitchen-garden gate.

Narrow tyres.

Mercer was already moving.

"Get units to the manor and surrounding lanes. Check the glasshouse again. Outbuildings. Footpaths."

Rachel nodded.

Clara said:

"Inspector."

"No."

"She may not be in danger."

"No."

"I was going to say she may know where the original plant is."

Mercer stopped.

He looked at her.

Clara continued.

"Lucy has drawn Arthur's plants for years. If anyone knew the scarred specimen, it was her."

Mabel nodded.

"And she knew the old gardeners' path."

Mercer turned to Rachel.

"Add Rosebank greenhouse and all garden sheds to the search. Also check whether any large plant pots are missing."

Rachel moved.

Mercer looked back at Clara.

"You stay here."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"In the police station?"

"Safest place I can think of."

Mabel folded her arms.

"I object."

"Noted."

Clara looked at the photograph of Agnes Wren again.

Something about it bothered her.

Not the people.

The background.

She picked it up carefully through the sleeve.

"Inspector."

"What now?"

"The glasshouse."

He looked.

Behind the three figures stood a brick wall with a distinctive arched window.

Same style as the old Vale glasshouse.

But beside Agnes was a stone trough.

Clara had seen something like it the previous evening through the gate.

A long rectangular trough partly buried by ivy.

"That photograph was taken at the glasshouse."

"Likely."

"No. Look."

She pointed.

"The trough."

Mercer leaned closer.

"What about it?"

"Last night, the police searched under the potting bench."

"Yes."

"Did anyone search inside the stone trough?"

He stared at her.

Then took out his phone.

"Rachel."

She turned.

"Tell the manor team to check the old stone trough in the south glasshouse."

"Why?"

"Because Mrs Bellamy has apparently memorised nineteenth-century garden furniture."

Mabel nodded proudly.

"Useful."

Clara ignored her.

Mercer made the call.

They waited.

Three minutes.

Four.

Nobody spoke.

Mabel finally opened Clara's croissant bag.

"Are you eating these?"

Clara looked at her.

"Apparently not."

Mabel took one.

Mercer's phone rang.

He answered.

Listened.

His expression changed.

"Don't touch it. Scene team only. And locate Lucy Bell now."

He ended the call.

Clara stood.

"What?"

Mercer looked at her.

"The trough had a false stone base."

Mabel stopped chewing.

"Inside?"

"A wrapped bundle."

"What?"

"Old documents."

Clara felt a rush.

"Agnes Wren's?"

"Possibly."

"Anything else?"

Mercer hesitated.

That meant yes.

"Inspector."

He exhaled.

"A fresh rose cutting."

Silence.

"The Crimson?"

"Looks like it."

"From the scarred plant?"

"We'll need Arthur to confirm."

Clara stared.

Someone had hidden a live cutting inside the same place where documents connected to Agnes Wren had been concealed.

Recent action.

Historical hiding place.

That did not feel accidental.

Mabel said:

"Lucy."

Mercer did not disagree.

Rachel's phone rang almost immediately.

She answered.

Then raised a hand.

"Sir."

"What?"

"She's been found."

Clara's chest loosened slightly.

"Where?"

Rachel listened.

"Old potting shed behind the manor orchard."

"Condition?"

"Alive."

Everyone exhaled.

Then Rachel's face tightened.

"But injured."

Mercer moved.

"How?"

"Head wound. Conscious but confused."

Clara felt cold.

"Did she say who attacked her?"

Rachel held up one finger, listening.

Then:

"She keeps saying the same thing."

Mercer waited.

"What?"

Rachel looked at Clara.

"'He took the wrong rose.'"

Silence.

Mercer grabbed his jacket.

Clara said:

"Who?"

Rachel shook her head.

"She hasn't said."

Mabel put down the croissant.

Mercer pointed at Clara.

"You remain here."

Clara stared at him.

"Inspector—"

"No."

"Lucy may speak to Arthur."

"Police will handle it."

"She knows the rose."

"So do we."

"Not like she does."

Mercer stopped.

For a second, Clara thought he might argue.

Instead he said:

"If I need you, I will call."

Clara nodded.

That was progress.

He left with Rachel.

The station became quiet.

Mabel looked at Clara.

"You are going to hate waiting."

"I already do."

She returned to the ledger.

He took the wrong rose.

Who was he?

Gerald?

Julian?

Someone else?

And which rose was wrong?

Gerald's fête entry had apparently been a substitution.

The original scarred Crowther plant was missing.

The glasshouse may contain a second line descended from the estate specimen.

Now a fresh cutting had been hidden with Agnes Wren's documents.

Perhaps there were not two roses.

Perhaps there were three.

Clara turned another page of the South Glasshouse ledger.

Near the end, a faded note had been added in pencil:

Wren stock differs from the Vale glasshouse line. Do not combine.

She stopped breathing for a moment.

"Mabel."

Mabel came over.

Clara pointed.

"Read that."

Mabel did.

"What does it mean?"

"I'm not sure."

"Two different roses?"

"Possibly."

The Bramblewick Crimson preserved by Agnes Wren and Albert Crowther might not be genetically identical to the plant retained at the Vale estate.

Perhaps the estate had propagated an early sibling seedling.

Perhaps Elias Vale had deliberately substituted one.

Perhaps the legendary Bramblewick Crimson itself had been misidentified for a century.

Clara read the line again.

Do not combine.

Not the same.

If Gerald took the wrong rose, perhaps his entire deception began because he never actually possessed the true Bramblewick Crimson.

Maybe Arthur's plant was one line.

The manor plant another.

Which was genuine?

The anonymous photograph asked who really bred it.

Perhaps the killer cared less about money than attribution.

Recognition.

A name.

A prize stolen more than a hundred years earlier.

Mabel said:

"You're thinking."

"Yes."

"Badly?"

"Potentially."

The station door opened.

Tom entered carrying a cardboard tray of coffees.

Clara stared.

"What are you doing here?"

"Mabel texted."

Clara turned.

Mabel looked innocent.

"You were hungry."

Tom placed the tray down.

"What happened?"

Clara explained.

Agnes Wren.

The second ledger.

Lucy missing and found injured.

The hidden documents.

The rose cutting.

Tom listened without interruption.

Then said:

"You're assuming 'wrong rose' means the wrong variety."

Clara looked at him.

"What else?"

"The wrong plant."

Mabel frowned.

"That's the same thing."

"No."

Tom shook his head.

"If there are two or three individual plants of the same variety, someone could take the wrong one physically."

Clara stared.

Tom continued.

"Gerald's fête plant was young."

"Yes."

"Arthur's original was mature and scarred."

"Yes."

"The manor may have another mature plant."

"Maybe."

"What if somebody intended to steal one particular specimen but took another?"

Clara felt something align.

"Why would the individual specimen matter?"

Tom shrugged.

"Evidence."

"Of what?"

"Age. Scar. Provenance. Graft."

Clara's mind returned to Sir Julian.

The plant tells the truth even when the paperwork doesn't.

The physical plant proved something.

Not merely variety.

History.

Rootstock.

Perhaps even which line was genuinely old.

"Tom."

"Yes?"

"That's good."

"I have moments."

Mabel nodded.

"Rare, but noticeable."

Tom ignored her.

Clara said:

"If someone needed to prove Gerald's fraud, they needed the original plant Arthur gave him."

"Right."

"If they took a younger propagated specimen instead, it wouldn't prove decades of possession."

"Exactly."

"And Lucy could tell the difference."

Mabel's face darkened.

"Which could be why she was attacked."

Clara looked towards the station door.

Suddenly waiting felt worse.

A telephone rang on Rachel's empty desk.

No one answered.

It rang again.

Then stopped.

Clara forced herself back to the documents.

She needed something concrete.

Agnes Wren.

Albert Crowther.

Two propagation lines.

The 1901 ledger.

Elias Vale's attribution.

She picked up the anonymous photograph again.

The three people were standing with the rose between them.

Agnes's hand rested on the plant.

Albert was looking at Agnes.

Elias was looking at the camera.

Then Clara noticed something tiny.

A label attached to the pot.

She brought the photograph closer.

The writing was too small to read.

But the label shape was distinctive.

Metal.

Oval.

Not the rectangular label found beneath the potting bench.

Different plant.

She turned to the photocopied ledger.

Plant A retained south glasshouse. Plant B moved to wall border. Vigour superior to Crowther specimen. Flowers true in colour, though form improved.

Form improved.

Not identical.

Perhaps the estate line had been selected to look more perfect.

Louisa had said Gerald's fête rose was too perfect.

Clara's pulse quickened.

What if Gerald's fête entry was not a modern recreation at all?

What if it was the Vale glasshouse line?

A century-old related rose, propagated secretly.

Beautiful.

More symmetrical.

Historically associated with the estate.

But not Agnes Wren's original Bramblewick Crimson.

Then Sir Julian's disqualification made perfect sense.

Gerald had substituted the Vale line for the scarred Crowther plant.

Why?

Because the original was gone.

Or stolen.

Or dying.

And he needed something convincing enough to pass.

Clara said:

"Mabel."

"What?"

"Gerald's fête rose may have come from the manor."

Mabel stared.

"Not his greenhouse?"

"Think about Louisa's description. Too perfect."

"Yes."

"The ledger says the manor line had improved form."

Mabel looked down.

"'Flowers true in colour, though form improved.'"

"Exactly."

Tom leaned closer.

"So Gerald entered the Vale line and claimed it was his rediscovered Bramblewick Crimson."

"Possibly."

"Why would he have access?"

"He's worked on estate gardening projects for years."

Mabel said:

"And Beatrice may not know one old red rose from another."

Clara nodded.

"If Gerald lost Arthur's original plant, he could substitute the manor line."

Tom said:

"Which Julian discovered."

"Yes."

"And someone took the wrong rose."

Clara stopped.

The phrase changed again.

Perhaps Lucy had been attacked because she tried to recover Arthur's original and instead found the manor line.

Or because someone else had.

Mabel said:

"Too many roses."

"Definitely."

Tom looked at the anonymous photograph.

"Who sent this?"

Clara sighed.

"That's another problem."

"Someone who knows Agnes Wren mattered."

"Yes."

"Arthur?"

"Possible."

"He could have just told you."

"True."

"Lucy?"

Clara looked at him.

"Also possible."

"If she wanted you to discover her great-grandmother's role without involving herself directly."

Mabel nodded slowly.

"That sounds like Lucy."

"Why anonymous?"

"Because Arthur would stop her."

Clara looked at the envelope.

If Lucy had sent the photograph, she had been outside The Crooked Bookmark around ten.

But the neighbour reportedly saw her cycling towards the manor at seven.

She could have returned.

Possible.

Then gone back to the manor later.

Possible again.

But why?

To hide Agnes's documents?

To take a cutting?

To prove something?

Clara's phone rang.

Mercer.

She answered immediately.

"Inspector?"

"Lucy Bell is stable."

"Good."

"Concussion. Six stitches. No fracture."

"Has she spoken?"

"Yes."

Clara waited.

Mercer continued.

"She says she went to the glasshouse last night."

"Why?"

"To recover the original Bramblewick Crimson."

Clara looked at Tom.

His theory.

"From where?"

"She believed Gerald had moved it there."

"Was she right?"

"No."

Clara frowned.

"Then what did she find?"

"A different mature rose."

"The Vale line."

"Possibly."

"Who attacked her?"

"She didn't see."

"Male?"

"She thinks so."

"Why?"

"Strength and voice."

"Voice?"

"Whispered. She couldn't identify it."

"What did he say?"

Mercer paused.

"'You should have left it buried.'"

Clara went still.

The phrase echoed Book One almost too neatly, but this was within the story world. Still, it could be intentionally thematic. Yet maybe too similar to Edwin note; but user's cozy series could echo.

Clara said:

"About the documents?"

"We think so."

"What did Lucy hide under the trough?"

"Agnes Wren's papers."

"So she sent me the photograph."

"Yes."

Clara exhaled.

"She admitted it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She wanted someone outside the family dispute to see it."

"Makes sense."

"She also took the sash."

Clara stared.

"The Best in Show sash?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"To wrap the cutting."

Tom nodded silently.

Clara said:

"And she returned it."

"After hiding the cutting."

"That explains the tear."

"Yes."

Mabel leaned closer, trying to hear.

Clara put the phone on speaker.

Mercer sighed audibly.

"Of course."

Mabel said:

"Hello, Inspector."

"Mrs Finch."

"What rose did Lucy cut?"

Mercer paused.

"She believed it was the original."

Clara looked at Tom.

"But it wasn't."

"No."

"Wrong rose."

"Exactly."

"Did she know that before she was attacked?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Stem."

"The scar."

"No scar."

Clara felt another piece settle.

Lucy had gone to the glasshouse expecting Arthur's scarred plant.

Instead she found another mature Bramblewick-like rose without the scar.

She cut it, perhaps as proof, then realised it was wrong.

"Did she see the scarred plant anywhere?"

"No."

"So Arthur's original is still missing."

"Yes."

"What about the anonymous photo?"

"Lucy pushed it through your door."

Mabel nodded triumphantly.

Tom looked at her.

"You guessed after the fact."

"Still counts."

Clara asked:

"Why not just come inside?"

"She saw Tom and Mabel with you and lost her nerve."

"Why?"

"Arthur had told her not to involve anyone."

"Why did Arthur want silence?"

"Because he believed exposing Agnes Wren's authorship would trigger a fight over ownership and shame him for helping Gerald."

Clara sighed.

"Very Bramblewick."

"Quite."

"Did Lucy know who took the original plant?"

Mercer was silent.

"Inspector?"

"She suspects Gerald."

"Naturally."

"But?"

"But she saw something yesterday morning."

"What?"

"Gerald's greenhouse."

Clara waited.

"She went there before the fête. The mature scarred plant was already gone."

"So it disappeared before Julian was killed."

"Yes."

"When?"

"Unknown."

"Could Julian have taken it?"

"Possible."

"Why?"

"Evidence. Protection. Leverage."

"Or someone else."

"Yes."

Mabel said:

"Did Lucy see Gerald at the glasshouse last night?"

"No."

"Then who attacked her?"

"We're working on it."

Clara heard something in Mercer's tone.

"You have a suspect."

"No comment."

"That means yes."

"No, it means no comment."

"Has Gerald been arrested?"

"No."

"Sheila?"

"No."

"Sophie?"

"No."

"Louisa?"

"No."

"Arthur?"

"No."

Mabel said:

"Very efficient elimination."

Mercer ignored her.

Clara thought through the remaining names.

Nathan Cole.

Beatrice Vale.

Lucy herself, though injured.

Perhaps someone not yet central.

Then the note in Julian's pocket returned.

You promised me first prize.

"Inspector."

"What?"

"Has handwriting analysis come back on Julian's note?"

"Not yet."

"Did Lucy write it?"

"No."

"You asked?"

"Yes."

"Arthur?"

"No."

"Gerald?"

"Denies it."

"Louisa?"

"Denies it."

"Sophie?"

"Denies it."

"Sheila?"

"Denies it."

"Which leaves Nathan."

"We have his sample."

"And?"

"Pending."

Clara looked at Mabel.

"Who else would care about first prize?"

Mabel frowned.

"Plenty."

"Specifically someone close enough to Julian to expect a promise."

Tom said:

"A competitor he knew before the fête."

Clara nodded.

"Nathan?"

"Writer, not entrant."

"Sheila?"

"Gardener."

"Arthur?"

"Doesn't seem likely."

Mabel suddenly went still.

Clara saw it.

"What?"

Mabel looked annoyed.

"I forgot someone."

Mercer's voice came through the phone.

"Who?"

"Beatrice Vale."

Clara frowned.

"She entered?"

"Not personally."

"What then?"

"The manor entered the heritage display."

Clara remembered.

Old estate roses.

Historic specimens.

Perhaps the revived Vale line.

Mabel continued:

"Best heritage exhibit."

"Judged by Julian?"

"Yes."

"First prize?"

"Yes."

Mercer said:

"Beatrice didn't mention competing."

Mabel snorted.

"Beatrice doesn't regard it as competing if the estate wins."

Clara almost smiled.

"What was in the display?"

"Roses from the manor gardens."

There it was again.

Roses.

"Could one have been the Vale line?"

"Possibly."

Mercer said:

"I'm going to speak to her now."

Clara looked at the second ledger.

"Ask whether anyone promised the estate first prize."

"I was planning to."

"Good."

"Do not come."

"I wasn't invited."

"That has not stopped you."

He ended the call.

Mabel stared at the phone.

"Rude."

Tom sat back.

"Beatrice."

Clara looked out through the station window.

Bramblewick Manor had been hiding a second rose line for more than a century.

Its owner might not even understand what grew there.

But someone did.

Gerald certainly.

Lucy likely.

Julian definitely.

Perhaps Beatrice too.

And if the manor's heritage display contained the Vale line, then Julian had multiple reasons to disqualify Gerald's entry.

Gerald may have stolen not only Arthur's history.

He may have stolen the manor's plant too.

First prize could belong to someone who believed Sir Julian had promised recognition to the estate.

Or to someone else entirely.

Tom picked up the photocopied ledger.

"Look at this."

Clara turned.

He pointed to the entry:

Mrs A. Wren advises continued propagation from B rather than original stock.

"What?"

"Why would Agnes advise propagating B instead of the original if B wasn't hers?"

Clara frowned.

"Good question."

"Maybe both lines were hers."

Mabel looked at him.

"Meaning?"

Tom tapped the page.

"Maybe Elias Vale didn't breed either rose."

Clara felt the possibility expand.

Agnes may have selected the original seedling.

Then later selected an improved sport or offspring.

The entire famous Bramblewick Crimson lineage could be her work.

Elias Vale's contribution might have been money, glasshouses and a name.

Clara looked at the photograph.

Agnes in the centre.

Pruning shears in hand.

Perhaps the image had been telling the truth all along.

Not merely who stood there.

Who worked.

Who created.

Who deserved the prize.

The police-station door opened.

Rachel Shaw came in carrying another folder.

"Inspector left?"

Clara nodded.

"Manor."

Rachel looked unsurprised.

She placed the folder on her desk.

Clara noticed the label.

MARLOWE — PERSONAL EFFECTS

Rachel saw her looking.

"No."

"I didn't ask."

"You were going to."

Mabel said:

"She was."

Clara ignored her.

Rachel began sorting papers.

Then stopped.

Something fell from the folder.

A small card.

It landed face up.

Clara saw only a few words before Rachel picked it up.

GARDEN BRITAIN AWARDS — FINALIST

Nathan Cole.

Clara frowned.

"What's that?"

Rachel hesitated.

Then sighed.

"Found in Sir Julian's wallet."

"Nathan's name?"

"Yes."

"Finalist for what?"

Rachel checked.

"Garden Writer of the Year."

Clara felt the note suddenly take on another possible meaning.

You promised me first prize.

Nathan had joked about professional jealousy.

He was not simply covering the fête.

He was a finalist in an award Sir Julian may have influenced.

"Did Julian judge it?"

Rachel looked at the paperwork.

"Chair of the judging panel."

Mabel whispered:

"Well."

Clara stared at the card.

Nathan had been at the fête.

He had spoken privately with Julian.

He had deleted a photograph.

He had access to the timings.

He knew the rose story before publication.

And now it turned out Sir Julian was judging an award Nathan wanted.

"Has Nathan told you about this?"

Rachel's expression was enough.

"No."

Tom said:

"That's awkward."

Clara looked at Nathan's camera evidence in her mind.

The photographs had helped expose everyone else's movements.

But who was photographing Nathan?

Almost nobody.

A photographer could record a scene while remaining absent from most of it.

Clara said quietly:

"Rachel."

"Yes?"

"Where was Nathan between twelve forty-five and one ten?"

Rachel froze.

She checked a timeline on the desk.

"Unknown."

Clara felt the room sharpen again.

"And after one twenty-five?"

"Mostly unknown until the body was found."

Mabel leaned back.

"The journalist disappears from his own photographs."

Rachel picked up the phone.

Clara looked at Tom.

The note in Julian's pocket might not be about roses at all.

It might be about a writing award.

A promise.

A career.

A humiliation.

And for the first time since Sir Julian's death, Clara could see a motive that had nothing to do with Gerald Wainwright.

That made it dangerous.

Because everyone had been looking at the flowers.

Chapter Eight: The Man Behind the Camera

Nathan Cole returned to Bramblewick police station at eleven fourteen.

He did not come voluntarily.

This was obvious from his expression.

Detective Constable Rachel Shaw brought him into the interview room with the professional neutrality of someone who had already decided not to be impressed by anything he said.

Clara watched through the open office doorway.

Nathan saw her.

His expression became worse.

"Oh, good."

Clara raised an eyebrow.

"Good morning."

"Is there anywhere in Bramblewick you don't appear?"

"Several places."

Mabel said:

"Not many."

Nathan looked at her.

"You're here too."

"Obviously."

Rachel pointed towards the interview room.

"In."

Nathan obeyed.

The door closed.

Clara looked at Rachel.

"You suspect him."

Rachel gave her a flat look.

"I work for the police."

"So?"

"We investigate people."

"That wasn't an answer."

"It was the only one you're getting."

Mabel nodded approvingly.

"She's learning from Mercer."

Rachel almost smiled.

Then her phone buzzed.

She read the message.

"Interesting."

Clara tried not to look interested.

Failed.

Rachel noticed.

"You can stop that."

"What?"

"Trying to read my face."

"I wasn't."

"You were."

Mabel said:

"She's not very subtle."

Clara turned.

"I thought you were on my side."

"I am. Doesn't require dishonesty."

Rachel picked up a folder.

"Inspector Mercer is on his way back from the manor."

"Did Beatrice Vale write the note?"

"No."

Clara blinked.

Rachel sighed.

"You asked directly. I'm rewarding efficiency."

"Thank you."

"Don't expect it again."

"So Beatrice denies 'You promised me first prize.'"

"Yes."

"Handwriting?"

"Doesn't match."

"Did she expect the heritage display to win?"

"She says Sir Julian told her it was likely."

"Promised?"

"No."

"Could she be lying?"

"Everyone could be lying."

Mabel nodded.

"Now she definitely sounds like Mercer."

Rachel sat down.

Clara looked towards the closed interview-room door.

"What about Nathan's writing award?"

"He admits being a finalist."

"Did Julian promise him first prize?"

"That's what we're asking."

"Did Nathan know the card was in Julian's wallet?"

"No."

"Why did Julian carry it?"

"Unknown."

Tom had not joined them this time.

He had returned to the café after declaring that one murder investigation was quite enough to damage the lunchtime trade.

Mabel had remained because, as she explained, she had no lunchtime trade.

Clara had remained because Mercer had told her to.

That still felt unusual.

She was not sure whether it represented professional trust or containment.

Probably both.

The station door opened.

Mercer entered carrying his jacket over one arm and an expression Clara recognised as mildly irritated concentration.

He saw her.

Then Mabel.

Then stopped.

"Still here."

"You told me to stay."

"I did."

Clara smiled.

"I'm enjoying the novelty."

"Don't."

He placed a file on Rachel's desk.

"Where's Cole?"

"Interview room."

"Good."

"His award connection has been confirmed."

Mercer nodded.

"Anything on handwriting?"

"Preliminary comparison. Not his."

Clara felt a small drop of disappointment.

Not because she wanted Nathan guilty.

Because she wanted the note solved.

Mercer noticed.

"That doesn't clear him."

"I know."

"Nor does it prove the note was written by whoever committed the murder."

"I know."

Mabel said:

"Still annoying."

Mercer looked at her.

"What is?"

"The note."

"Yes."

"Good. We're aligned."

Mercer ignored this.

Clara said:

"What did Beatrice tell you?"

"Enough."

"That sounds ominous."

"It sounds confidential."

"Same tone."

Mercer looked at Rachel.

"Let's deal with Cole first."

He entered the interview room.

Rachel followed.

The door closed again.

Mabel looked at Clara.

"Could hear better from the corridor."

"No."

"I didn't say we should."

"You were thinking it."

"Unfair."

Clara turned to the documents again.

She had spent the previous hour constructing a timeline from everything they knew.

Not an official one.

Mercer would object to the description.

But it was difficult to think without arranging facts.

She had written:

9.22 — Gerald photographed carrying fête rose.

10.11 — Julian photographs stem.

11.21 — Gerald and Julian argue publicly.

12.04 — potted rose missing from competition bench.

12.07 — cut bloom remains in vase.

12.40-ish — Louisa meets Julian behind/inside marquee.

12.59 — Nathan accidentally photographs Julian with unidentified woman. Image deleted.

1.12 — Gerald buys beer.

1.11–1.14 — Julian enters marquee.

1.18–1.20 — Gerald photographed near rear entrance carrying red document wallet.

1.22 — Lucy Bell photographed near marquee.

1.23 — marquee clock has been moved backwards.

1.38 — Clara follows Monty inside and finds body.

There were gaps.

Too many.

Nathan's most significant gap ran roughly from twelve forty-five to one ten.

Louisa claimed she left shortly after twelve forty-five.

Sophie admitted meeting Julian just before one.

Gerald had been photographed at one eighteen.

Lucy appeared at one twenty-two.

Someone altered the clock between one fourteen and one twenty-three.

That was a crowded murder scene.

The question was whether Sir Julian had been alive for all of it.

Clara tapped the timeline.

Mabel leaned over.

"You've written Gerald twice."

"He appears twice."

"Looks suspicious."

"Everything looks suspicious when written in capital letters."

Mabel considered.

"True."

The interview-room door opened.

Nathan emerged.

He looked angry now rather than nervous.

Mercer followed.

"Sit."

Nathan stared.

"Where?"

Mercer pointed at the desk opposite Clara.

Nathan sat.

"This is irregular."

Mercer said:

"You're not under arrest."

"That's not what I meant."

Clara looked at him.

"What did you mean?"

"You."

"Me?"

"You've become part of the furniture."

Mabel said:

"Better than some of the furniture."

Nathan rubbed his forehead.

Mercer stood beside the desk.

"Mr Cole has clarified his connection to Sir Julian."

Nathan looked at him.

"Clarified is generous."

"Would you prefer admitted?"

"No."

Clara said:

"Did he promise you Garden Writer of the Year?"

Nathan looked at her.

"No."

"Did you expect to win?"

"Yes."

"Did Sir Julian tell you that?"

Nathan hesitated.

Mercer said:

"Answer."

"He told me I was the strongest entry."

Mabel leaned forward.

"That sounds like a promise."

"It wasn't."

"What did he say exactly?"

Nathan closed his eyes.

"'Unless someone produces something remarkable, it's yours.'"

Clara felt a small click.

First prize.

Not quite.

But close.

"Was that before the fête?"

"Two weeks ago."

"And then?"

"Then yesterday he said things had changed."

"Why?"

Nathan looked away.

"He was angry with me."

"About?"

"The article."

"What about it?"

"I'd started rewriting it."

"To expose Gerald?"

"Yes."

"Without Julian?"

"With Julian's information."

"Permission?"

"Not exactly."

Mabel said:

"So no."

Nathan looked irritated.

"Journalists use information."

Clara said:

"Did Julian threaten your award?"

Nathan laughed bitterly.

"Yes."

There it was.

"Exact words?"

"He said if I printed anything before he was ready, I could forget the award."

Mercer said:

"And that made you angry."

"Of course it did."

"Enough to write 'You promised me first prize'?"

Nathan looked at him.

"No."

"Handwriting doesn't match."

"I know."

"You didn't know until ten minutes ago."

Nathan went quiet.

Mercer continued:

"Where were you between twelve forty-five and one ten?"

Nathan's expression changed again.

Clara saw it.

Not guilt.

Embarrassment.

Possibly worse.

He looked at her.

Then at Mabel.

Then Mercer.

"I was in the orchard."

Mabel frowned.

"What orchard?"

"Behind the manor lane."

Clara stared.

"Why?"

Nathan did not answer immediately.

Mercer said:

"Mr Cole."

"I was meeting someone."

Mabel said:

"Here we go."

Clara looked at Nathan.

"Who?"

He gave her a tired look.

"Laura Bennett."

"The freelance photographer?"

"Yes."

"I thought she left before lunch."

"She did."

"Then how were you meeting her?"

"She came back."

Mercer said:

"Why?"

Nathan sighed.

"Because we're seeing each other."

Mabel blinked.

"Is everybody in horticulture having an affair?"

Nathan stared at her.

"We're both single."

"Less interesting."

Clara suppressed a smile.

Mercer said:

"Laura Bennett confirms this?"

"Yes."

"She does," Rachel said.

She had returned to the room.

"We reached her twenty minutes ago. Her phone location also places her near the orchard from twelve fifty-one to one oh-eight."

Mercer nodded.

"So Nathan's gap is partly accounted for."

Clara said:

"Partly?"

"He left her at one oh-eight."

Nathan said:

"I walked back towards the green."

"Did you enter the marquee?"

"No."

"See Julian?"

"No."

"Gerald?"

"No."

"Anyone else?"

Nathan thought.

"Yes."

Everyone waited.

"Beatrice Vale."

Clara frowned.

"Where?"

"Near the manor lane."

"Time?"

"One ten, maybe one eleven."

"Walking?"

"Coming from the direction of the manor."

Mercer said:

"Did she speak to you?"

"No."

"See you?"

"I don't think so."

Clara looked at Mercer.

He had just returned from interviewing Beatrice.

"What did she tell you?"

"That she was at the manor from twelve thirty until one twenty."

Nathan said:

"Then she's lying."

Mercer's expression did not change.

But Clara knew that mattered.

Rachel said:

"We'll check cameras."

Mabel laughed.

"At Bramblewick Manor?"

"Road cameras."

"Less exciting."

Mercer looked towards the station entrance.

"Now we wait for the recovered image."

Clara straightened.

"It's ready?"

Rachel nodded.

"Forensics recovered the deleted burst."

Nathan looked uneasy.

"All of it?"

"Five images."

Mabel said:

"Excellent."

Nathan muttered:

"That's not the word I'd use."

Rachel opened a laptop.

Mercer moved it onto the central desk.

Clara remained where she was.

Mercer looked at her.

"You're going to see this anyway."

"That sounds almost resigned."

"It is entirely resigned."

Mabel pulled her chair closer.

Nathan did not.

Rachel opened the first recovered image.

Blurred canvas.

A flower display.

Part of the marquee entrance.

Timestamp:

12:58:51

Second image.

Better.

Sir Julian stood near the rear judging table.

His profile visible.

He held the red document wallet under one arm.

Opposite him stood a woman.

Dark hair.

Green jacket.

Lucy Bell.

Mabel breathed:

"Oh."

Clara leaned closer.

Lucy had claimed she was near the marquee later.

The photographs now placed her inside before one.

Third image.

Timestamp:

12:58:54

Julian had turned slightly.

Lucy stood close to him.

Not intimate.

Angry.

Her hand was raised.

In it was something rectangular.

A sheet of paper.

Fourth image.

Lucy pointing towards Julian's chest.

His expression dismissive.

The red wallet still under his arm.

Fifth image.

Timestamp:

12:58:56

Julian reaching for the paper.

Lucy pulling it back.

Then nothing.

Rachel paused.

Clara looked at Mercer.

"Lucy didn't mention this."

"No."

"Did she admit meeting Julian?"

"Not specifically."

"She said she went to the glasshouse last night."

"Yes."

"But not that she confronted Julian yesterday."

"No."

Mabel said:

"Why?"

Mercer closed the laptop.

"That's what we're going to ask."

Clara looked at the fourth photograph again before the screen disappeared.

"What was the paper?"

"Unknown."

"Could be the note."

Mercer paused.

Possible.

The wording.

You promised me first prize.

Could Lucy have written it?

Rachel said:

"Lucy's handwriting is being compared."

Clara thought about her motive.

Lucy was Arthur's great-niece.

She knew Agnes Wren's history.

She believed her family had been denied credit for the Bramblewick Crimson.

Perhaps Julian had promised to correct the record.

Perhaps she expected her heritage exhibit or Arthur's entry to win.

Perhaps the "first prize" was recognition.

Still, she had been attacked later.

Unless that attack was staged.

Clara did not like the thought.

"Might Lucy have injured herself?"

Mabel looked at her sharply.

Mercer said:

"We're considering all possibilities."

Clara nodded.

"Her head wound?"

"Consistent with being struck by a blunt object."

"Could be self-inflicted?"

"Technically."

"Likely?"

"No."

"Good."

Mabel gave Clara a look.

"You didn't like asking that."

"No."

"Still had to."

"Yes."

Mercer reopened the image.

"Look at Julian."

Clara did.

"What?"

"His jacket."

She leaned closer.

Dark navy.

The recovered photograph was clearer than she remembered.

Near his left cuff was a smear.

Red.

Clara frowned.

"Pollen?"

"Possibly."

"But he hadn't been found yet."

"Obviously."

"Meaning he'd recently handled the rose."

"Likely."

Nathan finally leaned forward.

"Or the cut bloom."

Clara looked at him.

"Good point."

Nathan nodded towards the image.

"The bloom had already been removed from the plant. If Julian handled it, he'd get pollen."

Mercer said:

"And Lucy?"

They zoomed.

Lucy's right sleeve.

Nothing obvious.

But her green jacket pocket bulged.

Mabel pointed.

"What's that?"

Rachel magnified the image.

Something circular.

Blue.

Clara's pulse jumped.

"The sash."

Mercer looked at her.

"Maybe."

The edge of dark blue fabric protruded from Lucy's pocket.

The Best in Show sash.

That placed it with her at twelve fifty-eight.

Before she later took it to the glasshouse.

Clara said:

"So Lucy already had the sash before one."

Mabel frowned.

"Why?"

Mercer made a note.

"Good question."

Nathan said:

"Maybe Julian gave it to her."

Clara looked at him.

"Promised first prize."

Silence.

The note suddenly looked much more plausible.

Lucy confronting Julian.

Blue sash in her pocket.

Arthur expected to win Best in Show.

Agnes Wren denied historical credit.

A family desperate for recognition.

Clara disliked how neatly that fitted.

Too neatly.

Again.

Mercer said:

"Rachel, get the hospital. We need a formal interview with Lucy as soon as she's cleared."

Rachel moved.

Mabel said:

"Arthur will be furious."

"Arthur is not in charge of the investigation."

"You haven't met furious Arthur."

Mercer looked at her.

"I suspect I will."

Clara returned to the photograph.

Something else bothered her.

"Zoom in on Julian's watch."

Rachel paused.

"Why?"

"Please."

Mercer nodded.

Rachel enlarged the image.

Julian wore a wristwatch.

White face.

Dark leather strap.

The time was difficult to read.

Nathan stood.

"Can you sharpen it?"

"Not much."

Rachel adjusted.

The minute hand became visible.

Near twelve.

Hour hand near one.

Clara frowned.

"His watch says one o'clock."

Nathan said:

"Timestamp twelve fifty-eight."

"Close enough."

"Camera is a minute fast maybe."

"Doesn't matter."

Mercer looked at her.

"What are you thinking?"

"The marquee clock manipulation happened later."

"Yes."

"So Julian's own watch may establish actual time if it stopped."

Mercer's expression changed.

Rachel checked the evidence list.

"His watch was running when recovered."

"So no."

Clara sat back.

The clock remained deliberate but unexplained.

Nathan said:

"Maybe it wasn't moved to fake time of death."

Everyone looked at him.

"What else?" Clara asked.

"Judging times."

Mabel frowned.

"Explain."

"The competition schedule used the marquee clock."

Nathan pointed towards the fête programme.

"Judges were meant to initial cards at set times. Best in Show review at one fifteen. Announcement at two."

Clara opened the programme.

He was right.

1.15 p.m. — Final Best in Show Review

If the clock was turned backwards after one fifteen, someone could make it appear the final review had not yet happened.

Mercer said:

"Why would that matter?"

Nathan shrugged.

"Judging card."

Clara's mind moved.

Gerald's card had been altered from first to disqualified.

Perhaps another card had also been changed.

"Was the Best in Show result written down?"

Rachel checked.

"Provisional judging sheet recovered."

"Who was first?"

"Arthur Bell."

"Second?"

Rachel looked again.

"Beatrice Vale's heritage display."

Mabel said:

"Ah."

Clara felt another route open.

If Julian had completed the Best in Show judging before he died, Arthur was winning.

If someone moved the clock backwards to make it appear judging had not finished, they could alter the sheet.

"Was the sheet altered?"

Rachel inspected the scan.

"Yes."

Mercer straightened.

"How?"

"Arthur Bell's score was crossed through."

Clara stared.

"Disqualified?"

"No. Reduced."

"By whom?"

"Initials J.M."

"Julian?"

"Apparently."

Nathan shook his head.

"Julian never used initials on scoring changes."

Everyone looked at him.

"How do you know?"

"I've covered shows he judged. He signs full surname when amending."

Rachel zoomed the scan.

"These initials look different from his other entries."

Forgery.

Clara said:

"So someone altered Arthur's Best in Show score."

Mercer nodded.

"Potentially after Julian died."

"Who benefits?"

Rachel read:

"With Arthur's score reduced, Beatrice Vale's heritage display becomes first."

Mabel leaned back.

"There we are."

Clara thought of Nathan seeing Beatrice near the manor lane at one ten.

Beatrice claiming she was home.

Her display potentially promoted to Best in Show.

But why murder Julian over a village prize?

Unless the prize mattered because of the rose history.

A public award from Sir Julian might validate the Vale estate's claim to the Bramblewick Crimson.

Not money.

Prestige.

Heritage.

Ownership.

Mercer said:

"Beatrice told me she did not know the results."

Clara asked:

"Did Julian promise her first prize?"

"She denied it."

"Could the note be hers?"

"Handwriting doesn't match."

Again, the note floated free of the most obvious suspects.

Nathan said:

"I can tell you something about Beatrice's display."

Mercer looked at him.

"What?"

"It included a red heritage rose."

Clara stared.

"The Vale line."

"Maybe."

"Did Julian inspect it?"

"Yes."

"Reaction?"

Nathan thought.

"He spent longer on it than anything else."

"Photographs?"

"On the camera."

Rachel checked the image catalogue.

"There are several."

She opened them.

At ten thirty-two, Sir Julian stood over Beatrice Vale's heritage display.

Among old-fashioned roses, herbs and labelled estate plants was a deep crimson bloom.

Not identical to Gerald's.

Close.

Clara looked carefully.

"Different form."

Nathan nodded.

"More open centre."

Mabel said:

"Less perfect."

The ledger had described the estate line as improved in form.

But perhaps that was relative.

Clara wasn't enough of a rose expert to trust her eye.

Nathan zoomed.

One label read:

Vale Crimson — Estate Stock, c.1900

Not Bramblewick Crimson.

Vale Crimson.

Clara's pulse quickened.

"That's the second line."

"Looks like it."

"Beatrice already knew."

Mercer frowned.

"She told me the estate held an unidentified old crimson rose, not that she knew the ledger history."

"Maybe she didn't."

Mabel said:

"Someone labelled it."

"Who prepared the display?" Clara asked.

Rachel checked.

"Martin Vale."

Clara frowned.

"Who?"

Mabel answered.

"Beatrice's nephew."

Another Vale.

"Gardener?"

"Horticultural consultant."

Mercer looked annoyed.

"Why has nobody mentioned him?"

Mabel shrugged.

"Nobody asked me."

He closed his eyes briefly.

Rachel searched.

"Martin Vale, fifty-one. Lives Oxfordshire. Signed in as estate display adviser. Left fête at twelve thirty-six."

"Confirmed?"

"Vehicle exit photographed at twelve thirty-nine."

"So probably not our one twenty clock mover."

"Probably."

Clara looked at the photograph again.

"Could he identify the two rose lines?"

"Almost certainly," Nathan said.

"Then speak to him."

Mercer gave her a look.

"We will."

Clara smiled faintly.

"Right."

The hospital called.

Rachel answered.

Listened.

Then:

"Lucy Bell is cleared for police interview after twelve thirty."

Mercer nodded.

"Good."

Mabel stood.

"I'm coming."

"No."

"Arthur will need someone."

"No."

"Not into the interview."

"No."

Mabel folded her arms.

"You're enjoying that word."

"Immensely."

Clara said:

"Mabel, maybe we should go back."

Mabel stared.

"To the shop?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Clara gathered the photocopies.

"Because we need to look at the books."

Mercer froze.

"No."

Clara looked at him.

"What now?"

"You just said 'we need to look at the books' in the tone you use immediately before discovering something I wish you'd discovered in my presence."

"That's unfairly specific."

"Experience."

"What books?"

Clara held up the Vale catalogue.

"Old rose exhibition records."

"Why?"

"Agnes Wren's first certificate."

Mabel understood.

"The note."

Clara nodded.

If **first prize** echoed something historical, they needed to know whether Agnes had been promised recognition and denied it.

Perhaps the phrase had been copied from an old letter.

Perhaps the killer planted it because of the ancient dispute.

Mercer considered.

"Fine."

Clara blinked.

"Fine?"

"Take Rachel."

Rachel looked surprised.

Mabel looked delighted.

Clara said:

"You're sending a police officer to a bookshop with me."

"Yes."

"Voluntarily."

"Don't make me reconsider."

"Historic moment."

Mercer pointed.

"Go."

The Crooked Bookmark was cool and quiet when they arrived.

Tom had left a note:

Soup in café. Do not solve murder without eating.

Mabel read it.

"Bossy."

Clara smiled.

Rachel locked the door behind them.

"Where do we start?"

Clara looked at her.

"You've never searched old books for a century-old clue?"

"No."

"Good."

"Why good?"

"You haven't developed bad habits."

Mabel muttered:

"She has enough."

Clara ignored her.

They began with the boxes of Douglas Harcourt's gardening collection.

If the Vale catalogue had survived there, related documents might have too.

Thirty minutes produced nothing useful.

Forty-five produced a 1910 seed catalogue, three handwritten pruning calendars and a pamphlet entitled *The Proper Culture of the Gooseberry*.

Mabel put it aside.

"For Tom."

"Why?"

"He looks like he should own it."

Rachel laughed.

Then quickly looked serious.

Clara noticed.

"So you do smile."

"Occasionally."

The second box yielded a county horticultural show programme from 1902.

Clara opened it.

Entries.

Judges.

Awards.

She scanned.

Class 41 — New Rose Seedling

First Certificate awarded to:

Elias Vale, Bramblewick Manor — 'Bramblewick Crimson'.

Clara felt anger.

Not surprise.

Confirmation.

Agnes's work publicly credited to Elias.

Tucked inside the programme was a newspaper clipping.

The headline:

LOCAL ROSE TRIUMPHS AT COUNTY SHOW

The article praised Elias Vale's "years of patient breeding".

No Agnes Wren.

Not one line.

Mabel read over her shoulder.

"Thief."

Rachel said:

"Legally, we don't know."

Mabel looked at her.

"Morally, I do."

Clara turned the clipping over.

Writing on the reverse.

Pencil.

Faded.

He promised me the first certificate if the Crimson won. He smiled when they called his name.

Clara stopped.

Rachel saw it.

"Bag."

She immediately took out an evidence sleeve.

Mabel whispered:

"That's it."

Clara nodded slowly.

Not exact words.

But close.

He promised me the first certificate.

The modern note:

You promised me first prize.

Someone had copied the sentiment.

Perhaps deliberately.

Perhaps from this very clipping.

Rachel said:

"Whose handwriting?"

"Could be Agnes."

"We'll compare."

Clara felt the mystery deepen.

The note in Sir Julian's pocket might not have been written by a modern competitor at all.

It could be a historical quotation.

A message designed to point investigators towards Agnes Wren.

"Who had access to this clipping?" Rachel asked.

Clara looked at the box.

"Anyone before I bought it."

"Previous owner?"

"Douglas Harcourt."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"Family?"

"Niece handled the sale."

Mabel frowned.

"Harcourt."

Clara looked at her.

"What?"

"Agnes Wren married Albert Crowther."

"Yes."

"But the Harcourts appear in the family somewhere."

Clara remembered Alice Harcourt from later books, but within Book Two perhaps no established relevance yet. Need not introduce future continuity. Mabel could know local family links.

"How?"

Mabel thought.

"Agnes's sister married a Harcourt."

Rachel immediately made a note.

"So Douglas Harcourt may be related."

"Likely."

Clara stared at the clipping.

If the Harcourt family preserved Agnes's papers, perhaps someone had known the truth all along.

The anonymous photograph could have come from the same archive.

Except Lucy admitted sending it.

Where had Lucy obtained it?

She had said among Arthur's papers.

Perhaps Arthur had more.

Rachel's phone rang.

Mercer.

She answered.

"Yes, sir."

Listened.

Her face changed.

"We're at the bookshop now."

Pause.

"Yes."

Another pause.

She looked at Clara.

"I'll tell her."

She ended the call.

"What?"

Rachel put the phone down.

"Lucy Bell has admitted writing the note."

Silence.

Mabel sat.

Clara looked at the clipping.

"She copied Agnes."

Rachel nodded.

"She found an old transcript among Arthur's papers."

"Why put it in Julian's pocket?"

"She says she didn't."

Clara stared.

"Then how did it get there?"

"She gave it to Julian at twelve fifty-eight."

"The photograph."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"To accuse him of repeating the same injustice."

Mabel nodded slowly.

"Promising Arthur recognition, then changing his mind."

Rachel said:

"Exactly."

Clara thought.

"So the note wasn't a threat."

"No."

"Not even literal."

"No."

"It was historical shorthand."

"Yes."

That solved one clue.

And removed it as direct evidence against Gerald.

Lucy had handed it to Julian during their confrontation.

Julian folded it and put it in his pocket.

Later, someone killed him.

The note remained.

Clara felt something loosen.

Then tighten again.

"What did Julian promise Arthur?"

"Best in Show and public acknowledgement of Agnes Wren."

Clara stared.

"Public acknowledgement?"

"Julian told Lucy he intended to use the prize announcement to correct the Bramblewick Crimson attribution."

Mabel whispered:

"That's why it mattered."

Not merely a sash.

Not merely a village prize.

A century-old correction.

Agnes Wren's name restored.

Rachel continued.

"Then, shortly before one, Julian told Lucy he was reconsidering."

"Why?"

"He said new evidence complicated the attribution."

"New evidence from where?"

"Unknown."

Clara looked at the second ledger.

Wren stock differs from Vale glasshouse line. Do not combine.

Perhaps Julian realised Agnes's role was more complicated than simply sole breeder.

Maybe another person was involved.

Or Gerald produced evidence.

"Did Lucy threaten him?"

"She shouted. She admits grabbing his sleeve."

"Hit him?"

"No."

"Police believe her?"

"At this stage."

"Did she leave him alive?"

"She says yes."

"Time?"

"About one oh-two."

"So Julian survives past one."

"According to Lucy."

Mabel said:

"Which still leaves plenty of people."

Rachel nodded.

"She says someone approached the rear entrance as she left."

Clara's attention sharpened.

"Who?"

"She didn't see clearly."

"Male?"

"Yes."

"Description?"

"Older. Light shirt. Dark trousers."

The same figure Louisa may have seen.

The same unidentified man in Nathan's earlier photograph.

Metal wristwatch.

Clara said:

"Gerald?"

"Could be."

"Arthur?"

"Could be."

"Tom?"

Mabel gave her a look.

"Tom was at the book stall."

"Confirmed," Rachel said.

"Martin Vale?"

"Already leaving."

"Ronald Pease?"

Rachel paused.

"The fête chairman?"

"Older. Light shirt. Dark trousers."

Mabel said:

"Also wears a metal watch."

Clara looked at her.

"How do you know?"

"He checks it every thirty seconds during committee meetings."

Rachel wrote the name.

"Anyone else?"

Mabel began listing.

"Reverend Ashcombe. George Ellison. Peter Lacey. Gerald. Arthur. Two stewards. Probably half the cricket club."

Clara sighed.

Not useful enough.

Rachel's phone rang again.

This time she listened longer.

Then looked at Clara.

"Recovered prints on Sir Julian's red wallet."

"Gerald?"

"Yes."

Mabel nodded.

"Expected."

"Also Julian."

"Expected."

Rachel continued:

"And one unidentified partial."

Clara waited.

"Female."

"Could be Louisa."

"Comparison pending."

"Sophie."

"Pending."

"Lucy."

"Pending."

"Beatrice."

"Pending."

Mabel said:

"Very narrowing."

Rachel ignored that.

"There was also plant residue inside the wallet."

"Rose?"

"No."

Clara frowned.

"What?"

"Fine yellow dust."

"Pollen?"

"Possibly."

"From what?"

"Lab says preliminary identification suggests lily."

Mabel stared.

"Lily?"

Clara thought of the fête.

Were there lilies in the floral displays?

Probably.

But the wallet had been at the glasshouse too.

Could lilies grow there?

Maybe.

Rachel continued:

"Same yellow residue was found on Sir Julian's right trouser cuff."

Clara frowned.

"Inside the marquee?"

"Could be."

Mabel said:

"Who entered lilies?"

Rachel checked the fête catalogue.

"Floral arrangement section."

"Entrants?"

Several.

Then Rachel stopped.

"What?"

"Beatrice Vale's heritage display included a Madonna lily."

Clara looked at her.

Of course it did.

Everything seemed to return to the manor.

But perhaps too conveniently.

"Anyone else?"

Rachel scanned.

"Sheila Pomeroy. Edith Partridge. Lucy Bell."

"Lucy again."

"Yes."

Clara thought.

The wallet had moved from Julian to Gerald to the glasshouse.

It could easily pick up pollen at multiple stages.

Not decisive.

Rachel carefully bagged the clipping.

"Anything else in this box?"

Clara continued.

Another programme.

More letters.

Then a folded sheet.

A carbon copy of a typed letter dated 17 August 1992.

Clara unfolded it.

No signature.

But the opening line made her stop.

Dear Louisa,

Mabel came closer.

Rachel immediately took a photograph before Clara turned further pages.

Clara read.

The letter was not Gerald's love letter.

It was from Agnes Wren's descendant — likely Arthur's mother? Wait 1992. Could be Arthur Bell himself? Let's not overcomplicate. Better a copy of correspondence from Gerald to a horticultural society? But begins Dear Louisa. It can be a draft/copy of Gerald's letter? How did Douglas Harcourt have it? Maybe not. Need maintain plausible. Perhaps it was a photocopy Sir Julian had made and left in book? Hmm.

Let's instead make it a letter from Douglas Harcourt to Louisa? No connection.

Could be old archive material assembled later. But if user wants manuscript long-form, okay.

Clara read the first lines:

Dear Louisa,

You asked me yesterday why the Crimson matters so much. The truth is that it is the only thing I have ever found that I believe could outlive me.

Mabel whispered:

"Gerald."

Rachel nodded.

"Likely."

Clara continued.

Arthur thinks the plant is simply an old family rose. He does not understand what he has. I do.

Clara froze.

Mabel's face hardened.

Arthur had claimed Gerald learned its identity with him.

This letter suggested otherwise.

Gerald had known before Arthur understood.

The next line:

The Vale records prove Crowther took one plant, but there may have been another. If I can establish that the Crowther plant is the true exhibition stock, then no one can challenge me once it is introduced properly.

Clara looked at Rachel.

"Gerald planned this in 1992."

"Looks like it."

Then:

You said the second ledger might still exist. Find it. I need to know which line won the certificate.

That was crucial.

Gerald knew there were two lines.

He needed to know which had won.

Because only one could claim to be the celebrated Bramblewick Crimson.

The rest of the letter shifted into affection.

Intense.

Possessive.

Not threatening.

But unmistakably emotional.

At the end:

And if Julian ever learns any of this, he will use it against both of us.

Clara sat back.

Rachel immediately called Mercer.

While she spoke, Mabel looked at Clara.

"Gerald knew about the second line thirty-four years ago."

"Yes."

"And he lied to Arthur."

"Probably."

"And Julian found out."

"Yes."

"Still looks like Gerald."

"It does."

"Too much?"

Clara considered.

"No."

Mabel raised an eyebrow.

"Changed your mind?"

"Not exactly."

"Then?"

"Sometimes evidence looks obvious because someone planted it."

"Yes."

"And sometimes it looks obvious because the obvious person did it."

Mabel nodded.

"Annoying."

"Very."

Rachel ended the call.

"Mercer wants this immediately."

Clara handed over the letter.

"Where did it come from?"

Rachel looked at the box.

"That's the question."

Mabel examined the lid.

"House clearance."

Clara nodded.

"Douglas Harcourt."

Rachel said:

"Could he have been collecting research on the Crimson?"

"Possibly."

Clara remembered the books.

Specialist rose literature.

Vale material.

Maybe Douglas had been another family historian.

Mabel suddenly said:

"Douglas's mother was Edith Wren Harcourt."

Clara stared.

"Agnes's niece?"

"Grand-niece, perhaps."

"So his family preserved papers from Agnes."

"Likely."

That explained the archive.

The box was not random gardening material.

It was a fragment of the Wren-Harcourt family history.

Sir Julian had suspected it.

That was why he wanted Clara's catalogue.

He may have known Douglas Harcourt's collection contained evidence Gerald had never seen.

Rachel lifted the evidence sleeve.

"We need to trace the niece who sold this."

"I have her number."

"Good."

Clara went to the sales ledger.

The niece was **Emily Harcourt**, living near Stroud.

Rachel called.

No answer.

Left message.

Then the bell above the shop door rang.

Everyone froze.

The door was locked.

Clara looked towards the front.

Another ring.

Someone trying the handle.

Rachel moved first.

She approached the door.

Outside stood Tom.

He held a tray.

Rachel unlocked it.

Tom entered.

"Soup."

Mabel looked pleased.

"Finally."

Tom looked at the three serious faces.

"What did I miss?"

Clara explained the letter.

Tom listened.

Then asked:

"Why would Gerald's 1992 letter be in Douglas Harcourt's books?"

Clara stopped.

Good question.

Mabel stopped eating before she had begun.

Rachel frowned.

"If it was sent to Louisa, Harcourt shouldn't have it."

"Unless it's a copy," Clara said.

"Who made it?"

"Gerald?"

"Why give it to Harcourt?"

"No reason."

"Julian?"

"Maybe he copied it recently and put it in the collection?"

"But the box came to Clara before the fête."

Clara nodded.

Two days before.

Sir Julian had visited the shop before then but not necessarily touched this box.

Tom said:

"Could Louisa have given a copy to someone?"

"Possible."

Mabel said:

"Or Gerald wrote a draft and someone kept it."

Rachel examined the paper.

"Carbon copy."

Clara looked closer.

Yes.

Thin paper.

Purple-black type.

A carbon copy, not photocopy.

Meaning Gerald or whoever typed it retained a copy in 1992.

How did it enter the Harcourt collection?

Perhaps Gerald typed the letter at someone else's house.

Perhaps Douglas helped him with research.

Or Agnes's descendants knew more than anyone admitted.

The telephone rang.

Clara answered.

"Crooked Bookmark."

A woman's voice.

"Mrs Bellamy?"

"Yes."

"This is Emily Harcourt. I missed a call from a police officer."

Clara looked at Rachel.

She switched to speaker.

Rachel introduced herself.

Emily sounded nervous immediately.

"Is this about Uncle Douglas's books?"

"Yes," Rachel said.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No. We need to understand where some papers in the boxes came from."

"What papers?"

"A 1992 carbon copy letter from Gerald Wainwright to Louisa Marlowe."

Silence.

Then Emily said:

"Oh."

Clara felt the room sharpen.

"You know it?" Rachel asked.

"Yes."

"How?"

"Uncle Douglas had it."

"Why?"

Another pause.

"Gerald gave it to him."

Clara stared.

"When?"

"Years ago."

"Why?"

Emily sighed.

"Because Uncle Douglas was helping him research the rose."

There it was.

"How close were they?" Clara asked.

Rachel gave her a look but allowed it.

Emily said:

"Very close once."

"Friends?"

"Yes. They fell out."

"When?"

"I don't know. Late nineties maybe."

"Over the rose?"

"Probably."

"Did Douglas believe Agnes Wren bred it?"

"Absolutely."

Mabel nodded.

Rachel asked:

"Did he tell Gerald?"

"Yes."

"And Gerald?"

"He said it didn't matter."

Clara frowned.

"Why?"

"Because, according to Gerald, history remembers whoever introduces a plant, not whoever mucked around with seedlings behind the greenhouse."

Mabel's expression became murderous.

"Charming."

Emily continued:

"Uncle Douglas hated him for that."

"Did Douglas have original Agnes Wren papers?"

"Some."

"Photograph?"

"Yes."

"Second propagation ledger?"

"No. Only notes."

"Did Lucy Bell ever visit him?"

Emily hesitated.

"Yes."

"When?"

"A few times before he died."

"Why?"

"Family history."

Clara said:

"So Lucy knew Douglas's archive."

"Yes."

That explained the anonymous photograph more fully.

Rachel asked:

"Did Douglas ever locate the original Bramblewick Crimson?"

Emily went quiet.

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"He believed Arthur Bell's plant was genuine."

"Anything else?"

"He thought Gerald had replaced it."

Clara's pulse jumped.

"When?"

"Years ago."

"With what?"

"A Vale estate plant."

Silence.

This was no recent substitution.

Gerald may have swapped the lines long before the fête.

Emily continued:

"Uncle Douglas said Gerald realised the Vale line was prettier."

Mabel whispered:

"Of course."

"Prettier how?" Rachel asked.

"Better flower form. Stronger growth."

Exactly as the ledger described.

"But if Gerald swapped them," Clara said, "what happened to Arthur's original?"

Emily hesitated.

"Uncle Douglas said Gerald moved it somewhere safe."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Did Douglas?"

"Maybe."

"Did he ever mention the old glasshouse?"

Long pause.

"Yes."

Everyone looked at each other.

"What did he say?" Rachel asked.

"That Gerald was keeping one of the old roses there."

"One?"

"That's what he said."

"Which one?"

"I don't know."

Clara's mind raced.

Gerald may have possessed both lines for years.

The Crowther/Wren original.

The Vale estate line.

He could choose whichever best suited his story.

Julian's investigation threatened to reveal the substitution.

And Lucy had gone to the glasshouse expecting the scarred original but found a different mature rose.

Maybe Gerald had moved the true plant again.

"Emily," Clara said, "did Douglas ever say who knew the location of the original plant?"

Emily thought.

"One person."

"Who?"

"Sir Julian Marlowe."

Silence.

Rachel straightened.

"How?"

"Uncle Douglas wrote to him before he died."

"When did your uncle die?"

"Last November."

So Sir Julian had known about this for months.

Long before Gerald contacted him publicly.

That changed his role.

Julian may have entered the authentication arrangement already suspicious.

Perhaps he had never intended to endorse Gerald.

Perhaps he had been setting a trap.

Rachel asked:

"Do you have a copy of Douglas's letter?"

"Maybe. His desk papers are still boxed."

"Don't touch them. An officer will contact you."

Emily sounded alarmed.

"Why?"

Rachel paused.

"Sir Julian was murdered yesterday."

Silence.

Then:

"Oh God."

Emily's voice changed completely.

"I thought it was an accident. I saw something online but—"

"Did your uncle receive any reply from Sir Julian?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it said?"

"No."

"Did Douglas talk about it?"

"Only once."

"What did he say?"

Emily took a breath.

"He said Julian Marlowe finally understood that Gerald hadn't rediscovered anything."

Clara closed her eyes briefly.

There it was.

Not only current evidence.

A chain reaching back months.

Rachel asked:

"Anything else?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Uncle Douglas said Julian was going to make Gerald confess."

Clara opened her eyes.

"How?"

"I don't know."

The call ended shortly afterwards.

Rachel immediately sent the details to Mercer.

Tom distributed soup.

Nobody objected.

For several minutes, they ate in silence.

Clara's thoughts would not settle.

Gerald had lied for decades.

That much now seemed certain.

He knew Arthur's family had the old rose.

He knew a second Vale line existed.

He had used Louisa to access records.

He involved Douglas Harcourt.

He may have switched plants.

He controlled the narrative.

Julian discovered the truth.

Arthur turned against Gerald.

Lucy wanted Agnes recognised.

Douglas had already warned Julian.

Every line led back to Gerald.

And yet Clara still lacked the mechanism.

When did Gerald kill Julian?

How did he maintain the beer-tent alibi?

Why move the marquee clock?

Why hide the rose plant in Sheila's tent?

Why leave his glove?

Why take the wallet to the glasshouse?

And who attacked Lucy the following night?

One killer could explain all of it.

But only if the timeline worked.

Tom put down his spoon.

"Maybe we're assuming Julian died when Clara found him."

Rachel looked at him.

"We aren't."

"I mean maybe he died much earlier."

"Possible."

Clara thought.

If Julian was killed soon after Lucy left around one oh-two, Gerald could perhaps commit the murder before buying his beer at one twelve.

Then later return at one eighteen, remove the wallet, alter the clock, stage evidence.

But Nathan photographed Julian entering the marquee around one eleven.

Unless—

Clara froze.

"Show me the photograph."

Rachel frowned.

"Which?"

"Julian entering at one eleven."

They used Nathan's recovered image archive.

Rachel opened the shot.

Sir Julian walking towards the rear entrance.

Timestamp one eleven.

Clara looked closely.

Dark jacket.

Grey hair.

Clipboard?

No.

Something wrong.

"Zoom."

Rachel did.

Face partly turned away.

Clara leaned closer.

Mabel said:

"That's Julian."

"Maybe."

Tom looked.

"What are you seeing?"

Clara pointed.

"The jacket."

"What about it?"

"Julian's jacket had a pale pocket square."

Mabel nodded.

"He did."

"In every morning photograph."

Rachel checked earlier images.

Yes.

Cream pocket square.

At one eleven, no pocket square.

Could have removed it.

Clara pointed again.

"And shoes."

Earlier: polished brown leather.

One eleven: dark shoes.

Tom sat forward.

"That's not him."

Rachel stared.

"Similar build."

"Grey hair," Mabel said.

"Same jacket colour."

Clara's heart accelerated.

"Someone impersonated him from a distance."

Rachel immediately called Mercer.

While waiting, Clara examined every detail.

The one-eleven figure was slightly broader through the shoulders.

Walk different.

No visible red wallet.

No pocket square.

Dark shoes.

Nathan had taken the image from perhaps thirty metres.

Everyone had assumed Julian because they expected Julian.

The witness who saw him enter at one twelve may have made the same mistake.

If it wasn't Julian, the entire timeline changed.

Mercer answered.

Rachel explained.

Silence on the speaker.

Then Mercer said:

"I'm coming back."

Clara asked:

"Where are you?"

"Manor."

"Did you find Beatrice?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Later."

"Inspector—"

"Five minutes."

He hung up.

Mabel looked at the photograph.

"Who could pass for Julian from behind?"

Tom answered:

"Older man. Grey hair. Similar height."

Clara thought of Gerald.

White hair.

Broad shoulders.

But Gerald had a moustache.

Not visible from behind.

Clothing?

Gerald had worn a light linen jacket in the morning, not dark navy.

Could change.

Arthur?

Thin.

No.

Ronald Pease?

Grey hair, similar height perhaps.

Nathan?

Too young.

Martin Vale?

Fifty-one.

Maybe.

Someone deliberately dressed like Julian.

Why?

To create a false sighting after Julian was already dead.

Then the clock.

If the killer manipulated both a visual sighting and the marquee clock, the false time of death became much more sophisticated.

Clara said:

"The clock wasn't just moved backwards."

Rachel looked at her.

"What?"

"It was part of the same staging."

"If someone wanted people to think Julian was alive after one ten—"

"They dress like him and walk into the marquee."

"Then move the clock backwards so later witnesses misremember when they saw activity."

Tom nodded slowly.

"Creating confusion."

Mabel said:

"That requires planning."

"Yes."

Gerald had motive.

But did he plan murder?

The original concept had Gerald strike Julian during confrontation, then stage. Could be partially planned after-the-fact, not premeditated. He could improvise impersonation maybe using Julian's jacket? Wait Julian still wearing jacket on body. So impersonator can't use same jacket unless body later redressed. Possible but complicated. Better maybe it is Gerald in his own dark

jacket? But morning Gerald was maybe changed after lunch? We can reveal he had society blazer in car. Hmm.

Mercer returned.

He looked at the enlarged photograph.

Then at Clara.

"Good catch."

Mabel's eyebrows rose.

Clara tried not to look too pleased.

"Thank you."

"Do not enjoy that."

"Too late."

Mercer ignored her.

"We have another witness."

"Who?"

"Beatrice Vale."

"To what?"

"She saw Sir Julian at the glasshouse at twelve twenty."

Clara stared.

"Alive?"

"Very."

"Doing what?"

"Digging up a rose."

Silence.

Tom said:

"Which rose?"

Mercer looked at him.

"The mature scarred plant."

Arthur's original.

Clara felt everything rearrange.

"Sir Julian took it."

"According to Beatrice."

"So Gerald's greenhouse was already empty because Julian had moved the plant."

"Likely."

"To the manor."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Protection."

"Evidence."

"Both."

Mabel said:

"Then Lucy went later and couldn't find it because Julian had moved it again."

Mercer nodded.

"Exactly."

"Where?"

"No idea."

Clara looked at the timeline.

At twelve twenty Julian was alive at the glasshouse.

At twelve forty he met Louisa.

At twelve fifty-eight he argued with Lucy.

So he was definitely alive until around one.

The fake one-eleven sighting only extended survival by perhaps ten minutes.

Still useful.

The murderer likely killed him between one oh-two and one ten.

Then created a false one-eleven sighting.

Gerald bought beer at one twelve.

Could he kill Julian, impersonate him, then be at the beer tent minutes later?

Yes.

If the timing was tight.

Very tight.

Mercer said:

"We rechecked Gerald's beer purchase. One twelve forty-three."

Clara stared at the fake photograph.

Timestamp one eleven fourteen.

Less than two minutes.

The beer tent was perhaps three minutes' walk from the marquee.

Possible at a brisk pace.

Gerald could have walked as Julian into the marquee, slipped out another side, removed disguise, reached beer tent.

But why enter the marquee if Julian's body was already inside?

To be seen.

Exactly.

Mabel said:

"Gerald."

Mercer looked at her.

"Maybe."

Clara said:

"What was Gerald wearing at one twelve?"

Mercer checked.

"Photographs from beer tent show cream shirt, dark trousers. No jacket."

"Earlier?"

"Light linen jacket."

"The fake Julian wears dark jacket."

Rachel said:

"Could be Julian's spare?"

"Or a judging steward blazer."

Mabel frowned.

"There's a dark blue fête committee blazer."

Mercer turned.

"What?"

"Ronald insists senior stewards wear them."

"How many?"

"Six."

Rachel began checking.

One blazer was missing from the committee tent between twelve fifty and one thirty.

Recovered later.

No one had reported it because no one cared.

Clara felt the staging become plausible.

Grey-haired Gerald.

Dark committee blazer.

Viewed from behind.

Walking towards the marquee.

Enough.

"Did Gerald have access to the committee tent?" she asked.

Mabel laughed.

"Gerald behaves as though he has access to the Palace of Westminster."

Mercer nodded.

"Yes."

Tom said:

"Still doesn't prove it."

"No," Clara said.

"But it gives him the opportunity."

Mercer looked at Clara.

"There's more."

She waited.

"Beatrice saw Gerald at the manor yesterday morning."

"Before the fête?"

"Seven forty."

"Doing what?"

"Leaving the old glasshouse."

Mabel said:

"Did she ask?"

"Yes."

"He said he was checking heritage roses for the display."

Clara thought.

Gerald knew the Vale line.

Could have taken a younger specimen for his entry.

He may already have substituted it before judging.

And Julian discovered that.

"Did Beatrice know he took anything?"

"No."

"Did he have permission?"

"General access, not removal."

"Why did Beatrice lie about leaving the manor around one ten?"

Mercer paused.

Clara had almost forgotten Nathan's sighting.

"She wasn't lying about being at home."

"But Nathan saw her."

"He saw someone he thought was Beatrice."

Clara frowned.

"Who?"

"Her sister."

Mabel blinked.

"Caroline?"

Mercer nodded.

"Same build. Similar hair. She was staying at the manor."

Nathan's witness observation dissolved.

Another false lead.

Mabel said:

"Too many relatives."

Clara agreed.

Mercer continued:

"Beatrice's heritage display was prepared by Martin Vale using cuttings from the manor line. She genuinely did not understand the connection to Agnes Wren."

"So no first-prize motive."

"Not strong enough."

"Which leaves Lucy's note explained."

"Yes."

Clara looked at the fake Julian photograph again.

Now one question dominated.

"What happened between one oh-two and one eleven?"

Mercer said:

"We're reconstructing."

Clara read her timeline.

Lucy leaves around one oh-two.

Unknown male approaches.

Julian likely remains inside.

At one eleven, false Julian seen entering.

At one twelve forty-three, Gerald buys beer.

At one eighteen, Gerald photographed near the marquee with Julian's wallet.

That was odd.

If Gerald staged the fake sighting and then went to the beer tent, why return six minutes later?

To remove the wallet?

Perhaps he realised he'd left incriminating documents.

Or had forgotten something.

Arthur sees the wallet.

Nathan photographs it.

Then Gerald goes to the glasshouse to dump it?

But witnesses see Gerald again at beer tent around one thirty-two.

Could make a quick trip by bicycle.

Was there a bicycle?

Clara asked:

"Did Gerald have one at the fête?"

Mercer looked at Rachel.

She checked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Behind horticultural tent."

"Did anyone see him use it?"

"Not yet."

Mabel said:

"He cycles to allotments."

Of course.

That gave Gerald the movement needed.

Clara's mind assembled a possible sequence:

Julian confronts Gerald before one ten.

Gerald kills him with Rose Cup.

Gerald takes committee blazer, creates fake Julian sighting at one eleven.

Buys beer at one twelve to establish public presence.

Returns around one eighteen to collect red wallet and perhaps other evidence.

Cycles to glasshouse, hides wallet, possibly searches for original rose.

Returns by one thirty-two.

Later his glove is found by body and plant in Sheila's tent, both planted or perhaps left by him.

But when did he move the fête plant into Sheila's tent?

Could have done before murder around noon.

Why?

Because Julian disqualified it and Gerald wanted to conceal substitution.

He hides it in rival's tent, planning to retrieve later, accidentally or deliberately incriminating Sheila.

That fits.

What about the original scarred plant Julian dug up at twelve twenty?

Where did Julian put it?

Still unknown.

That could be the final clue.

If Gerald killed him, he probably wanted that plant badly.

Maybe the confrontation was specifically about its location.

Julian refused to tell him.

Then Gerald killed him.

That creates motive beyond public humiliation.

The original plant could prove fraud and carry future commercial value.

Clara said:

"Gerald didn't know where Julian moved the scarred plant."

Mercer looked at her.

"Probably."

"That's why he went to the glasshouse after the murder."

"To search."

"And dumped the wallet there when he found nothing."

"Possible."

"The attack on Lucy?"

"Could be same reason."

"She was searching for the plant too."

"Yes."

"If Gerald thought Lucy found it—"

"He might follow her."

Mabel's face hardened.

"Hit her."

Mercer nodded.

"Possible."

Clara looked at him.

"You think it's Gerald."

"I think Gerald has significant explaining to do."

"Where is he?"

"At home. Under observation."

"Why not arrest him?"

"Because suspicion is not enough."

"Fair."

Mabel said:

"Annoyingly."

Rachel's phone rang.

She answered.

Then handed it to Mercer.

He listened.

His expression changed.

"Where?"

Pause.

"Do not move it."

Another pause.

"We're coming."

He ended the call.

Clara felt it.

"What?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Arthur Bell has found the original rose."

Silence.

"Where?"

"Rosebank Cottage."

Mabel stared.

"At Arthur's?"

"Yes."

"Where exactly?"

Mercer's eyes narrowed.

"Under his own greenhouse bench."

Clara frowned.

"That doesn't make sense."

"No."

"If Julian moved it from the manor, why put it back at Arthur's?"

"Good question."

"Did Arthur put it there himself?"

"He says no."

"Could Lucy?"

"She was at hospital."

"Gerald?"

"Possible."

Tom said:

"Does the scar match?"

"Arthur says yes."

Clara felt a rush of relief, absurdly, for a plant.

The living original survived.

But its return created another mystery.

Someone had moved it after the murder.

Perhaps after Lucy was attacked.

Why restore it?

Because the killer no longer needed to hide it.

Or because its disappearance was drawing too much attention.

Mercer picked up his jacket.

"We're going to Rosebank."

Clara stood.

He looked at her.

"No."

She sat.

Mabel smiled.

"Progress."

Mercer and Rachel left.

Tom looked at Clara.

"You're not going?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because for once I think the important thing is here."

Mabel frowned.

"The shop?"

"The records."

She opened the Vale ledger again.

If the original plant was back with Arthur, perhaps the truth did not depend on where it was.

Maybe it depended on something physically on the plant.

Sir Julian's phrase:

The plant tells the truth even when the paperwork doesn't.

Scar.

Yes.

But maybe more.

She examined the old propagation notes.

Grafting.

Cuttings.

Rootstock.

One line.

Then another.

Original Wren stock own-rooted. Vale line maintained by grafting after 1901 weakness.

Clara stopped.

"Tom."

He came closer.

"What?"

"Read."

Tom did.

"Own-rooted versus grafted."

Mabel frowned.

"Meaning?"

Clara explained:

"The original Wren/Crowther line grows on its own roots. The Vale estate line was grafted onto another rootstock."

"So you can tell them apart below the soil."

"Yes."

Tom nodded slowly.

"If Gerald substituted the Vale line at the fête—"

"The rootstock would expose it."

"And Julian photographed the stem."

"Maybe the graft union."

Mabel said:

"That's the mistake."

Clara felt a click.

Gerald could fake flowers.

Labels.

Provenance.

He could present a younger propagated plant.

But if the plant was grafted, it physically betrayed the Vale line.

That could be why Julian disqualified it.

The plant tells the truth.

Clara turned pages rapidly.

Then found a later annotation:

Vale line susceptible to suckering from R. canina stock. Remove below union.

Dog rose rootstock.

Very distinctive if a sucker had emerged.

Nathan's photographs.

Clara remembered the potted fête plant.

Perhaps there was a small pale-green shoot near soil level.

She needed the image.

Nathan's camera was with police.

But Nathan had sent preview files to his magazine?

Maybe.

She called him.

Mercer would object.

Possibly.

Nathan answered.

"What?"

"Did your camera automatically back up previews to your phone?"

Pause.

"Yes."

"Do you still have the photograph of Gerald's potted rose?"

"Probably."

"Send it."

"Why?"

"Rootstock."

Silence.

Then:

"Oh."

He understood.

Two minutes later, the image arrived.

Clara enlarged it on her phone.

There.

At the base of the plant.

A thin shoot.

Different leaf form.

Seven leaflets rather than five.

Mabel leaned close.

"That isn't the same rose."

"No."

"Rootstock sucker."

Tom nodded.

"So the fête plant was grafted."

"The Vale line."

Not Arthur's original.

Proof Gerald had substituted.

And Julian could have seen it instantly.

Clara stared at the image.

Something else.

Around the pot rim was a strip of yellow tape.

Handwritten:

V-2

Vale line two?

She zoomed.

Yes.

Faint.

Gerald had failed to remove the nursery tape completely.

A tiny physical mistake.

The clue had been visible all morning.

Clara forwarded it to Mercer.

No comment.

Only the image.

Thirty seconds later her phone rang.

"You called Cole."

"Yes."

"I knew it."

"Look at the photograph."

"I am."

"Seven-leaflet sucker. Grafted rootstock. Yellow V-2 tape."

Silence.

Then Mercer said:

"Stay there."

Clara smiled.

"I am."

"That wasn't praise."

"Still counts."

He ended the call.

Mabel looked delighted.

Tom said:

"Does this solve the murder?"

"No."

Clara put the phone down.

"It proves Gerald lied about the plant."

"But we already knew."

"Yes."

"Then?"

"It gives Julian a concrete reason to disqualify him."

Mabel said:

"And Gerald a concrete reason to panic."

"Exactly."

Still not murder.

But closer.

The shop bell rang.

This time the door was unlocked.

A woman entered.

Tall.

Early sixties.

Short grey hair.

She carried a handbag and looked as though she had come to complain about an invoice.

Clara recognised her from the fête.

Patricia Lowe.

Prize steward.

"Mrs Bellamy?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to bother you."

"Can I help?"

Patricia looked around.

Then lowered her voice.

"I think I may have done something stupid."

Mabel brightened.

"Excellent."

Clara said:

"Mabel."

Patricia continued.

"Yesterday. Before Sir Julian died."

"Yes?"

"I gave someone the committee storeroom key."

Clara felt her pulse quicken.

"Who?"

"Gerald Wainwright."

Silence.

"When?" Clara asked.

"About twelve fifty."

"Why?"

"He said Sir Julian needed the Best in Show sash and spare steward's blazer."

Tom stared.

"Both?"

Patricia nodded.

"He said Julian wanted to rehearse the presentation photographs."

Clara's mind snapped into place.

The blue sash.

The dark committee blazer.

Gerald had obtained both.

The sash later went to Lucy, perhaps Julian gave it to her? Wait Lucy had it at 12:58. If Gerald got both at 12:50, he could have given sash to Julian or Lucy? We know Lucy has sash in pocket during confrontation. Could Gerald have passed it to Julian, who offered it to Lucy/Arthur? Maybe. Need plausible. Patricia says Gerald asked for both. Gerald could leave sash in

marquee, Julian hands it to Lucy as symbolic promise? Or Lucy takes it during argument. We'll unravel.

"Did Gerald return the key?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"About one twenty-five."

"Did he return the blazer?"

Patricia swallowed.

"Not directly."

"Meaning?"

"It appeared back on the peg later."

"And sash?"

"I found it in the lockbox after the body was discovered."

Mabel said:

"Torn."

Patricia nodded.

"Yes."

Clara looked at Tom.

Gerald had access to the exact blazer needed to impersonate Julian.

At twelve fifty.

Before Julian's final confrontation.

"Did you tell police?"

Patricia looked embarrassed.

"No."

"Why?"

"I didn't think of it until this morning."

"Call Mercer."

Patricia looked alarmed.

"Now?"

"Now."

Mabel handed her the shop phone.

"Before Clara does it for you."

Patricia called.

While she spoke, Clara thought about the sash.

Gerald retrieved it with blazer.

Why?

If Julian requested both, perhaps genuine.

But Lucy had the sash eight minutes later.

Maybe Julian had indeed intended to award Arthur Best in Show and gave Lucy the sash prematurely.

That would explain her note:

You promised me first prize.

She confronts him after he changes his mind, holding the sash he had already effectively given her family.

During struggle, she keeps it.

Later uses it to wrap cutting.

Yes.

So Gerald's claim that Julian needed sash may have been partly true.

But why blazer?

Presentation rehearsal sounded ridiculous.

Sir Julian was already wearing a jacket.

The blazer may have been Gerald's own preparation for the fake sighting.

He used Julian's request for sash as cover to obtain both.

If he intended murder already at twelve fifty, that suggests premeditation.

Did Gerald know Julian would expose him? Yes.

Could decide then.

Patricia ended the call.

"Inspector Mercer is coming."

Mabel sighed.

"He spends a lot of time coming here."

Clara said nothing.

She was reconstructing.

At 12:50 Gerald gets storeroom key, sash and blazer.

At 12:58 Lucy confronts Julian; she has sash in pocket. Gerald may have delivered sash to Julian, who handed it to Lucy/Arthur? But Arthur not there. Perhaps Julian gave it to Lucy earlier during argument? Hmm.

At ~1:02 Lucy leaves, unknown older man approaches.

Gerald, possibly.

Confrontation.

Julian killed with Rose Cup.

Gerald takes wallet and possibly locket.

He puts on dark blazer, imitates Julian entering at 1:11.

Buys beer at 1:12.

Returns at 1:18 for wallet? Wait wallet maybe already taken. The photo shows him holding it. He could be going from crime scene to bike after staging. But if fake sighting at 1:11 and beer at 1:12, impossible to also hold wallet at 1:19 unless he returns. Fine.

Maybe after beer purchase, he says he left pint on table to use loo, returns to marquee at 1:18, collects wallet he had hidden behind display, cycles to manor, dumps it, returns by 1:32. This works.

But why not take wallet at murder? Because he panicked, focused on staging, later remembered documents. Great.

Clock moved between 1:14-1:23. He could move it during 1:18 return. That fits. He moves clock back then to create ambiguity about when "Julian" entered? But the fake sighting at 1:11 already intended to show alive. Moving clock backward to 1:05 at 1:23 seems opposite. Let's reason: If body found around 1:38 and clock reads ~1:20 (because moved back 18 mins), witnesses might infer death more recent? Hmm. Why change clock? Perhaps to create alibi around judging schedule: Gerald needed to alter judging card after 1:18 and make it seem card was changed before 1:15 while Julian alive. Or to make the final review appear incomplete. Initial plot says altered apparent time of death and alibi. We can make it work: The marquee clock had stopped? It was running after moved. If killer changes clock backwards, someone later notes body discovery at clock 1:20 while actual

1:38 and pathologist maybe uses general. But police don't use scene clock for TOD. It could influence witness memories: a steward who glanced at clock when seeing Gerald inside at actual 1:20 might report 1:05, placing him before beer purchase? This is key. Gerald returns at 1:18 and is seen by someone inside; by moving clock to 1:05, that witness thinks it was before his 1:12 beer alibi. Thus no contradiction. Nice. Need reveal later.

Mercer arrives. Let's continue chapter perhaps with Patricia formal. Then maybe a new clue: steward saw Gerald at "1:05" inside according clock, but actually 1:20. This explains clock. Excellent.

Write enough ending with concrete clue. Let's continue from Patricia call. Need maintain flow.

Mercer arrived twelve minutes later.

He listened without interruption.

Patricia repeated the story.

At the end, he asked:

"Who else knew you gave Wainwright the storeroom key?"

"No one."

"Did he specifically request the blazer?"

"Yes."

"His words?"

Patricia thought.

"'Sir Julian wants the presentation sash and one of the dark blazers for photographs.'"

"Why a blazer?"

"I assumed someone would model the prize."

"Who?"

"He didn't say."

"Did Sir Julian ever confirm the request?"

"No."

"Did you see Gerald give him the sash?"

"No."

"Did you see Lucy Bell with it?"

"No."

"Then why was it in her pocket by twelve fifty-eight?"

Patricia stared.

"I don't know."

Mercer looked at Clara.

She said:

"Julian may have handed it to her."

"Why?"

"Because he had originally promised Arthur Best in Show."

"Maybe."

Mabel said:

"Or Gerald gave it to Lucy."

"Why would he?"

No answer.

Patricia suddenly said:

"Wait."

Everyone turned.

"I did see Gerald with Lucy."

"When?"

"Just before one."

"Where?"

"Outside the marquee."

"What were they doing?"

"Talking."

"Arguing?"

"No. Gerald handed her something."

"The sash?"

"I couldn't see."

Clara looked at Mercer.

Could be.

Why would Gerald give Lucy the sash?

Perhaps to inflame her against Julian.

Gerald knew Julian was reconsidering the award. If he handed Lucy the sash saying Julian had promised it, he could provoke confrontation.

That was more sinister.

Gerald may have manipulated Lucy into being seen arguing with Julian, creating a potential suspect.

Mercer asked:

"Did Gerald know Lucy was angry with Sir Julian?"

Patricia shrugged.

"Everyone nearby knew."

Mabel said:

"Lucy had been complaining since eleven."

"About Agnes?"

"Yes."

Clara felt the murder's staging become more deliberate.

Gerald could have planted multiple false trails:

His own glove? Hard to see why plant own clue. Unless glove missing from before, someone else planted. But if Gerald himself staged, he wouldn't plant own glove. Could have been dropped accidentally during killing. That's plausible. He later says missing weeks ago as lie. We'll reveal.

Rose in Sheila's tent: deliberate frame rival.

Lucy note: genuine but useful accidental clue.

Sash: given to Lucy to provoke.

Blazer: used to impersonate.

Clock: cover return.

Wallet: taken and dumped.

This is enough.

Mercer received another call. A steward, **Peter Lacey**, had remembered seeing Gerald in the marquee "about five past one" because he checked the marquee clock. But timestamped photo of Gerald with wallet at 1:19 and clock had been set back to 1:05. So Peter's "1:05" was actually around 1:20. He thought before beer alibi, but actually after. This perfectly explains clock. Let's write. Good.

Mercer asks Peter. Then end chapter: clock wasn't to create time of death; it was to move Gerald's second visit backwards. Great.

Let's craft rest.

Patricia ended the call and replaced the receiver.

"Inspector Mercer is coming."

Mabel sighed.

"He spends a lot of time coming here."

Clara said nothing.

She was reconstructing the afternoon.

At twelve fifty, Gerald obtained the committee storeroom key.

He asked for two things.

The Best in Show sash.

And a dark blue steward's blazer.

Eight minutes later, Lucy Bell was photographed confronting Sir Julian with part of the sash visible in her pocket.

At approximately one oh-two, Lucy left the marquee.

A grey-haired man approached.

At one eleven, someone resembling Sir Julian walked towards the rear entrance wearing a dark jacket.

At one twelve, Gerald bought a pint in the beer tent.

At one eighteen, he was photographed beside the marquee carrying Sir Julian's red document wallet.

Between one fourteen and one twenty-three, someone altered the marquee clock.

Clara looked at Patricia.

"Why would Sir Julian need a steward's blazer?"

Patricia shook her head.

"I assumed it was for a photograph."

"What sort?"

"The presentation. Winner with judge, sash, trophy. Something like that."

"But Sir Julian already had a jacket."

"Yes."

"So who was supposed to wear the blazer?"

"I don't know."

Mabel said:

"Gerald."

Patricia looked at her.

"What?"

Mabel pointed towards Clara.

"Say it."

Clara sighed.

"We think someone may have dressed to resemble Sir Julian from a distance."

Patricia's eyes widened.

"The blazer."

"Possibly."

"Gerald?"

"We don't know."

Mabel gave Clara a look.

Clara ignored it.

Patricia sat heavily in the chair beside the counter.

"I should have remembered earlier."

"You remembered now."

"A man is dead."

"Yes."

"I gave Gerald the key."

"That doesn't make you responsible."

Patricia looked unconvinced.

Tom returned from the café kitchen with another mug of tea.

"For Patricia."

She took it gratefully.

"Thank you."

Mabel looked at him.

"Where's mine?"

"You've had four."

"That's not an answer."

Tom disappeared again.

The bell above the door rang.

Inspector Mercer entered with Rachel Shaw behind him.

Mercer looked at Patricia.

Then at Clara.

Then at the three half-finished bowls of soup.

"I see the investigation is being catered."

Tom called from the rear:

"Tea?"

Mercer paused.

"Yes."

Clara smiled.

He looked at her.

"Don't."

Mercer sat opposite Patricia.

Rachel opened her notebook.

Patricia repeated everything.

The storeroom key.

The sash.

The blazer.

Gerald's claim that Sir Julian wanted them for photographs.

The key returned around one twenty-five.

The blazer later found back on its peg.

The torn sash recovered from the lockbox.

Then Patricia remembered seeing Gerald speaking to Lucy shortly before one.

Mercer leaned forward.

"How shortly?"

"Maybe twelve fifty-five."

"Where?"

"Beside the judges' entrance."

"What did Gerald give her?"

"I couldn't see."

"Could it have been the sash?"

"Yes."

"Did Lucy put something into her pocket?"

Patricia thought.

"Yes."

Clara looked at Mercer.

The recovered photograph at twelve fifty-eight showed the blue sash protruding from Lucy's pocket.

So Gerald probably handed it to her.

Why?

Mercer asked:

"Did you hear what they said?"

"Only one thing."

"What?"

Patricia frowned, trying to remember.

"Gerald said, 'He won't give it to you unless you make him.'"

Silence.

Clara felt a chill.

Mercer said:

"You're certain?"

"Pretty certain."

"Exact words?"

"As close as I can remember."

Mabel muttered:

"Helpful man."

Clara looked at her.

"Very."

If Gerald deliberately gave Lucy the sash while she was already angry with Julian, he had done more than provide a prop.

He had pushed her towards confrontation.

Perhaps knowing she would be seen.

Perhaps hoping she would become a suspect.

Mercer asked:

"What did Lucy say?"

"Something about Julian changing his mind again."

"Anything else?"

"No."

Patricia hesitated.

"Gerald smiled."

Mercer's eyes narrowed.

"What sort of smile?"

Patricia looked uncomfortable.

"That sounds silly."

"It isn't."

"Not friendly."

Mabel said:

"Gerald has several."

Mercer ignored her.

Patricia continued:

"More like he was pleased she'd become angry."

Clara sat back.

That mattered.

A great deal.

Tom arrived with Mercer's tea and placed it on the counter.

Mercer looked at it.

"Thank you."

Mabel raised her eyebrows.

"He gets one."

"He's working."

"So am I."

Tom looked at her.

"No, you're not."

Mabel appeared genuinely offended.

Rachel's phone rang.

She stepped away.

Mercer continued questioning Patricia.

"Where did you keep the spare blazers?"

"Committee tent."

"Locked?"

"Normally."

"Who had keys?"

"Ronald Pease, me, Edith Partridge and two senior stewards."

"Gerald?"

"No."

"But you gave him yours."

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"About thirty-five minutes."

"Did you see what he returned?"

"The key."

"Not the blazer?"

"No."

"The sash?"

"No."

"So both items were unaccounted for after twelve fifty."

Patricia nodded.

Mercer wrote.

Clara thought about the fake Sir Julian photograph.

The impersonator did not need to be convincing close up.

Grey hair.

Dark jacket.

Similar height.

Seen from thirty metres.

A few seconds.

Enough for the mind to fill in the rest.

Gerald could manage that.

Especially if anyone seeing him already expected Sir Julian to be around.

Rachel returned.

Her expression had changed.

"Sir."

Mercer looked up.

"We've got another witness."

"Who?"

"Peter Lacey. Senior steward."

Mabel nodded.

"Peter sees everything except where he puts his glasses."

Rachel continued:

"He says he saw Gerald Wainwright inside the produce marquee at approximately five past one."

Clara frowned.

"That helps Gerald."

Mercer looked at her.

"Why?"

"If Gerald was inside at one oh-five and bought beer at one twelve, that fits. It puts him there before the likely murder window."

Rachel shook her head.

"No."

Clara waited.

"Peter didn't check his watch."

"He checked the marquee clock."

Silence.

Clara understood first.

"Oh."

Mercer did too.

Rachel continued:

"He remembers looking straight at it because judging was running behind. The clock said one oh-five."

"But at one twenty-three," Clara said, "Nathan's photograph shows the clock also around one oh-five."

Rachel nodded.

"Exactly."

Mabel leaned forward.

"So Peter didn't see Gerald at one oh-five."

"No."

"He saw him after someone had moved the clock."

"Likely."

Tom said:

"Meaning closer to one twenty."

Mercer stood.

"Where's Peter?"

"Parish hall."

"Bring him here."

Rachel left.

Clara stared at her handwritten timeline.

The purpose of the clock was suddenly clear.

It was not principally about the estimated time of death.

It was about Gerald's movements.

If someone saw Gerald inside the marquee after his beer-tent purchase, his alibi collapsed.

Move the marquee clock backwards and that later visit appeared to have happened earlier.

A witness could honestly say:

"I saw Gerald around five past one."

Yet the actual time might have been one twenty.

Clara looked at Mercer.

"The clock protected his second visit."

Mercer nodded slowly.

"That's one possibility."

"He bought the beer at one twelve."

"Yes."

"Then returned to the marquee."

"According to Peter, likely."

"At roughly one eighteen to one twenty."

"The photographs support that."

"Carrying Julian's wallet."

"Yes."

"Then moved the clock backwards so anyone who saw him thought the visit occurred before the beer purchase."

Mercer looked at her.

"That's becoming plausible."

Mabel said:

"Which in Mercer language means yes."

He ignored her.

Clara continued:

"Why return?"

"Wallet."

"Maybe."

"He forgot it after the murder."

"Possible."

"Then realised it contained the letters."

"Possible."

"So he came back for it."

"Possible."

"Found the document wallet."

"Yes."

"Moved the clock."

"Possibly."

"Then went to the glasshouse and dumped it."

Mercer sat again.

"Careful."

"Why?"

"You're turning possibility into narrative."

Clara paused.

He was right.

Again.

Annoyingly.

She nodded.

"Fair."

"Good."

"Still, it fits."

"It does."

Mabel said:

"Better."

Mercer looked towards her.

"Do you need something to do?"

"Yes."

"Go home."

"No."

He sighed.

The door opened again.

Peter Lacey entered with Rachel.

Peter was sixty-eight, narrow-faced and balding, wearing the dark trousers and white short-sleeved shirt of a fête steward.

A metal watch gleamed on his wrist.

Clara noticed immediately.

So did Mabel.

"Another one."

Peter looked confused.

"Another what?"

"Nothing."

Mercer gestured to a chair.

Peter sat.

Rachel began.

"Mr Lacey, tell Inspector Mercer what you told me."

Peter rubbed his hands together.

"I saw Gerald inside the produce marquee."

"When?"

"About five past one."

"Why do you think that?"

"The clock."

"Where were you?"

"Main entrance."

"Where was Gerald?"

"Near the judges' table."

"Doing what?"

Peter hesitated.

"Looking for something."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"Did you speak?"

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"'Everything all right?'"

"And Gerald?"

"He said, 'Marlowe's lost his papers.'"

Clara felt a small jolt.

Mercer said:

"His exact words?"

"As near as I remember."

"Did you see Sir Julian?"

"No."

"Body?"

"No."

"Could you see behind the flower display?"

"No."

"Did Gerald appear distressed?"

"Annoyed."

"Anything in his hands?"

Peter thought.

"Red folder."

The wallet.

"Which hand?"

"Left."

Clara exchanged a look with Mercer.

Nathan's photograph also showed the red wallet in Gerald's left hand.

Peter continued:

"He was moving cards on the judging table."

Mercer's expression sharpened.

"What cards?"

"Entry cards, I assumed."

"Did you see which?"

"No."

"Did he touch the clock?"

Peter frowned.

"I don't remember."

"Think carefully."

Peter looked down.

Then:

"He stood beside the support pole."

"The clock was mounted there."

"Yes."

"Did you see his hands?"

"No."

"I turned away."

"Why?"

"Someone called me from outside."

"How long?"

"Half a minute."

"When you looked back?"

"Gerald was coming out."

"Which entrance?"

"Rear."

"Did he still have the wallet?"

"Yes."

Clara's mind moved rapidly.

That could be the one nineteen photograph.

Peter was witnessing the same event from inside.

He simply misremembered the time because of the altered clock.

Mercer asked:

"What did the clock show when you first saw Gerald?"

"About five past."

"And after he left?"

Peter thought.

"Still about five past."

Everyone went quiet.

Mercer said:

"Still?"

"Well, maybe six or seven minutes past."

"So it was running."

"Yes."

That matched Nathan's images.

Someone did not stop the clock.

They reset it.

Then let it continue.

Deliberate.

Precise enough to shift the apparent time.

Mercer said:

"Did you see Gerald earlier, before the beer tent?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Twelve fifty or so."

"Where?"

"Committee tent."

"Was he wearing a jacket?"

"His linen one."

"Later in the marquee?"

Peter frowned.

"No jacket."

"Did you see anyone wearing a dark blue steward blazer?"

Peter thought.

"Sir Julian."

Clara sat straighter.

Mercer said:

"You're certain?"

"I thought it was him."

"When?"

"Just before Gerald bought his beer."

"Time?"

"About one ten."

"Where?"

"Rear side of the marquee."

"What did you see?"

"Back of him."

"Face?"

"No."

"Hair?"

"Grey."

"Build?"

"Similar."

"Did he walk into the marquee?"

"Yes."

The fake sighting confirmed independently.

Mercer asked:

"What made you think it was Sir Julian?"

"Who else would it be?"

Exactly.

Clara felt the danger of assumptions again.

The man looked enough like Julian because Peter expected him to be Julian.

"Did you see the person's shoes?"

Peter stared.

"Shoes?"

"Colour?"

"No."

"Pocket square?"

"No idea."

"Anything in his hands?"

"Nothing."

Mercer nodded.

"Thank you."

Peter looked worried.

"Have I got something wrong?"

"No. You've remembered something important."

"Is Gerald—"

Mercer held up a hand.

"Don't discuss this with anyone."

Peter nodded.

Mabel said:

"That'll last twelve minutes."

Peter looked offended.

"I'm discreet."

Mabel stared.

Peter reconsidered.

"Mostly."

Rachel escorted him out.

Clara looked at Mercer.

"Gerald."

Mercer did not answer.

But he did not correct her.

Tom folded his arms.

"Sequence?"

Mercer gave him a look.

Tom shrugged.

"Just asking."

Clara laid out her timeline.

"Suppose Julian is alive at one oh-two when Lucy leaves."

"Suppose," Mercer said.

"Gerald approaches."

"Possible."

"They argue."

"Likely."

"Gerald kills him."

"Unproven."

"With the Rose Cup."

"Unproven."

"Then takes the dark blazer."

"He already had access."

"Walks outside as 'Julian' around one ten."

"Creating a false sighting."

"Then reaches the beer tent and buys a pint at one twelve forty-three."

"Yes."

"Public alibi."

"Potentially."

"Then realises he left Julian's wallet behind."

"Possible."

"Returns around one eighteen."

"Peter sees him."

"Nathan photographs him."

"Yes."

"He moves the marquee clock back so Peter thinks the visit happened before the beer purchase."

"That would explain the clock."

"He takes the wallet to the manor by bicycle."

"Possible."

"Hides it beneath the glasshouse bench."

"Yes."

"Searches for the original scarred rose Julian moved."

"Maybe."

"Doesn't find it."

"Maybe."

"Returns to the beer tent by one thirty-two."

"Possible."

Mabel said:

"Very possible."

Mercer held up one finger.

"There are problems."

"Of course."

"First, no witness saw Gerald strike Julian."

"Expected."

"Second, the Rose Cup has no usable fingerprints."

"Wiped."

"Maybe."

"Third, blood traces?"

Clara waited.

Mercer said:

"None visible."

"Could have been cleaned."

"Maybe."

"Fourth?"

"The trophy may not be the weapon."

That surprised her.

"What?"

"Pathologist says the wound shape is compatible with a narrow, heavy rounded object. The cup could do it. But so could several gardening tools."

Mabel said:

"Secateurs?"

"No."

"Small hammer?"

"Yes."

"Rose pruning hammer?"

Tom frowned.

"Is that a thing?"

"No," Clara said.

Mabel shrugged.

"Worth asking."

Mercer continued:

"Fourth problem: if Gerald intended to frame Sheila by hiding the potted rose in her tent, when did he do it?"

Clara thought.

Before twelve oh-four, because Nathan photographed the bench empty then.

Gerald was publicly around much of that time.

But he could have moved it earlier.

"Before noon."

"Possible."

"Why?"

"Because Julian had identified the substitution."

"So Gerald needed to remove the evidence."

"Yes."

"Then why hide it instead of destroying it?"

Clara paused.

Nathan had earlier raised exactly that problem.

The potted Vale-line plant was valuable.

Gerald might want it back later.

"Temporary concealment."

"Maybe."

"Sheila's tent also frames a rival."

"Convenient."

Mabel said:

"He thinks in committee politics. Framing Sheila would occur naturally."

Mercer almost smiled.

Almost.

"Fifth problem."

Clara sighed.

"Go on."

"The glove."

Gerald's committee glove beside the body.

"He says it was stolen weeks ago."

"Yes."

"Do you believe him?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because three weeks ago is exactly when Julian began asking questions."

Mercer nodded.

"Good."

"Meaning Gerald invented the story after realising the glove was at the scene."

"Possible."

"Or someone actually stole it then to frame him later."

"Also possible."

Mabel sighed.

"Back to annoying."

Clara said:

"If Gerald killed Julian, why leave the glove?"

"Accident."

"He drops it during struggle."

"Possible."

"He later realises but cannot retrieve it because Clara finds the body."

"Except he did return at one eighteen."

Clara stopped.

Right.

If Gerald returned, he could have retrieved his glove.

Unless he did not know it was there.

Or Monty had moved it from where Gerald dropped it.

That was possible.

Monty found it near the entrance, not necessarily the body.

He could have carried it.

"Monty moved the glove."

Mercer nodded.

"Likely."

"So Gerald returned and didn't see it."

"Possible."

Clara looked towards the rear room where Monty was asleep.

"Useful again."

Mabel said:

"We should get him a badge."

"No," Mercer said.

Clara ignored both.

"The biggest problem is motive for attacking Lucy."

Mercer nodded.

"Exactly."

"If Gerald already killed Julian and recovered the wallet, why attack Lucy later?"

"Perhaps he thought she found the original plant."

"Possible."

"Did she tell anyone?"

"Arthur."

"Could Gerald overhear?"

"Maybe."

"Did he follow her?"

"Unknown."

Tom said:

"Could the attack on Lucy be someone else?"

Everyone turned.

"Why assume one person did everything?"

That landed.

Clara stared.

A murder.

An attempted attack.

Evidence staging.

Historical document hiding.

Not necessarily one actor.

Mercer nodded slowly.

"Exactly."

Mabel looked irritated.

"That makes it worse."

"Usually does."

Clara thought of Lucy's attacker whispering:

You should have left it buried.

That sounded more concerned with Agnes Wren's documents than the rose itself.

Gerald cared about the rose.

But who cared about keeping Agnes's authorship buried?

Someone whose family reputation depended on Elias Vale's credit.

A Vale.

Beatrice?

Unlikely emotionally, but possible.

Martin Vale?

Horticultural consultant, aware of lineage.

Maybe.

The attack might come from a different motive entirely.

Clara said:

"Martin Vale."

Mercer looked at her.

"What about him?"

"If Agnes Wren is recognised as breeder, what happens to the Vale estate's claim?"

"Reputational damage."

"Commercial?"

"Potentially."

"Does Martin have a business connected to heritage roses?"

Mercer looked at Rachel's desk.

She had returned silently during the discussion.

Rachel checked.

"Vale Heritage Horticulture Ltd."

Clara raised her eyebrows.

"There."

Mercer said:

"What's the business?"

Rachel read:

"Consultancy, garden restoration, historic plant propagation. Specialist nursery contracts."

"Does he sell Vale-branded roses?"

"Checking."

A few taps.

"Yes."

One current cultivar line marketed under the estate heritage brand.

Mabel said:

"That sounds expensive."

Rachel nodded.

"Very."

Clara said:

"If Agnes Wren's records undermine the Vale story, Martin's business loses part of its heritage claim."

"Potential motive."

"But Lucy's attack was last night."

"After the documents were discovered."

"And she was carrying evidence."

"Yes."

Mercer's expression changed.

"Rachel. Find Martin Vale's movements from six p.m. onwards."

She nodded.

Clara looked at Tom.

His suggestion had opened another path.

Gerald might be the murderer.

Martin might be Lucy's attacker.

Or vice versa.

Or neither.

The case had stopped being a single knot.

It was becoming several tied together.

Rachel worked for a minute.

Then:

"Martin Vale checked into the Red Lion in Stow at six forty last night."

"Any proof he stayed?"

"Room key logs show entry at ten fifty-eight."

"So four-hour gap."

Mercer nodded.

"Vehicle?"

"Hotel car park camera shows it leaving at seven twelve."

"Returning?"

"Ten thirty-nine."

Mabel folded her arms.

"That's enough time."

"Yes."

Clara said:

"To come to Bramblewick."

"Yes."

"Attack Lucy."

"Yes."

"Return."

"Yes."

Mercer picked up his phone.

"Let's bring him in."

He stepped outside.

Mabel watched him go.

"He's becoming very obedient."

Clara stared.

"To whom?"

"You."

"Don't say that where he can hear."

Tom laughed.

Rachel's phone buzzed.

She glanced.

Then went still.

"What?"

Clara asked.

"Lab result."

"On?"

"The red smear from the sash fragment."

Clara straightened.

"Blood?"

Rachel nodded.

"Human."

Mabel's face changed.

"Whose?"

"Preliminary DNA comparison."

She read again.

"Sir Julian's."

Silence.

The torn blue sash Lucy carried had Julian's blood on it.

Clara felt the case tip sharply.

Lucy said she left Julian alive.

She later used the sash at the glasshouse.

But blood from the victim was already on it.

"Could it transfer during their argument?" Clara asked.

Rachel shook her head.

"Potentially, if he was already injured."

"But he wasn't, according to Lucy."

"Correct."

Mabel said quietly:

"Then Lucy lied."

Or someone else handled the sash after the murder before Lucy took it to the glasshouse.

Clara remembered Patricia.

Gerald gave Lucy something at twelve fifty-five.

Likely sash.

At twelve fifty-eight, Lucy had it.

If it already carried Julian's blood at that point, then Julian had been injured before Lucy confronted him.

But Nathan's recovered images showed Julian upright, arguing, apparently fine.

Could the blood be tiny transfer from an earlier cut?

Maybe.

But if significant enough? Need know quantity.

"How much blood?" Clara asked.

Rachel read.

"Trace amount."

Not enough.

Could have come from a small cut.

Or later contamination.

"Where on sash?"

"Near torn edge."

The fragment itself caught on path. Lucy wrapped the cutting later. If she had the sash when Julian was killed later, but she left with sash before death, no. Unless she returned or someone else used the same sash.

Wait photograph shows fabric in pocket, could be only portion/similar cloth, not necessarily whole sash. But Patricia gave sash to Gerald, then Gerald handed something to Lucy. Could be a folded judging sheet, not necessarily sash. Yet visual dark blue suggests likely. We can leave ambiguity.

Clara said:

"Could blood have got onto the sash after Lucy's confrontation?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"If she dropped it."

"Or someone took it."

"Yes."

Mabel frowned.

"Then returned it to her?"

"She later had it at the glasshouse."

"Did she say where it was between one and last night?"

Rachel checked interview notes.

"She says after arguing with Julian, she left the sash on the judges' table."

Everyone froze.

Clara said:

"She didn't keep it?"

"No."

"But photograph shows it in her pocket."

Rachel looked again.

"She says she tucked it there briefly, then removed it and left it behind."

"Then someone else could use it after one."

"Yes."

"And later return it to the lockbox."

"Yes."

"Lucy took it again from the lockbox last night to wrap the cutting."

Rachel nodded.

That solved the chain.

The blood likely got onto the sash during the murder.

The killer then returned it to the prize box.

Lucy unknowingly reused it later.

Which meant the killer handled the sash.

And likely the blazer too.

Both came from the same storeroom.

Gerald had the key.

Clara looked at Rachel.

"Fingerprints on sash?"

"Fabric. Not useful."

"Blood transfer pattern?"

"Lab says contact transfer, not spatter."

"So the sash touched Julian after he was injured."

"Yes."

Mabel said:

"Used to wipe something?"

Rachel frowned.

"Possible."

Clara thought of the weapon.

If the Rose Cup had been wiped clean, what was used?

A blue sash.

That would leave trace blood.

The killer could wipe the trophy with the sash, then return the sash to the lockbox.

"Inspector!"

Mercer re-entered.

"What?"

Clara pointed at Rachel.

"Blood on the sash."

"I heard."

"You did?"

"Door was open."

"Contact transfer."

"Yes."

"Could have wiped the trophy."

Mercer stopped.

He looked at Rachel.

"Get lab to compare trace metal polish and silver residue on the sash."

Rachel nodded immediately.

Mabel whispered:

"There."

If silver polish from the Rose Cup was embedded in the sash alongside Julian's blood, the sash had almost certainly been used to clean the murder weapon.

That would connect the storeroom access directly to the killing.

Gerald obtained the sash.

Gerald obtained the blazer.

Gerald later had the wallet.

Gerald lied about his movements.

Gerald had motive.

The structure was tightening.

But Clara still felt uneasy.

Not because Gerald looked innocent.

Because he looked increasingly guilty.

And she had learnt to distrust the moment when a case became comfortable.

Mercer looked at her.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Not believing the obvious."

"I believe Gerald is deeply involved."

"But?"

Clara sighed.

"I don't know whether he killed Julian."

Mabel stared.

"After all that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Clara looked at the timeline.

"Because someone planned the false sighting and the clock."

"Yes."

"Someone manipulated Lucy."

"Yes."

"Someone hid the Vale-line plant in Sheila's tent."

"Likely."

"Someone wiped the weapon."

"Likely."

"Someone returned the sash and blazer."

"Likely."

"Someone then returned to collect Julian's wallet, cycled to the manor, searched the glasshouse and came back."

"Possible."

She looked at Mercer.

"That's a lot of clear thinking immediately after killing someone in anger."

Mercer nodded slowly.

"Unless it wasn't anger."

"Premeditated."

"Possible."

"Then why use an improvised trophy?"

"Good question."

Tom said:

"Maybe the trophy wasn't improvised."

Everyone turned.

"What?" Clara asked.

"If Gerald planned to kill him inside a flower show, the trophy is ideal."

"Why?"

"Heavy. Available. Belongs to the scene. No need to bring a weapon."

Mabel looked impressed.

"That's unpleasantly sensible."

Tom shrugged.

Mercer nodded.

"Premeditation doesn't require bringing a weapon."

True.

Clara thought again.

Perhaps Gerald had planned everything.

The blazer.

Sash.

Provoking Lucy.

Moving the substitute rose.

Creating false sightings.

If so, the murder was not a panic reaction.

It was a constructed performance.

That fit Gerald in an uncomfortable way.

A man who had spent decades constructing a false horticultural history might be very good at staging a false narrative.

Then the phone rang.

Rachel answered.

Listened.

Her eyes widened.

"Sir."

"What?"

"Lab just called back about the trophy."

Mercer turned.

"They found something in the engraving."

"What?"

"Microscopic blood residue."

Clara's stomach tightened.

"So it is the weapon."

"Likely."

Rachel continued:

"And fibres."

"Blue?"

"Yes."

The room went silent.

The Rose Cup had killed Sir Julian.

The blue Best in Show sash had been used to wipe it.

Mercer looked at Patricia.

"You gave Gerald both the sash and the key to the blazer."

Patricia went pale.

"Yes."

"And he returned the key at one twenty-five."

"Yes."

"Did anyone else have access during that period?"

"Not through my key."

"Could someone use the others?"

"Yes."

"Who had them?"

"Ronald. Edith. Peter."

Mercer said:

"We'll account for all of them."

Clara looked at the trophy in her mind.

Gerald had wanted it.

The Bramblewick Rose Cup.

The symbol of his triumph.

Then he had used it to kill the man who intended to destroy that triumph.

There was cruel symmetry in that.

Perhaps too much symmetry.

But murder often had less poetry than investigators supplied afterwards.

Mercer said:

"I'm bringing Gerald Wainwright in."

No one objected.

Mabel asked:

"Arrest?"

"Voluntary interview initially."

"He'll hate that."

"Good."

Mercer picked up his jacket again.

Clara said:

"Inspector."

He stopped.

"One thing."

"One."

"The original plant found under Arthur's greenhouse bench."

"Yes."

"Who moved it there?"

"We don't know."

"Could Gerald have returned it last night?"

"We're checking."

"If he did, why?"

Mercer looked at her.

"Perhaps he no longer needed it hidden."

"Or someone else wanted Arthur to have it."

"Yes."

"Julian?"

"Dead."

"Before he died."

"Possible."

Clara frowned.

"If Julian dug it up at the manor at twelve twenty, he had nearly forty minutes before Louisa arrived."

"Yes."

"He could have moved it to Rosebank himself."

Mercer paused.

That possibility had not yet been ruled out.

"Beatrice saw him digging it up," Clara continued. "Nobody saw where he went afterwards."

"Correct."

"What if he simply returned the original plant to Arthur?"

Mabel stared.

"Where it belonged."

Louisa had quoted Julian:

It went back where it belonged.

Clara felt a jolt.

"That's exactly what he meant."

Mercer looked at her.

"What?"

"Louisa said Julian told her, 'It went back where it belonged.' We assumed he meant the glasshouse."

"But he could mean Rosebank."

"Yes."

"Arthur's greenhouse."

"Yes."

Then the original plant's mysterious reappearance was not mysterious at all.

Julian had restored it before his death.

No murderer moved it.

No midnight return.

No clue after the fact.

One whole branch of the investigation vanished.

Mabel said:

"So Lucy went to the glasshouse last night looking for something that was already safely back at Arthur's."

"Yes."

Tom added:

"And found the Vale-line plant instead."

"Yes."

"Then whoever attacked her cared about the old documents, not the original rose."

Clara nodded.

Two crimes.

Two motives.

Possibly two culprits.

Gerald for Julian.

Someone else for Lucy.

Mercer looked at Rachel.

"Martin Vale. Priority."

She nodded.

The case split cleanly.

Sir Julian's murder increasingly centred on Gerald.

Lucy's attack centred on Agnes Wren's papers and the Vale legacy.

Clara felt relief.

Not because the case was solved.

Because the shape finally made sense.

Gerald's fraud involved stealing history.

Martin Vale's possible motive involved protecting the history that had benefited his family.

Different generations.

Different interests.

Same rose.

Mabel looked at Clara.

"Still uncomfortable?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Clara considered.

Then she smiled slightly.

"Because we haven't heard Gerald's explanation yet."

The shop bell rang again.

Everyone turned.

Gerald Wainwright stood outside.

No police had brought him.

No constable accompanied him.

He looked through the glass.

His face was grey.

In his hand was a small cardboard box.

Mercer moved towards the door.

Gerald raised the box.

"Before you arrest me," he called through the glass, "you need to see what's inside this."

Mercer unlocked the door cautiously.

Gerald entered.

He placed the box on the counter.

No one touched it.

Mercer said:

"What is it?"

Gerald looked at Clara.

Then at the Vale catalogue.

Then at Mabel.

"Proof."

"Of what?"

Gerald's voice was suddenly tired.

"That I lied about the Bramblewick Crimson."

Mabel said:

"We've established that."

Gerald flinched.

"But I didn't kill Julian."

Mercer said nothing.

Gerald opened the cardboard lid.

Inside lay a stack of photographs.

Old.

New.

Labels.

Propagation notes.

And a sealed plastic specimen bag containing a dried rose stem.

Gerald pointed to it.

"That came from the original plant in 1983."

Clara frowned.

"Why keep a dead stem?"

"Because I had it tested."

"When?"

"1998."

"For what?"

"Parentage."

Nathan's earlier questions about line differences flashed through Clara's mind.

Gerald swallowed.

"The Bramblewick Crimson Arthur's family kept isn't the rose that won the county certificate in 1902."

Silence.

Mabel stared.

"What?"

Gerald looked at the Vale ledger.

"The estate line is."

Clara felt the case tilt again.

Gerald continued:

"Agnes Wren bred both."

The room was silent.

"The Crowther plant was her original seedling. The Vale line was a later selection from the same cross. Elias Vale entered the later one under his own name."

Clara looked at the two ledger entries.

That fitted.

Wren stock differs from Vale glasshouse line.

Do not combine.

Two related roses.

Both Agnes's.

Gerald said:

"Arthur's plant is the true original Bramblewick Crimson by family history."

"Then why say the estate line won the certificate?"

"Because the flower shown publicly in 1902 came from the improved Vale selection."

"So there are two legitimate claims."

"Yes."

Mabel said:

"And you decided to claim both."

Gerald closed his eyes.

"Yes."

No defence.

No excuse.

That was almost worse.

Mercer said:

"Why bring this now?"

"Because Julian knew."

"Yes."

"He intended to expose me."

"Yes."

"And I hated him for it."

"Yes."

Gerald looked at him.

"But he was alive when I left the marquee at one twenty."

Clara froze.

Mercer said nothing.

Gerald continued:

"I went back for the wallet. That's true."

"You lied about that."

"Yes."

"You altered the clock."

Gerald looked surprised.

"No."

Mercer watched him closely.

"Think carefully."

"I didn't touch the clock."

"You were inside around one twenty."

"Yes."

"Peter Lacey saw you."

"I know."

"He thought it was one oh-five because the clock had been moved."

Gerald stared.

"Then someone had already moved it."

Clara felt unease return.

Mercer said:

"Why did you go back?"

"Julian had taken Louisa's locket and my letters. I wanted them."

"So you stole his wallet."

"Yes."

"From where?"

"Judges' table."

Not from the body.

That mattered.

"Where was Julian?"

"Alive."

Clara leaned forward.

"Where?"

"Behind the flower display."

Everyone went still.

"What was he doing?" Mercer asked.

"Arguing with someone."

"Who?"

Gerald looked towards Clara.

"I couldn't see at first."

"Then?"

Gerald swallowed.

"When I left, I saw her."

"Who?"

Gerald's face tightened.

"Sheila."

Silence.

Mabel whispered:

"Oh."

Gerald continued:

"Sheila Pomeroy was with Julian at one twenty."

Clara stared.

That should have been impossible.

Sheila's plant-club tent had become the place where Gerald's substituted rose was later found.

Sheila had motive to humiliate Gerald.

She had known the Crimson story was false.

And now Gerald claimed she was the last known person with Julian.

Mercer said:

"You expect us to believe you only mention this now?"

Gerald looked at him.

"I thought she'd killed him."

"Then why stay silent?"

"Because I'd stolen the wallet."

"And because the documents inside exposed your fraud."

"Yes."

"Convenient."

"I know."

Clara asked:

"Did Sheila see you?"

Gerald looked at her.

"I think so."

"Did you hear what they argued about?"

"Only one sentence."

"What?"

Gerald hesitated.

Then:

"Julian said, 'I never promised you anything.'"

The note.

The words suddenly returned with new force.

You promised me first prize.

Lucy had written the note historically.

But perhaps the phrase resonated with another real argument entirely.

Clara looked at Mabel.

"Sheila entered floral classes."

"And roses."

"Did Julian judge hers?"

"Yes."

Gerald said:

"She expected to win."

Mercer looked at him.

"Why?"

Gerald gave a bitter laugh.

"Because Julian told her she would."

Silence.

Clara felt the mystery turn once more.

"How do you know?"

"She told everyone."

Mabel frowned.

"She did say she had the winning entry."

"Which class?" Clara asked.

Gerald looked at her.

"Heritage rose."

Clara's pulse quickened.

"What rose?"

Gerald's answer came slowly.

"A crimson one."

No one spoke.

Gerald added:

"Sheila had her own Bramblewick Crimson."

And just like that, there were not two old rose lines.

There were three claims.

Three histories.

Three people who believed they possessed the truth.

And one dead judge who had been expected to decide between them.

Clara looked at Mercer.

"What exactly is missing?"

"Something that places Gerald in physical contact with Julian at the moment of the assault."

"The glove."

"He admits losing it in the marquee."

"The sash."

"He admits handling it earlier."

"The blazer."

"Same."

"The trophy?"

"No usable prints."

"The wallet?"

"Taken afterwards, by his own admission."

Mabel folded her arms.

"He has an answer for everything."

"That's what solicitors are for," Mercer said.

Clara thought again about the photographs.

Gerald before the murder.

Gerald after.

There had to be some change.

Something small.

Murder did not happen outside the physical world.

People moved.

Touched.

Dropped.

Tore.

Transferred.

She looked at Rachel.

"Do you still have Nathan's photograph sequence?"

"Yes."

"Can we see the one around one oh-six?"

Mercer watched her.

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know yet."

"Excellent."

Rachel opened the laptop.

The image at **1:06:41 p.m.**

Sheila walking away.

Gerald approaching the rear entrance.

White shirt.

Dark trousers.

Linen jacket folded over one arm.

Blue steward blazer over the other.

Clara enlarged Gerald.

Nothing obvious.

Mabel leaned closer.

"His moustache is crooked."

"Not relevant."

"Could be."

Clara scanned him slowly.

Shirt.

Collar.

Sleeves.

Watch.

Jacket.

Then she stopped.

"His lapel."

Rachel zoomed.

Gerald's linen jacket carried the Bramblewick Horticultural Society badge.

A small enamel rose surrounded by a brass ring.

Clara pointed.

"Was he wearing that all morning?"

Nathan's earlier photographs confirmed it.

Nine twenty-two.

Badge.

Ten eleven.

Badge.

Eleven twenty-one during the argument.

Badge.

Twelve thirty.

Badge.

Clara said:

"Now the beer-tent photograph."

Rachel opened it.

1:12:47 p.m.

Gerald stood holding his pint.

No linen jacket.

Just white shirt.

"Not useful," Mabel said.

"Wait."

Clara looked at the jacket he carried in another image after one thirty.

Nathan had photographed Gerald beside the horticultural tent.

The linen jacket was back on.

Rachel enlarged.

Clara felt her pulse jump.

"No badge."

Mabel leaned in.

"You're right."

Tom said:

"Could have removed it."

"Why?"

"No reason."

Mercer was already checking the evidence log.

"Rachel."

She pulled up the scene inventory.

Items recovered from around Sir Julian's body.

Broken glass.

Plant labels.

One silver cufflink belonging to Julian.

Twine.

A brass fastener.

Mercer stopped.

"What sort of fastener?"

Rachel opened the photograph.

Small.

Circular.

Bent.

With traces of dark enamel around the edge.

Clara stared.

"That's not a fastener."

Mercer looked at her.

"Could be the back of the badge."

Mabel said:

"There."

Rachel searched further.

Another tiny item had been recovered beneath the edge of the flower-display cloth.

An enamel fragment.

Deep red.

Curved.

Clara looked at Gerald's earlier lapel badge.

Red enamel rose.

Brass surround.

Same approximate size.

Mercer's expression sharpened.

"Send both for comparison to Wainwright's society badge design."

Rachel nodded.

Clara said:

"If it broke during a struggle—"

"Then part remained on Gerald's jacket and part fell near the body."

"Except the whole badge is gone afterwards."

"Yes."

"Did police search Gerald's clothing?"

"All seized."

"Jacket?"

"Yes."

"Any damage?"

Rachel checked.

"Small tear at left lapel."

Silence.

That was different.

Not merely circumstantial.

Gerald's badge had been intact moments before he entered the marquee.

Afterwards it was gone.

A fragment matching it lay beside the victim.

And the jacket itself was torn where the badge had been fixed.

Tom said quietly:

"Julian grabbed him."

Clara pictured it.

Gerald confronting Julian.

The Rose Cup nearby.

Voices rising.

Julian perhaps dismissing him.

Gerald reaching for the wallet.

Julian grabbing Gerald's jacket.

The badge tearing loose.

Then the blow.

One strike.

Enough.

Mercer closed the laptop.

"That may be what we needed."

Mabel said:

"You mean Clara found it."

Mercer looked at her.

"I was going to say the photographic comparison found it."

"Of course you were."

Clara smiled.

Mercer did not.

But there was something different in his expression now.

Respect, perhaps.

Or resignation.

Possibly both.

"Don't get sentimental," Clara said.

"I wasn't planning to."

"Good."

Rachel's phone buzzed.

She read.

Then looked at Mercer.

"Sir. Gerald's solicitor is pushing for release if we're not charging immediately."

Mercer's expression hardened.

"How long?"

"We either charge on current evidence or release pending further enquiries."

Mabel frowned.

"After all this?"

"Evidence procedure isn't a village vote."

"Pity."

Clara said:

"Will the badge comparison be quick?"

"Could take hours."

"And until then?"

Mercer looked irritated.

"We have strong grounds, but the solicitor is arguing that his admitted deception explains the blazer, clock, wallet and altered cards."

"Not the murder."

"Exactly."

"The badge could."

"Yes."

"Could you charge now?"

"We could attempt it."

"But?"

"I'd rather have the forensic match."

That was sensible.

Still frustrating.

Rachel said:

"Gerald's account is that he caught the badge earlier on marquee rope."

Clara laughed.

Mercer looked at her.

"What?"

"Of course it is."

"He says it happened before one."

"Does Nathan have a photograph after one?"

Rachel searched.

Twelve fifty-eight.

Gerald near committee tent.

Badge visible.

Clara pointed.

"There."

Mercer's face hardened.

"He just lied again."

Mabel smiled.

"He's consistent."

Rachel immediately sent the image comparison.

Clara felt the case closing.

But Mercer did not appear satisfied.

"He's adapting," he said.

"Meaning?"

"Every time we show him a contradiction, he supplies a new explanation."

"Poor ones."

"Poor can still create reasonable doubt if enough of the scene has innocent explanations."

Tom said:

"Then the badge matters."

"Very much."

A silence settled.

Outside, Bramblewick continued with its ordinary Saturday-afternoon business.

A delivery van stopped outside the chemist.

A woman pushed a pram past the window.

Two boys cycled towards the green.

Nothing in the village looked changed.

Yet one man was dead.

Another sat in police custody.

And a woman lay in hospital because people had spent more than a century protecting stories they preferred to the truth.

Mabel stood.

"I need proper tea."

Tom looked offended.

"What have I been making?"

"Intermediate tea."

He sighed and returned to the café.

Mercer checked his watch.

"I need to go back."

Clara nodded.

"Will you tell me?"

"If he's charged."

"And Caroline?"

"Likely charge for the assault once final interview is complete."

"So Agnes's papers are safe."

"Yes."

"Good."

Mercer reached the door.

Then stopped.

"Clara."

She looked at him.

He rarely used her first name.

"Yes?"

"Do not go to the glasshouse."

Mabel turned.

Clara frowned.

"Why would I?"

"Because Gerald knows that's where the documents were found."

"He's in custody."

"For now."

"You think he might be released."

"Possibly."

"And go there."

"Possibly."

"What would he be looking for?"

Mercer hesitated.

"Anything Julian left behind."

"The plant samples."

"Exactly."

Clara had almost forgotten them.

Sir Julian had supposedly taken samples from all three crimson roses.

None had been found in his car or effects.

If those samples remained somewhere, they could independently prove Gerald's long deception.

The glasshouse was a likely hiding place.

"So police are searching it again?"

"Yes."

"Then why warn me?"

Mercer gave her a look.

"Experience."

"Fair."

He left.

Mabel watched him through the window.

"He definitely likes you."

"Stop saying that."

"Doesn't make it less true."

Clara returned to the Vale catalogue.

But the words no longer held her attention.

The missing samples bothered her.

Julian had taken:

Arthur's old Wren-line specimen.

Sheila's Croft rose.

Gerald's Vale-line entry.

Three samples.

Three histories.

If tested together, they could establish relationships between the plants beyond argument.

Julian had apparently intended to use evidence, not reputation, to settle the matter.

Where had he put them?

Not his car.

Not his wallet.

Not on his body.

Maybe they were still at the fête.

Or—

Clara looked towards the old photograph of Agnes Wren standing in the glasshouse.

The stone trough.

The hidden compartment.

Lucy had found documents there.

Perhaps Julian had found it first.

Perhaps he used the same hiding place.

Mabel saw her expression.

"No."

Clara sighed.

"I haven't said anything."

"You don't need to."

"It's only a thought."

"No."

"The police are already searching."

"Good."

"But they may not know what they're looking for."

"They know about samples."

"Do they know what horticultural samples look like?"

Mabel stared.

"Bits of plant."

"Potentially wrapped, labelled, dried, refrigerated—"

"Clara."

"Fine."

She sat down.

For eleven minutes.

Then the telephone rang.

Clara answered immediately.

"Crooked Bookmark."

Rachel Shaw.

"We've got the badge match."

Clara stood.

"Yes?"

"Enamel composition, size and brass fitting are consistent with the society badge issued to Gerald Wainwright."

Mabel had moved close enough to hear.

"And the tear?"

"Consistent with the pin being ripped outwards."

"So Julian grabbed his jacket."

"Likely."

"Enough to charge?"

"Mercer's speaking to the CPS now."

Clara exhaled.

"Good."

Rachel continued:

"There's something else."

"What?"

"The red enamel fragment had skin cells."

Clara frowned.

"Gerald's?"

"No."

A beat.

"Sir Julian's."

Silence.

The badge had not merely fallen near the body.

Julian had touched it.

Possibly gripped it.

Pulled it from Gerald's lapel during the struggle.

"That places Gerald in contact with him."

"Yes."

"At around the murder window, because the badge is visible intact shortly beforehand."

"Exactly."

Mabel whispered:

"Done."

Clara was less certain.

Strong.

Very strong.

But Gerald had proven resourceful in explaining evidence.

"What does Gerald say?"

"He hasn't been told yet."

"Will you charge him?"

"Likely."

"Likely?"

"Legal decisions aren't instant."

Clara nodded.

"Anything on the missing plant samples?"

"No."

There it was again.

Still missing.

"Rachel."

"Yes?"

"Search the false base beneath the stone trough again."

"We did."

"Behind it?"

Pause.

"What do you mean?"

"The historical compartment might have more than one cavity."

"Why?"

"Old estate hiding places were sometimes double-backed. Documents in front, valuables behind."

"You're guessing."

"Yes."

"But specifically."

"Yes."

Rachel sighed.

"I'll tell the team."

"Thank you."

The call ended.

Mabel looked at Clara.

"Now can we have lunch?"

"It's almost six."

"Then supper."

Tom reappeared.

"I heard that."

He carried a plate of sandwiches.

Mabel smiled.

"He's useful."

Clara took one.

For nearly half an hour, nothing happened.

The longest peaceful period of the weekend.

Then Rachel called again.

Clara answered with half a sandwich in her hand.

"Yes?"

"You were right."

Clara stopped chewing.

Mabel noticed immediately.

"What?"

Clara put the phone on speaker.

Rachel continued:

"There was a second cavity behind the stone base."

Tom set down his cup.

"What was inside?"

"Three sealed sample tubes."

There they were.

"Labels?" Clara asked.

"Yes."

Rachel read them.

A.B. — Wren/Crowther stock

S.P. — Croft specimen

G.W. — Vale graft

Clara felt satisfaction.

Sir Julian had labelled them clearly.

No ambiguity.

No performance.

Evidence.

Rachel continued:

"Also a handwritten note."

"What does it say?"

Pause.

Then:

If the samples confirm what I suspect, Wainwright has spent forty years selling a resurrection that never happened. Agnes Wren's work survived in more than one line. Credit her, not him.

Silence.

Mabel said:

"Quite clear."

Rachel continued:

"And beneath that—"

There was more.

Of course.

"—Julian wrote: **G.W. knows. Confront after judging.**"

Clara closed her eyes.

That directly established the planned confrontation.

Gerald knew Julian had the evidence.

Julian intended to expose him.

The motive became complete.

"Does Gerald know you found them?"

"Not yet."

"Good."

"Why good?"

Clara opened her eyes.

"Because if he thinks they're still hidden, he'll want them."

Mabel stared.

"Clara."

Rachel said:

"Exactly what Mercer said."

Clara paused.

"What?"

"Gerald's being released."

The shop went silent.

"What?"

"Temporarily."

"Why?"

"His solicitor has challenged the timing and the CPS wants the full forensic package before murder charge. We can continue holding only so long without charge."

"After the badge?"

"That result came after the release decision was already being processed. Mercer is trying to reverse it."

"Can he?"

"Maybe."

"Where is Gerald now?"

"Leaving the station."

Mabel stood.

"Wonderful."

Clara looked towards the front window.

The glasshouse.

The missing samples.

Gerald did not know police had found them.

If he believed they remained there, he might go straight to the one place Mercer had specifically warned Clara to avoid.

Rachel said:

"Clara."

"Yes?"

"Stay where you are."

"I am."

"Mercer means it."

"I know."

"Gerald may be desperate."

"I understand."

"Do not go anywhere near Bramblewick Manor."

"Understood."

The call ended.

Tom looked at Clara.

"No."

She sighed.

"Everyone has become very repetitive."

"Because you require repetition."

Mabel pointed towards the chair.

"Sit."

Clara sat.

For five minutes.

Then Monty began barking.

Not at the door.

At the rear window.

Clara turned.

The narrow alley behind The Crooked Bookmark led towards Church Lane and, eventually, the north road.

A bicycle passed.

Bright green.

Gerald Wainwright rode it.

Fast.

Heading towards the manor.

No one spoke.

Mabel slowly turned towards Clara.

"No."

Clara was already standing.

"We need to call Mercer."

"Good."

"And tell him."

"Good."

Clara dialled.

No answer.

Rachel.

No answer.

Tom said:

"They're probably dealing with the release mess."

Clara looked through the rear window.

Gerald was gone.

Mabel pointed firmly at the chair.

"No."

Clara picked up Monty's lead.

"Absolutely not."

"I'm only going to the lane."

"Which lane?"

"The manor lane."

"That is not better."

"We can stay on the public road."

Tom folded his arms.

"Until you don't."

Clara looked at him.

"If Gerald is going to the glasshouse, he may destroy the samples."

"The police already have them."

"He doesn't know that."

"Then he'll find nothing."

"And become desperate."

"Exactly why we don't follow."

Mabel nodded.

"Tom is correct."

Clara stared at both of them.

"This is unbearable."

"Yes."

"You're enjoying it."

Mabel smiled.

"A little."

Then the shop telephone rang.

Clara grabbed it.

Mercer.

"Do not leave the shop."

"Gerald just cycled past towards the manor."

"I know."

"How?"

"Officer saw him."

"Are you following?"

"We are."

"Good."

"Stay where you are."

"Yes."

"Clara."

"Yes?"

"That means actually stay."

"I understand."

He hung up.

Mabel looked satisfied.

"There."

Clara sat again.

Ten minutes passed.

Fifteen.

Twenty.

No call.

Clara paced.

Tom cleared plates.

Mabel read the newspaper.

Monty slept.

At twenty-five minutes, Clara's phone buzzed.

A message.

Unknown number.

She opened it.

One sentence.

You wanted the truth about the Crimson. Come to the glasshouse and I'll give it to you. Alone.

Clara stared.

Mabel noticed her face.

"What?"

Clara showed them.

Tom's expression hardened immediately.

"No."

Mabel nodded.

"Definitely no."

Clara looked at the unknown number.

Gerald.

Almost certainly.

Or someone using his situation.

Either way, the message was bait.

Obvious bait.

Dangerous bait.

Clara forwarded it to Mercer.

Then wrote nothing else.

Mabel watched.

"Good."

Clara put the phone down.

Another message arrived.

Ask Mercer why he hasn't told you what Julian wrote about Bellamy.

Clara froze.

Mabel leaned closer.

"Bellamy?"

Tom frowned.

"What does that mean?"

Clara read the line again.

Nothing in the current rose investigation had involved her family.

Nothing she knew.

Gerald might be inventing it.

But why choose Bellamy?

The third message arrived.

The last page is still here.

Clara felt the hook sink.

Mabel saw it happen.

"No."

Clara looked at her.

"I know."

"You are thinking."

"Yes."

"Stop."

"Trying."

The phone rang.

Mercer.

She answered.

"You received messages from Wainwright?"

"Yes."

"We've traced the number. Temporary pay-as-you-go. Signal near manor."

"So it is him."

"Likely."

"What does he mean about Bellamy?"

Silence.

Clara's voice sharpened.

"Inspector."

"We found a note among Julian's sample papers."

"You didn't tell me."

"Because it did not appear relevant to the murder."

"What note?"

Another pause.

"Julian had written: **Bellamy catalogue incomplete. Ask Clara about missing lower margin.**"

Clara looked at the cut page.

"That's all?"

"No."

"What else?"

"On the reverse he wrote: **Possible Wren/Bellamy connection through nursery accounts. Unverified.**"

Mabel stared.

Clara felt irritation mix with curiosity.

"You decided that wasn't relevant?"

"To the murder, no."

"To me?"

"I was going to tell you when we weren't trying to stop Gerald Wainwright destroying evidence."

"Fair."

It was.

Annoyingly.

Mercer continued:

"Gerald is trying to lure you there."

"I know."

"Do not respond."

"I haven't."

"Good."

"We stay here."

"Yes."

"Police at manor?"

"Moving in."

"Can you see him?"

"No."

"Then be careful."

Mercer gave a short laugh without humour.

"Advice noted."

He ended the call.

Clara looked at the anonymous messages again.

The last page is still here.

Perhaps Gerald had found something Julian missed.

Perhaps he was lying.

Perhaps he simply knew Clara's curiosity well enough to use the possibility.

That was unpleasant in itself.

Mabel said:

"He knows what works on you."

Clara nodded.

"Yes."

"That's more worrying than the message."

"Also yes."

Tom locked the rear door.

Then the front.

"No adventures."

Clara smiled faintly.

"Agreed."

They waited.

Another twenty minutes.

The sky darkened.

Rain began lightly against the windows.

Then sirens sounded in the distance.

One.

Then another.

Heading towards the manor.

Monty raised his head.

Clara stood.

No one told her to sit.

Five minutes later, Mercer's name appeared on her phone.

She answered.

"Inspector?"

His breathing was slightly heavier than usual.

"We've got Gerald."

Relief loosened the room.

"At the glasshouse?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"He was trying to burn the remaining records."

"Remaining?"

"Loose ledger pages behind the old boiler wall."

"The last page."

"Apparently."

"Did he resist?"

"Ran."

Mabel said:

"At seventy-one?"

Mercer heard.

"Surprisingly well."

Tom looked at Mabel.

"Free manure."

She nodded.

"Exactly."

Clara almost laughed.

"What stopped him?"

There was a pause.

Then Mercer said:

"Wheelbarrow."

Mabel's face lit up.

"A wheelbarrow?"

"Don't."

Clara smiled.

"Please explain."

"He backed into one while trying to get through the side door."

"Was Monty involved?"

"No."

Clara looked at the sleeping dog.

"Shame."

Mercer continued:

"He went over it. Officer Shaw caught him."

Mabel looked deeply satisfied.

"Acceptable."

"What were the records?" Clara asked.

"More Agnes Wren material. One page appears to identify her as sole breeder of the original Crimson and co-selector of the improved Vale line."

"So the attribution is settled."

"Looks that way."

"Anything about Bellamy?"

"We haven't read everything."

"Inspector."

"Tomorrow."

Clara sighed.

"Fine."

"He also had something else."

"What?"

"Sir Julian's fountain pen."

Clara frowned.

"Why?"

"Likely taken during the murder."

"Souvenir?"

"Maybe. Or accident."

"Anything on it?"

"Blood."

Silence.

"Julian's?"

"Likely."

"And Gerald's fingerprints?"

"Yes."

That was direct.

Finally.

The small object the killer had taken without perhaps even realising it.

A pen.

Physical contact at the scene.

Blood.

Prints.

Combined with the badge, false sighting, clock, sash, wallet, bicycle, motive and lies, it closed the circle.

Mercer said:

"We'll be charging him."

Clara exhaled.

"Good."

This time Mercer did not tell her to stop saying it.

The rain strengthened.

Through the shop window, Bramblewick blurred into wet gold beneath the streetlamps.

The village looked peaceful.

It was not.

But perhaps it was returning there.

Mabel said:

"So Gerald killed Julian."

Clara nodded.

"Yes."

"And Caroline attacked Lucy."

"Yes."

"Agnes Wren bred the Crimson."

"Looks that way."

"Arthur gets his rose back."

"Already has it."

"Sheila's rose isn't the Crimson."

"No."

"But might be rare."

"Yes."

Mabel considered.

"Not bad."

Tom looked at her.

"Two people were nearly killed."

"I meant botanically."

"Of course."

Clara sat behind the counter.

For the first time since the fête, the solution no longer seemed to move when she looked at it.

The Body at the Village Fête

Gerald had spent forty years constructing a story in which he was the hero.

When Sir Julian prepared to destroy that story publicly, Gerald planned an alternative.

He moved the substituted Vale-line rose into Sheila's tent.

He obtained the Best in Show sash and steward's blazer.

He encouraged Lucy to confront Julian.

He waited until Sheila had also argued with him.

Then, shortly after one oh-seven, Gerald entered the marquee.

The argument became physical.

Julian grabbed Gerald's lapel and tore the society badge.

Gerald struck him with the Rose Cup.

One blow.

He wiped the trophy with the blue sash.

Then he put on the dark steward blazer and allowed witnesses to mistake him for Sir Julian walking into the marquee after Julian was already dead.

Minutes later, Gerald publicly bought a pint.

An alibi built from a false sighting.

But he had left the red wallet.

So he returned.

Peter Lacey saw him.

Gerald moved the marquee clock backwards so Peter would later place that return before the beer-tent purchase.

He took the wallet, altered judging paperwork, cycled to the glasshouse, searched for the original rose and hid the incriminating documents.

The glove he dropped during the confrontation was found and moved by Monty.

The lapel badge remained broken beside Julian.

The steward blazer carried petal material from Gerald's substituted rose.

And the fountain pen, unknowingly taken in the struggle, travelled home with Gerald.

A complicated plan.

But fundamentally the same lie Gerald had been telling for decades.

Move the labels.

Change the record.

Make people look at the wrong thing.

Then insist the story had always been that way.

Clara looked at the old photograph of Agnes Wren.

She stood between Elias Vale and Albert Crowther.

Pruning shears in hand.

No title.

No recognition.

No prize.

Yet the rose had outlived all of them.

Perhaps that was the final irony.

Gerald had committed murder because he wanted his name to survive beside a flower.

Agnes had lost her name entirely.

And still her work endured.

Mabel touched the photograph.

"She ought to get her credit."

"She will."

"Plaque?"

"Probably."

"Better than nothing."

"Yes."

Tom said:

"And the fête?"

Mabel looked horrified.

"What about it?"

"Will they hold another?"

"Of course."

"After a murder?"

"Especially after a murder. They'll have money to refund."

Clara laughed.

A proper laugh this time.

It felt good.

Then the telephone rang again.

Clara answered.

"Crooked Bookmark."

Mercer.

"One last thing."

"You're full of those."

"We read the page Wainwright was trying to burn."

Clara straightened.

"The Bellamy connection?"

"Yes."

Mabel moved closer immediately.

"What does it say?"

Mercer paused.

"Not much."

"Inspector."

"An account entry from 1902."

"Whose account?"

"Vale estate nursery."

"And?"

"It records payment to a man named Thomas Bellamy."

Clara frowned.

"For what?"

Mercer read:

For carriage and private storage of Wren papers, six shillings.

Clara felt a small chill.

"Who was Thomas Bellamy?"

"We don't know."

"Related to me?"

"We don't know."

"Where did he store the papers?"

"That's the interesting part."

"Where?"

Mercer read the final line:

Consignment removed to Bramblewick station store. Not to be entered in estate ledger.

Silence.

Mabel's eyebrows rose.

Tom looked at Clara.

Mercer continued:

"Looks like Agnes Wren trusted a Bellamy to move some of her papers out of the estate."

"Did they survive?"

"No idea."

"Where is the station store now?"

"Long gone."

"Anything else?"

"One notation."

"What?"

Mercer's voice lowered slightly.

T.B. retained key.

Clara looked towards the shelves of The Crooked Bookmark.

Another old key.

Another missing set of papers.

Another Bellamy who had apparently become involved in somebody else's secret.

Mabel smiled.

"Oh, dear."

Clara sighed.

"Yes."

"Family habit?"

"Apparently."

Mercer said:

"Do not investigate tonight."

Clara laughed.

"I won't."

"Tomorrow?"

"No promises."

He hung up.

Outside, the rain continued over Bramblewick.

Inside The Crooked Bookmark, Agnes Wren's photograph lay beneath the warm light of the counter.

Her rose had survived.

Her name would return.

Gerald's false story had finally ended.

But somewhere beneath a century of village records was another small mystery.

Thomas Bellamy.

A hidden consignment.

A retained key.

Clara looked at Mabel.

Mabel looked back.

"No," Mabel said.

Clara smiled.

"I didn't say anything."

"You don't need to."

Prizes, Plaques and Proper Jam

One week after the murder, Bramblewick held the rest of its fête.

Nobody called it the second fête.

Officially, it was the **Continuation of the Bramblewick Summer Fête and Prize Presentation**.

This title appeared on a hastily printed banner stretched across the village green.

Mabel read it.

"Terrible."

Clara stood beside her beneath the awning of The Crooked Bookmark's book stall.

"Accurate."

"Still terrible."

"That's committee language."

"Exactly."

The weather was better than anyone had earned.

Blue sky.

Light breeze.

Bunting restored.

Brass band functioning.

Children racing.

Tea urns boiling.

The ferret demonstration had been rescheduled for three.

Monty was already banned from catering.

Some traditions returned quickly.

Clara looked across the green.

The produce marquee had been removed.

A smaller replacement stood in its place.

No one mentioned why.

Not openly.

But everyone knew.

Sir Julian's murder had travelled far beyond Bramblewick.

Television crews had appeared for two days.

National newspapers ran photographs of Gerald Wainwright beneath headlines involving murder, roses and village secrets.

Clara disliked most of them.

Nathan Cole disliked them professionally.

He had returned to Bramblewick that morning carrying a copy of *Garden Britain*.

His Gerald feature had been cancelled.

A replacement article would appear instead.

THE WOMAN WHO BRED THE BRAMBLEWICK CRIMSON

Agnes Wren.

Her photograph would fill two pages.

Arthur Bell had cried when Nathan showed him the proof.

Then denied it.

Mabel had been present.

She did not challenge him.

That was how Clara knew it had happened.

Sheila Pomeroy arrived carrying a pot containing her Croft Crimson.

"You'll be pleased to know it's not worthless."

Mabel inspected the bloom.

"Never said it was."

"Royal Horticultural Society expert thinks it could be an undocumented nineteenth-century cultivar."

Clara smiled.

"So you still have something rare."

"Possibly."

"Nurseries?"

Sheila grimaced.

"Deposits returned."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

"Painful?"

"Extremely."

Mabel nodded.

"Character building."

Sheila ignored her.

"I may propagate it properly next year."

"Under its correct name?"

"Once we know it."

"Good."

Sheila looked towards the prize tent.

"And if it wins anything, I shall pretend not to care."

Mabel said:

"You'll need practice."

Sheila smiled despite herself and walked away.

Tom approached with tea.

Mabel accepted hers.

Sipped.

Paused.

Then nodded once.

Tom looked relieved.

Clara said:

"Official approval?"

"Nearly."

"High praise."

Tom handed Clara a mug.

On the far side of the green, Lucy Bell stood with Arthur.

Her head wound was hidden beneath her hair.

She looked tired but well.

Caroline Vale had been charged in connection with the assault and removal of Lucy's phone.

Beatrice Vale had withdrawn the controversial heritage-funding application voluntarily and announced that a revised submission would be prepared after an independent review of the estate archive.

Clara respected that.

Not because it was heroic.

Because it was sensible.

Sometimes correcting a lie required less drama than maintaining it.

Bramblewick Manor had also announced that the restored south glasshouse would eventually contain a

permanent display devoted to Agnes Wren and the women who had worked in the estate gardens without formal recognition.

Mabel approved.

Mostly.

She thought the wording of the announcement was "self-congratulatory".

Clara had not disagreed.

The original scarred Bramblewick Crimson stood safely at Rosebank Cottage.

Arthur refused all offers to sell it.

He had agreed to allow controlled propagation by a specialist conservation nursery.

The Vale estate line would also be preserved.

Both would carry Agnes Wren's name in their official provenance.

No single owner.

No invented rediscovery.

No Gerald Wainwright.

Clara thought Agnes might have appreciated that.

Inspector Mercer crossed the green.

He was not working.

Or at least claimed not to be.

Clara did not believe police inspectors knew how.

He stopped beside the stall.

"Mrs Bellamy."

"Inspector."

"Mabel."

"Daniel."

Mercer looked pained.

Mabel smiled.

Tom handed him tea.

He accepted it automatically.

Clara noticed.

"So."

"So what?"

"Gerald."

"Charged."

"I know."

"Then why ask?"

"I wasn't."

"You had the expression."

"My eyebrows?"

"Yes."

Tom nodded.

"They do it."

Clara looked at him.

"Traitor."

Mercer almost smiled.

"Gerald has been charged with Sir Julian Marlowe's murder, theft of evidence and attempting to pervert the course of justice."

"Still denying the blow?"

"Yes."

"But prosecution case?"

"Strong."

"The fountain pen?"

"Blood confirmed Sir Julian's. Gerald's prints. Also a tiny fibre from Gerald's torn linen lapel caught beneath the pen clip."

Clara nodded.

There it was.

Physical struggle.

Badge.

Jacket.

Pen.

No narrative left to manipulate.

Mabel said:

"And the Rose Cup?"

"Will remain evidence for some time."

"Shame."

"Why?"

"It needs polishing."

Mercer stared.

Mabel drank her tea.

A bell rang from the prize tent.

Mabel immediately turned.

Clara smiled.

"Winning doesn't matter."

"It doesn't."

"Of course."

They walked towards the ceremony.

Ronald Pease stood on a small wooden platform with a microphone.

He looked extremely pleased to have regained control of the fête.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen."

Feedback squealed through the speakers.

Half the audience winced.

Monty barked.

Ronald tapped the microphone.

"Is that better?"

It was worse.

Eventually the system settled.

Prizes were awarded.

Children's vegetables.

Cakes.

Floral displays.

Photography.

Preserves.

Tom's Victoria sponge received first place.

Clara applauded enthusiastically.

Mabel said:

"It was decent."

Tom looked at her.

"Thank you."

"Don't overreact."

Then raspberry jam.

Mabel straightened.

Ronald read:

"First prize, raspberry preserve — Mabel Finch."

Mabel did not move.

Clara looked at her.

"Mabel."

"I heard."

"You're first."

"I know."

"Aren't you going up?"

"In a moment."

Mabel smoothed her cardigan.

Then walked to the platform with the dignity of someone accepting an honour she had been expecting all along.

Clara applauded.

Tom applauded.

Mercer applauded.

Monty barked again.

Mabel returned carrying a blue rosette.

Clara smiled.

"Congratulations."

Mabel tucked it immediately into her handbag.

"Doesn't matter."

"Naturally."

Ronald continued.

The final horticultural award was Best in Show.

The original result had been voided.

After rejudging by an independent panel, the award went to Arthur Bell for his white heritage climbing rose.

Arthur shook his head when his name was called.

Lucy pushed him gently towards the platform.

The crowd applauded.

Longer than required.

Arthur accepted the certificate.

Then Ronald asked him to remain.

Beatrice Vale joined him.

Nathan Cole came forward carrying a framed enlargement of the old photograph.

Agnes Wren between Elias Vale and Albert Crowther.

Ronald cleared his throat.

"The Bramblewick Horticultural Society, Bramblewick Manor and the parish council have agreed

that the historical record concerning the Bramblewick Crimson will be formally amended."

The green became quiet.

"Evidence discovered this week indicates that the rose was bred and selected by Agnes Wren, later Agnes Crowther, while working in the gardens of Bramblewick Manor."

Arthur lowered his head.

Lucy took his hand.

"The surviving Crowther and Vale lines will both be preserved as part of her horticultural legacy."

Applause began.

This time it spread slowly.

Then became substantial.

Clara watched Arthur.

He did not cry.

Probably.

Mabel looked away politely.

Ronald continued:

"A memorial plaque will be installed in the restored south glasshouse."

He read the wording:

Agnes Wren Crowther

1861–1938

Horticulturist and breeder of the Bramblewick Crimson

Her work survived even when her name did not.

Clara felt something tighten in her throat.

Simple.

Accurate.

Enough.

When the applause ended, the brass band began playing.

Not especially well.

But with conviction.

The fête resumed.

Mercer stood beside Clara.

"You satisfied?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Gerald spent forty years trying to own the rose."

"And?"

"Now nobody does."

"That seems appropriate."

"Yes."

Mabel returned with another certificate.

Tom looked at it.

"What now?"

"Highly Commended marmalade."

"You entered marmalade too?"

"Obviously."

Clara laughed.

Monty chose that moment to escape his lead.

He moved with astonishing speed towards the refreshment tent.

"Monty!"

Several people shouted simultaneously.

A plate of sausage rolls disappeared.

Edith Partridge screamed.

Monty emerged from beneath the canvas carrying two.

Clara closed her eyes.

Mercer said:

"Some mysteries repeat."

"Apparently."

Tom went after him.

Mabel said:

"Leave him. He'll come back when they're gone."

"He has two sausages."

"Exactly."

Clara watched Monty disappear behind the book stall.

Life in Bramblewick had returned to normal.

Or its version of normal.

She thought of the small account entry Mercer had mentioned.

Thomas Bellamy.

Six shillings.

Wren papers.

Bramblewick station store.

Retained key.

A minor historical curiosity.

Nothing to do with the murder.

Nothing requiring immediate investigation.

Clara was determined to leave it alone.

At least until Monday.

Perhaps Tuesday.

Mercer looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You're thinking about Thomas Bellamy."

"No."

"That was too quick."

Mabel said:

"Definitely thinking about him."

Clara sighed.

"There's a station-store reference."

"I know."

"Old records may survive."

"I know."

"And a key."

"I know."

"Do you know where the key is?"

"No."

"Good."

Mercer frowned.

"Why good?"

"Because neither do I."

He stared at her.

Then Clara smiled.

"Yet."

Epilogue

The Rose at Rosebank

Three weeks later, the Bramblewick Crimson flowered again.

Arthur Bell telephoned Clara shortly after eight in the morning.

He said only:

"It's open."

Clara knew what he meant.

She walked to Rosebank Cottage with Mabel, Tom and Monty.

The old rose grew behind Arthur's greenhouse.

It was not impressive in the way Gerald's fête specimen had been impressive.

The plant leaned.

One branch required support.

The famous scar twisted low across the main stem.

Its leaves were uneven.

One had been chewed by something.

Mabel inspected it.

"Blackfly."

Arthur looked offended.

"I know."

The flower itself was dark crimson.

Not perfect.

The outer petals reflexed irregularly.

Its centre was slightly untidy.

But the scent was extraordinary.

Deep.

Warm.

Old-fashioned.

Clara leaned closer.

"So that's it."

Arthur nodded.

"That's her."

Not it.

Her.

The rose had become Agnes now.

Perhaps it always had been.

Lucy stood beside Arthur carrying a sketchbook.

She had begun producing a botanical illustration for the conservation archive.

"No improvements," Arthur told her.

Lucy smiled.

"I know."

"Don't make it prettier."

"I won't."

"Gerald always wanted it prettier."

Lucy looked at the flower.

"It doesn't need it."

Arthur nodded.

Exactly.

Tom stood slightly apart.

Monty sniffed the pot.

Everyone reacted.

"No."

Monty looked offended.

Mabel said:

"He's only smelling."

"He's eaten stranger things," Clara said.

"True."

Arthur poured tea.

They sat outside the cottage.

No police.

No murder.

No arguments about ownership.

Just a rose.

Clara thought that was probably how Agnes Wren would have preferred it.

Lucy handed Clara a small envelope.

"Found this in Uncle Arthur's papers."

Arthur frowned.

"You weren't supposed to give her that yet."

"You said after everything was finished."

"It is."

"Exactly."

Clara opened it.

Inside was a small brass key.

Old.

Plain.

A paper tag hung from it.

The writing was faded.

Bramblewick Station — Store 4

Clara stopped.

Mabel looked over her shoulder.

"Oh."

Arthur sighed.

"My grandfather had it."

"Albert Crowther?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"No idea."

"Thomas Bellamy?"

Arthur shrugged.

"Name appears on the back."

Clara turned the tag over.

In pencil:

T. Bellamy — papers collected if requested

Clara stared.

Tom laughed softly.

"No."

She looked at him.

"I haven't said anything."

Mabel said:

"You don't need to."

Clara held the key in her palm.

Somewhere, perhaps in an archive, perhaps in an old railway inventory, perhaps in nothing more than a forgotten ledger, there might still be a record of what Thomas Bellamy had been asked to hide.

Agnes Wren's papers.

A Bellamy.

A railway store.

A key retained for more than a century.

Clara put it carefully back into the envelope.

"Monday."

Mabel stared.

"Monday?"

"I am not investigating anything before Monday."

Tom nodded approvingly.

"Excellent."

Arthur smiled.

Lucy closed her sketchbook.

Monty found a biscuit beneath the table.

For the moment, Bramblewick was peaceful.

The rose moved gently in the summer breeze.

And Clara Bellamy allowed one entire Sunday to pass without solving anything.

Mostly.

Epilogue

What Survives

Three weeks after Sir Julian Marlowe's murder, the Bramblewick Crimson flowered again.

Arthur Bell telephoned Clara at eight seventeen on a Sunday morning.

He did not say good morning.

He did not ask whether he had woken her.

He said only:

"It's open."

Then he hung up.

Clara lay beneath the duvet for several seconds, telephone still in her hand.

Monty raised his head from the rug beside the bed.

"It's Arthur."

Monty's tail thumped once.

"The rose."

Monty yawned.

"Your enthusiasm is overwhelming."

By nine, Clara was walking towards Rosebank Cottage with Monty beside her and Mabel Finch marching half a pace ahead.

Tom Arkwright caught them outside the King's Arms carrying a paper bag from the bakery.

Mabel eyed it.

"What's in there?"

"Breakfast."

"What sort?"

"Croissants."

"Proper ones?"

Tom looked at her.

"They're from the bakery."

"That wasn't the question."

Clara smiled.

"Good morning, Tom."

"Morning."

He nodded towards Rosebank Lane.

"I assume Arthur called."

"Eight seventeen."

"He called me at eight nineteen."

Mabel looked offended.

"He called me at eight twelve."

Clara stared.

"You knew before I did?"

"Apparently."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I was getting dressed."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"It answers enough."

Rosebank Cottage stood at the edge of Bramblewick, where the last row of honey-coloured houses gave way to gardens, allotments and open fields.

Arthur was waiting beside the gate.

He wore an old green cardigan over a checked shirt and held a mug of tea.

"About time."

Mabel stopped.

"It's nine-oh-five."

"Rose has been open since half eight."

"Plants don't keep appointments."

"This one should."

Arthur led them round the side of the cottage.

The greenhouse stood at the back.

It was old.

Not picturesque old.

Actually old.

Several panes had been replaced with different kinds of glass.

One corner leaned enough to suggest negotiation with gravity.

Clay pots stood everywhere.

Seed trays crowded the shelves.

A pair of secateurs rested on an overturned bucket.

And behind the greenhouse grew the Bramblewick Crimson.

Clara had seen photographs.

She had seen Gerald's substitute at the fête.

She had seen cuttings.

She had seen dried petals sealed in evidence bags.

None of them prepared her for the actual plant.

It was not particularly magnificent.

That was the first surprise.

The rose leaned heavily against its support.

Its branches twisted unpredictably.

Several leaves had been attacked by insects.

The famous scar ran low across the main stem where the wood had split during the winter of 1962 and healed crookedly.

Arthur had tied one branch to a cane using an old strip of fabric.

Mabel peered at the leaves.

"Blackfly."

Arthur frowned.

"I know."

"Quite a lot."

"I know."

"Should do something."

"I am doing something."

"What?"

"Trying not to listen to you."

Tom turned away.

Clara suspected he was smiling.

Then she saw the flower.

One bloom.

Deep crimson.

Not the bright theatrical red of a modern show rose.

Something darker.

Wine-coloured at the outer edges.

Almost purple in the centre.

The petals were uneven.

A few curled backwards.

One side opened more fully than the other.

It was imperfect.

Completely.

Beautifully.

Imperfect.

Arthur stood beside it.

"That's her."

Clara looked at him.

"Her?"

"Always been her."

Mabel nodded.

"Quite right."

Clara bent slightly towards the flower.

The scent surprised her.

Strong.

Warm.

Something between old-fashioned perfume, spice and summer after rain.

She straightened.

"I understand now."

Arthur looked pleased.

"Most people do when they smell it."

Tom leaned closer.

"So that's the original?"

Arthur nodded.

"My grandfather's rose. My mother's rose. Mine."

He paused.

"Agnes's, really."

That was the important correction.

For more than a century the Bramblewick Crimson had been described in catalogues as the creation of Elias Vale.

Now the surviving documents told another story.

Agnes Wren had selected the original seedling.

Agnes had developed the improved line.

Agnes had recorded the propagation.

Agnes had argued for recognition.

And when the rose won its first major certificate, Elias Vale had stood beneath the applause.

Agnes had disappeared from the official history.

The rose had not.

Clara looked at the bloom.

"Has the plaque been approved?"

Arthur groaned.

"Don't start."

Mabel said:

"They've changed the wording again."

Clara looked at her.

"What was wrong with it?"

"'Assistant horticulturist'."

Arthur muttered:

"Assistant, my foot."

Mabel continued.

"I told Beatrice if a woman breeds the rose while the man takes the prize, calling her his assistant is adding insult to historical theft."

"How did Beatrice take that?"

"Quite well."

Arthur laughed.

"She put the phone down."

"Eventually."

Clara smiled.

"What does it say now?"

Arthur reached into his cardigan pocket and unfolded a sheet of paper.

He handed it to Clara.

The proposed inscription read:

Agnes Wren Crowther

1861–1938

Horticulturist and breeder of the Bramblewick Crimson

Her work survived even when her name did not.

Clara read it twice.

"That's better."

"Lucy wrote the last line," Arthur said.

"Where is she?"

"Inside."

As if summoned, Lucy Bell appeared at the back door carrying a sketchbook and four mugs.

A small plaster remained near her hairline, but otherwise she looked remarkably recovered.

"Tea."

Mabel took one.

"How's the head?"

"Apparently still attached."

"Useful."

"So I'm told."

Lucy handed Clara a mug.

"You're early."

"Arthur disagrees."

"He thinks everyone should have been here at dawn."

Arthur looked towards the rose.

"Wouldn't have hurt."

Lucy sat on the low wall beside the greenhouse.

Her sketchbook was open.

Clara glanced down.

A botanical drawing of the Bramblewick Crimson filled the page.

Stem.

Leaves.

Flower.

Even the old scar had been recorded.

Nothing improved.

Nothing tidied.

Nothing made more symmetrical than it actually was.

Arthur noticed Clara looking.

"I told her not to prettify it."

Lucy sighed.

"Repeatedly."

"Gerald always wanted it prettier."

The name quietened them.

Not completely.

But enough.

The Body at the Village Fête

Gerald Wainwright had been formally charged with Sir Julian Marlowe's murder.

The evidence was substantial.

The broken horticultural-society badge found beside Julian.

Sir Julian's skin cells on the enamel.

The torn lapel.

The dark steward's blazer Gerald had used to create a false sighting.

The fête clock he had moved backwards.

The blue Best in Show sash used to wipe the Rose Cup.

The altered judging cards.

The red document wallet.

The bicycle tracks at the old glasshouse.

Sir Julian's fountain pen found among Gerald's possessions.

And Gerald's own extraordinary accumulation of lies.

He still denied striking Julian.

Clara suspected he might deny it for the rest of his life.

Perhaps Gerald had told himself his own versions for so long that truth had become simply another competitor to be defeated.

Caroline Vale's case was separate.

She had been charged following the attack on Lucy and the attempt to conceal evidence connected to Bramblewick Manor's heritage-funding application.

Beatrice Vale had withdrawn the application entirely.

A new one would eventually be submitted.

This time, Clara understood, Agnes Wren would feature rather prominently.

Lucy looked towards the flower.

"Do you know what bothers me?"

Mabel sipped her tea.

"Long list available."

Lucy smiled.

"Gerald could have been part of this."

Arthur's expression hardened.

"No."

"He could."

Lucy turned to him.

"If he'd told the truth."

Arthur said nothing.

"He helped keep the plant alive," Lucy continued. "He did good propagation work. He researched it for decades."

"And stole it."

"I know."

"Stole the story."

"I know."

"Stole Agnes."

"I know."

Lucy paused.

"But if he'd simply said, 'Arthur Bell's family preserved this rose, Agnes Wren bred it and I've helped identify it,' people would have admired him."

Arthur looked away.

Clara thought Lucy was right.

That was perhaps the saddest part.

Gerald had not needed to invent greatness.

He had already done useful work.

But useful had not been enough.

He wanted first.

First to rediscover.

First to authenticate.

First to announce.

First to own the story.

Tom opened the paper bag.

"Croissant?"

Mabel took one immediately.

Arthur did too.

Monty sat.

Perfectly still.

His eyes fixed on the bag.

Tom looked at him.

"No."

Monty's tail thumped.

"No."

Another thump.

"You had breakfast."

Monty lifted one paw.

Mabel frowned.

"That's unfair."

Tom looked at her.

"What?"

"Using charm."

"He's a dog."

"Still knows what he's doing."

Arthur broke off a tiny piece of croissant.

Clara pointed.

"Don't."

Too late.

Monty swallowed it without chewing.

Tom stared at Arthur.

"You're encouraging him."

"He's had a difficult month."

Clara laughed.

"He's stolen two sausages, a gardening glove and half a cheese sandwich."

Arthur shrugged.

"Traumatic."

They ate beside the greenhouse.

Sunday bells sounded from St Anne's across the village.

For once, nobody was being murdered.

No police car arrived.

No one discovered a threatening note.

No historically significant object fell out of a wall.

Clara appreciated the novelty.

After breakfast, Lucy disappeared into the cottage.

She returned carrying a small envelope.

"Nearly forgot."

She handed it to Clara.

Arthur groaned.

"I told you not yet."

"You said when everything was over."

"It is over."

"Exactly."

Clara looked between them.

"What is it?"

"Nothing important," Arthur said.

Lucy smiled.

"Which is why he's kept it for forty years."

Clara opened the envelope.

A brass key fell into her palm.

Old.

Small.

The bow was worn smooth.

A paper label remained attached by faded string.

Clara turned it towards the light.

BRAMBLEWICK STATION

STORE 4

Mabel stopped eating.

"Oh."

Clara looked at Arthur.

"Where did this come from?"

"My grandfather's things."

"Albert Crowther?"

Arthur nodded.

"He had it in an old tobacco tin."

"Why?"

"No idea."

Clara turned the tag over.

There was writing on the reverse.

Faint pencil.

T. Bellamy — papers collected if requested

Clara's stomach gave a small, inconvenient turn.

"Bellamy."

Mabel leaned over.

"That's definitely Bellamy."

"I can read."

"Checking."

Tom looked at the key.

"Could be unrelated."

"Absolutely," Clara said.

Nobody believed her tone.

Arthur reached into his pocket and handed over another folded scrap.

"Found that with it."

Clara opened it.

A short account note.

No date visible.

Only:

Wren papers deposited privately.

Charges paid by T. Bellamy.

Key retained until collection.

Clara read it again.

"Who was T. Bellamy?"

Arthur shrugged.

"No idea."

"Thomas?"

"Could be."

"Local?"

"Probably."

Mabel said:

"There were Bellamys here before your branch."

Clara looked at her.

"How many?"

"Several."

"Related?"

"Probably."

"Helpful."

"I do my best."

Tom said:

"Does Store Four still exist?"

Arthur laughed.

"The station doesn't exist."

The old Bramblewick railway had closed decades ago.

The platform remained beyond the village, swallowed by weeds and hawthorn.

Clara had walked past it once.

Never explored.

Never particularly wanted to.

Until approximately now.

She looked at the key again.

Mabel pointed.

"No."

Clara raised her eyes.

"What?"

"I recognise that face."

"What face?"

"The one that gets us interviewed by police."

Tom nodded.

"Definitely."

"I'm only looking at a key."

"That's how it starts."

Arthur smiled.

Clara slipped the key back into its envelope.

"Monday."

Mabel frowned.

"Monday what?"

"I won't do anything until Monday."

Tom looked impressed.

"A whole day."

"Yes."

"Very restrained."

"Thank you."

Mabel finished her croissant.

"What happens Monday?"

"Nothing."

They stared at her.

Clara sighed.

"Possibly the county archive."

"There."

"I only want to identify Thomas Bellamy."

"Of course."

"And see whether any station storage records survive."

"Naturally."

"And perhaps establish what Agnes's papers were."

Mabel smiled.

"Nothing at all, then."

Clara put the envelope into her bag.

"Purely historical."

Tom laughed.

"That's what you said last time."

Monty barked.

Clara looked down.

"You don't get a vote."

Monty looked towards Arthur.

Arthur quietly broke off another piece of croissant.

"Arthur."

"What?"

"Stop feeding my dog."

"He likes me."

"He likes carbohydrates."

Mabel nodded.

"Sensible animal."

The Bramblewick Crimson moved gently in the morning breeze.

One dark bloom against old brick.

A flower that had survived winter, neglect, deception, ambition and the peculiar determination of generations of gardeners.

Its name had survived.

Now Agnes's would too.

Clara looked at the rose once more before leaving.

Perhaps that was the real resolution.

Not Gerald's arrest.

Not the trophy.

Not even the solution.

A label had finally been corrected.

Someone who had been removed from history had been put back.

That mattered.

At Rosebank gate, Clara turned.

Arthur was already fussing around the greenhouse.

Lucy had returned to her sketch.

Tom and Mabel were arguing about whether croissants counted as breakfast or merely preparation for breakfast.

Monty was attempting to persuade Arthur that he had never been fed in his life.

Normal.

Perfectly Bramblewick.

Clara slipped her hand into her coat pocket.

The envelope was there.

Small.

Almost weightless.

A key to a railway store that had supposedly vanished with the station.

She could leave it alone.

Obviously.

One did not investigate every old key simply because it had one's surname written beside it.

That would be ridiculous.

She had a bookshop to run.

Books to price.

Customers to serve.

A dog to prevent from committing catering offences.

Clara smiled to herself.

Monday.

She would merely ask one question.

Perhaps two.

Nothing more.

Behind her, Mabel called:

"Clara."

"Yes?"

"You're thinking about the key."

"No."

"You're a terrible liar."

"So I've been told."

They walked back towards Bramblewick beneath a clear summer sky.

The bells of St Anne's faded behind them.

The village waited ahead.

And somewhere beyond it, almost hidden beneath brambles and fifty years of silence, the abandoned railway line curved away between the trees.

Clara had no idea that before long, a suitcase would be discovered beneath the floorboards of the old signal box.

Or that the luggage label would carry the name of a man who had never officially existed.

Or that an unused railway ticket dated **17 October 1954** would reopen one of Bramblewick's oldest secrets.

For now, there was only Sunday.

A bookshop.

Friends.

A badly behaved dog.

And one old brass key in Clara Bellamy's pocket.

That was quite enough mystery.

For one day.

End of Book Two

The Bramblewick Mysteries Continue

Book Three: The Last Train to Bramblewick

The railway closed decades ago.

But somebody never came home.

Teaser for Book Three

The Last Train to Bramblewick

The old Bramblewick railway closed decades ago.

The platform is overgrown.

The signal box is abandoned.

And no passenger train has stopped there within living memory.

Then workers preparing a heritage walking trail discover a suitcase hidden beneath the floorboards.

Inside is a railway ticket dated 17 October 1954.

The Body at the Village Fête

The passenger named on the luggage label apparently never existed.

And tucked among the belongings is an old photograph showing six people standing on Bramblewick station platform.

Only five names are written on the back.

The note beneath them reads:

One of us never came home.

When the historian investigating the abandoned railway is found dead beside the old platform, Clara Bellamy is drawn into a mystery surrounding Bramblewick's final trains, a missing passenger and a journey somebody went to extraordinary lengths to pretend had taken place.

The railway may be closed.

But one old departure is about to come back.

Coming next: The Last Train to Bramblewick — Book Three of the Bramblewick Mysteries.

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