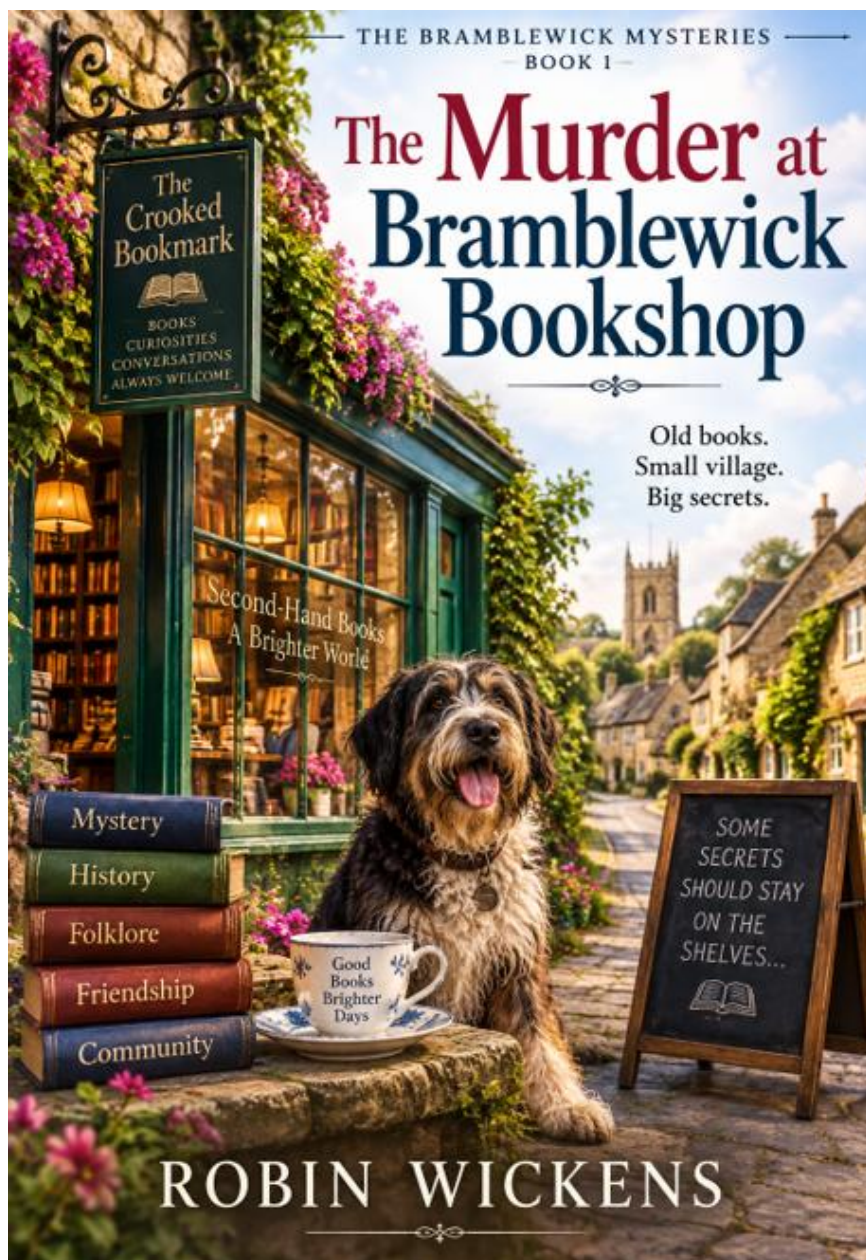


## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop



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# **The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop**

A Bramblewick Mystery

Robin Wickens

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## **Prologue — The Book That Lied**

Bramblewick, June 1958

The church clock struck eleven as Eleanor Halloway crossed the village green carrying a book that could ruin three families.

At twenty-seven, Eleanor had long ago learnt that Bramblewick slept lightly.

Curtains twitched after dark. Bedroom windows opened at unusual noises. Doors remained firmly closed while the people behind them listened with impressive concentration to matters that were none of their concern.

Tonight, however, the village appeared still.

Rain had passed through an hour earlier, leaving the honey-coloured stone shining beneath a thin moon. Water dripped from the yew trees surrounding St

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Bartholomew's, and somewhere beyond the cottages a fox barked in the fields.

Eleanor tightened her coat around herself.

The book beneath it dug painfully into her ribs.

Green cloth.

Gilt lettering.

A ridiculous volume of Victorian rambles through Gloucestershire that no sensible person would carry through the village at eleven o'clock at night.

Unless, of course, the book contained something more important than its printed pages.

She reached Church Lane and stopped.

Footsteps.

Eleanor pressed herself into the shadow beside the old mercer's shop.

The building had been empty since February. A faded notice remained in the window announcing that the premises were available to let, although a dead moth had become trapped behind the card and rather weakened the advertisement's optimism.

The footsteps came closer.

A young man appeared beneath the streetlamp.

Edwin Pritchard.

Sixteen years old, narrow-shouldered and trying very hard to look older.

Eleanor stepped out.

He jumped.

"Good grief."

"Keep your voice down."

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“You nearly killed me.”

“No one has ever died from being startled in Church Lane.”

“You don’t know that.”

“In Bramblewick, somebody would have put up a plaque.”

Edwin looked behind him.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Neither should you.”

“My mother thinks I’m at Arthur’s.”

“And Arthur’s mother?”

“Thinks he’s with me.”

Eleanor almost smiled.

Almost.

Then she saw how frightened Edwin was.

His face looked pale beneath the streetlamp.

“What happened?” she asked.

Edwin swallowed.

“Mr Vale came to the vicarage.”

Eleanor’s fingers tightened around the book.

“Matthew?”

Edwin nodded.

“He knows.”

The night seemed to contract around them.

“How much?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did he say?”

“That there had been confusion in the parish records.”

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Eleanor gave a short, humourless laugh.

“Confusion.”

“He wants me to change something.”

“No.”

Edwin looked miserable.

“He says it’s only copying.”

“It isn’t.”

“He said no one would ever know.”

“That is usually what people say when they are asking you to do something they very much hope people will never know.”

Edwin glanced at the bulge beneath her coat.

“Is that it?”

Eleanor hesitated.

Then she drew out the book.

Even in the poor light, the gold thistle on the spine caught the moon.

Edwin stared.

“The Harcourt.”

“Yes.”

“I thought Matthew kept it at Vale House.”

“He did.”

“You stole it?”

“I borrowed it without securing his permission.”

“That is stealing.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with the parish clerk.”

Despite himself, Edwin smiled.

It vanished quickly.

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“Why is it important?”

Eleanor looked towards the dark windows of the cottages.

“Not here.”

She led him through the narrow side passage beside the empty shop.

At the back stood a small yard enclosed by high stone walls. An old wooden door hung crookedly from one hinge.

Eleanor pushed it open.

The disused shop smelled of dust, damp timber and old plaster.

Moonlight entered through the front windows.

Edwin followed reluctantly.

“This place is horrible.”

“It’s a building.”

“It feels haunted.”

“You’re sixteen. Everything feels haunted after eleven.”

They moved behind the abandoned counter.

Eleanor placed the green book on it.

“Open the middle.”

Edwin did.

At first he saw only pages.

Then Eleanor pressed the edge of the paper.

A rectangular section lifted.

Edwin stared.

The centre of the book had been hollowed out.

Inside lay a bundle of letters tied with blue ribbon.

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“What are those?”

“Proof.”

“Of what?”

Eleanor looked at him.

“That Beatrice never agreed to give Matthew Vale anything.”

Edwin went very still.

“Vale House?”

“Vale House. The land. The money. All of it.”

“But everyone says Miss Vale is going abroad.”

“Everyone says whatever Matthew tells them often enough.”

“She isn’t leaving?”

Eleanor did not answer.

Edwin understood anyway.

His eyes widened.

“Where is she?”

“You do not need to know.”

“Eleanor—”

“No.”

Her tone stopped him.

She softened it.

“The less you know, the safer you are.”

A floorboard creaked above them.

Both froze.

Edwin whispered, “I thought this place was empty.”

“So did I.”

Another sound.

Not above.

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Behind the wall.

A faint scrape.

Then silence.

Eleanor closed the Harcourt.

“We have to go.”

Edwin caught her sleeve.

“What am I supposed to do about the register?”

“Nothing.”

“He threatened my mother.”

That stopped her.

Eleanor looked at him properly.

Edwin’s fear was no longer childish.

Matthew Vale knew precisely where to press.

“What did he threaten?”

“He said estate cottages were for loyal families.”

Eleanor closed her eyes.

Edwin’s mother had worked at Vale House for most of her adult life.

Their cottage belonged to the estate.

“You mustn’t let him frighten you into becoming part of this.”

“What if he throws us out?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s easy for you to say.”

“No,” Eleanor said quietly. “It isn’t.”

She picked up the Harcourt.

“If anything happens, remember this book.”

“What do you mean, anything?”

“The date matters.”

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Edwin frowned.

“What date?”

Before Eleanor could answer, the front door rattled.  
Once.

Then again.

Someone was trying the lock.

Edwin went white.

Eleanor snatched up the book.

“Back way.”

They ran into the yard.

At the gate, Edwin stopped.

“Where will you go?”

“Home.”

“That’s where they’ll look.”

Eleanor looked back at the dark shop.

“No,” she said. “Not tonight.”

The front door opened inside.

A man’s voice said her name.

Very softly.

Eleanor pushed the Harcourt into Edwin’s hands.

“Take it.”

“What?”

“Take it and hide it.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere he won’t look.”

The man called again.

Closer now.

Eleanor gripped Edwin’s shoulders.

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“And whatever anybody tells you tomorrow, remember one thing.”

“What?”

She glanced towards the church tower.

Then towards Vale House, invisible beyond the dark ridge.

“People can be buried without ever being put in the ground.”

Edwin stared at her.

He did not understand.

Not yet.

Eleanor pushed him towards the alley.

“Go.”

He ran.

Behind him, the church clock began to strike the quarter hour.

And somewhere inside the darkened shop, a floorboard lifted with a slow wooden groan.

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**Robs Books**

# The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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## Chapter 1 — A Most Inconvenient Corpse

By half past nine on Thursday morning, Bramblewick had already formed three opinions about Clara Bellamy's window display, two about her late husband, and at least seven about the wisdom of buying a failing second-hand bookshop at the age of fifty-eight.

Clara knew this because Mabel Finch told her.

"Mrs Pomeroy says the green velvet makes the books look funereal," Mabel announced, standing in the doorway of The Crooked Bookmark with the air of someone delivering intelligence from a hostile government. "Which is rich, coming from a woman who has worn mauve since 1987."

Clara looked up from a precarious tower of hardbacks. "Good morning to you too."

"It is a good morning. I've brought scones."

That, Clara had already learnt, was how Mabel expressed affection.

At eighty-one, Mabel Finch was narrow as a bookmark and twice as difficult to lose. She lived next door to Clara in a honey-stone cottage with roses around the door and a letterbox that appeared to function as a village intelligence service. Nothing escaped Mabel. Certainly not people.

Monty, Clara's enormous, shaggy rescue dog, rose from behind the counter with surprising speed.

"No," Clara said.

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Monty sat down.

His expression suggested that she had misunderstood him entirely and that his interest in the paper bag was purely academic.

Outside, Bramblewick was waking beneath a pale September sun. The village curled around a shallow green valley in that absurdly beautiful Cotswold manner that made visitors stop in the road to photograph cottages while locals muttered about traffic. The church tower rose above tiled roofs, the King's Lantern pub had just put out its lunchtime board, and across the lane Tom Arkwright was arranging chairs outside his café despite the chill.

The Crooked Bookmark occupied what had once been a seventeenth-century mercer's shop. Its floors sloped, its beams sagged, and its plumbing possessed moods. Clara loved it.

Three months earlier, after thirty-four years of marriage and eighteen months of widowhood, she had sold the house in Cheltenham that had suddenly felt too large and too quiet. She had bought the bookshop on what her sister called an impulse and Mabel called "the first sensible thing you've done in years".

Clara was still deciding which woman had been ruder.

She carried Mabel's scones towards the little table by the back window. "Tea?"

"Obviously."

"Earl Grey?"

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Mabel looked offended. "Have I done something to upset you?"

Clara smiled and reached for the breakfast tea.

The shop smelled of dust, beeswax and old paper, with a faint underlying trace of damp whenever it rained. The front room held general fiction, cookery and gardening. A narrower passage led to biography, local history and crime. At the back, behind a heavy oak door, was the rare-books room.

That room was currently locked.

And standing outside it, staring at the brass handle as if it had personally insulted her, was Clara's least favourite problem of the morning.

"The key won't turn," she said.

Mabel accepted her tea. "Then use another key."

"There is no other key."

"Then it seems an odd sort of lock."

Clara gave her a look.

The rare-books room had been the pride of the shop's previous owner, Malcolm Dredge, who had treated its contents with such reverence that he had once asked a customer to remove a boiled sweet before entering. Most of the stock was valuable only to collectors, though Malcolm had insisted several items were "quite important".

On Tuesday, Clara had finally started cataloguing them.

Yesterday afternoon, Edwin Pritchard had arrived and asked to see one particular volume.

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A Victorian history of Gloucestershire.

Clara remembered it because Edwin had asked the question too casually.

“Still got that old Harcourt?”

“Harcourt?”

“Felix Harcourt. *A Gentleman’s Rambles Through the Cotswolds*. Green binding. Gold thistle on the spine.”

Clara had found the book on the third shelf beside a collection of sermons and an 1891 agricultural gazetteer.

Edwin had gone strangely still.

“May I look at it in here?”

“Of course.”

She had left him in the rare-books room shortly before five while she took a telephone call from a dealer in Oxford. Twenty minutes later, Edwin was gone.

Or so she had thought.

Now the key refused to turn.

Mabel blew across her tea. “Perhaps Malcolm’s ghost has locked himself in.”

“Mabel.”

“I’m not saying I believe in ghosts. I’m saying Malcolm would be exactly the sort of man to become one out of administrative stubbornness.”

Bramblewick had strong views about ghosts, witches, saints, wells, curses and parking restrictions, not necessarily in that order.

The village’s most famous legend concerned Elspeth Vale, a midwife who had lived near the old mill in the nineteenth century and was still referred to by half the

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village as “the Bramblewick Witch”. The church leaflet insisted Elspeth had merely been skilled with herbs. Mabel insisted the church leaflet lacked imagination.

Clara had discovered that disagreeing with either side was unwise.

She set down her cup and tried the rare-room key again.

It moved a fraction.

Then stopped.

“Something’s against the door,” she said.

Mabel lowered her cup.

For the first time that morning, she looked serious.

### **The Locked Room**

Tom Arkwright came over from the café with a screwdriver, a torch, and the resigned expression of a man who had already repaired two chairs and a coffee grinder before ten o’clock.

He was forty-six, broad-shouldered, perpetually flour-dusted, and possessed of the sort of calm manner that encouraged people to tell him things they later regretted.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Door’s stuck,” Clara said.

Mabel said, “Possibly haunted.”

Tom nodded. “Right.”

Clara stared at him. “You’re not even going to question that?”

“I’ve lived here twelve years.”

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A few minutes later, after a great deal of pushing and one remark from Mabel concerning Tom's technique, the door shifted inward.

Only six inches.

Clara saw the overturned chair first.

Then a shoe.

Black leather, highly polished.

Her stomach tightened.

"Tom."

He stopped pushing.

Clara crouched, peering through the gap.

There was a man on the floor.

Edwin Pritchard lay on his side beside the reading table, one arm folded beneath him. His silver hair was neat, his tweed jacket buttoned. There was no blood, no visible injury, nothing dramatic.

He looked, Clara thought with a coldness that started behind her ribs, as though he had simply decided to lie down between Victorian travel writing and parish histories.

Tom's voice dropped.

"Don't touch anything."

Mabel came closer.

"Oh," she said quietly.

Clara backed away.

Ten minutes later, the shop was full of uniforms, radios and the brisk, slightly embarrassed atmosphere that accompanies disaster in a place where everyone knows the police constable's mother.

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PC Hannah Lyle took Clara's statement beside the till while Monty watched proceedings from beneath a table.

Detective Sergeant Alistair Reeves arrived from Cheltenham just after eleven.

He was a lean man in his early fifties with greying hair and an expression Clara could not immediately interpret. He listened more than he spoke, which distinguished him from most men who came into second-hand bookshops.

"You last saw Mr Pritchard at approximately five yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And you believed he'd left?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because when I came back, the chair was empty and the door was nearly closed."

"Nearly?"

Clara paused.

"Yes."

"Was it locked?"

"I don't think so."

Reeves glanced towards the corridor.

"The doctor's initial view is that Mr Pritchard may have suffered a fall."

Mabel, seated three feet away despite having been asked twice to leave, gave a small noise.

Reeves turned. "Is there something you'd like to add, Mrs Finch?"

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“No.”

“You made a noise.”

“At my age one makes several. Most mean nothing.”

Clara pressed her lips together.

Reeves returned his attention to her. “Was anything in the room disturbed?”

“I don’t know.”

But as soon as she said it, she knew that was not true.

Something had been bothering her since the door opened.

The shelves.

She looked past Reeves into the back corridor.

The third shelf.

Yesterday, *A Gentleman’s Rambles Through the Cotswolds* had been beside the sermons.

Now the sermons were beside the agricultural gazetteer.

The green volume was gone.

Clara felt the hairs rise on her arms.

“Actually,” she said, “yes.”

Reeves followed her gaze.

“A book is missing.”

“What sort of book?”

“A Victorian travel history. The one Edwin came to see.”

For the first time, the detective’s expression changed.

“Valuable?”

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“I don’t know.”

Mabel said, “That usually means yes.”

Reeves ignored her.

Clara stepped closer to the rare-room door, careful not to cross the tape.

“And the books have been moved.”

“Moved?”

“The order is wrong.”

Reeves studied her.

“You’re certain?”

“I spent yesterday cataloguing that shelf.”

A uniformed constable appeared from the room holding a clear evidence bag.

“Sir?”

Inside was a folded piece of cream paper.

Reeves took it, read the writing, and said nothing.

Clara could see the ink through the plastic.

Six words.

Written in a hurried, slanting hand.

**You should have left her buried.**

Nobody spoke for several seconds.

Outside, the church clock struck noon.

Mabel’s face had lost its colour.

Tom, who had been waiting by the doorway, looked from the note to Clara.

Reeves turned towards Mabel.

“You know what this means?”

Mabel recovered quickly.

“No.”

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Clara knew her well enough now to recognise a lie.

It was a very good lie.

But it was still a lie.

Then Monty barked.

Everyone looked down.

The dog had emerged from beneath the table with something in his mouth.

Not a biscuit.

A small square of stiff, yellowed card.

Clara reached for it before Reeves could stop her.

It was an old photograph.

Seven people stood outside Bramblewick church, dressed in clothes from another age. Someone had torn the picture down the middle.

Only four figures remained.

On the back, in faded blue ink, was a date.

**June 1958.**

Beneath it, in newer handwriting, someone had added two words.

**Ask Edwin.**

Clara looked up.

Mabel Finch had gone utterly still.

And for the first time since Clara had moved to Bramblewick, the old woman looked frightened.

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### Chapter 2 — The Photograph in the Pocket

“You are not going to ask me about the photograph.”

Clara set a mug of tea in front of Mabel.

“I was absolutely going to ask you about the photograph.”

“Then I shall save you the trouble by refusing to discuss it.”

They were sitting in the tiny kitchen behind The Crooked Bookmark, where a narrow window overlooked an alley containing three bins, a climbing rose and, at present, one police constable eating a packet of salt-and-vinegar crisps.

It was nearly two o'clock. Edwin Pritchard's body had been taken away, the rare-books room remained sealed, and Detective Sergeant Reeves had advised Clara not to enter the back of the shop until the police had finished.

That left the front room available for business.

Clara had closed it anyway.

There were limits.

Even in Bramblewick, where Mrs Pomeroy had already knocked twice to ask whether Clara had “heard anything”.

Mabel wrapped both hands around her mug.

“You'll burn yourself,” Clara said.

“Good. It may distract me.”

Clara sat opposite her.

“Mabel.”

“No.”

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“You recognised someone in that photograph.”

Mabel stared into her tea.

Clara waited.

Widowhood had taught her something about silence. People rushed to fill it if you gave them enough room.

Mabel lasted forty-three seconds.

“That photograph used to hang in the Historical Society office.”

“Used to?”

“Years ago.”

“Who are the people?”

“Villagers.”

“I had gathered that.”

Mabel gave her a look.

Clara gave it back.

Outside, a van reversed somewhere near the butcher’s shop with a prolonged electronic beeping that seemed entirely unsuitable for the mood.

Finally Mabel sighed.

“The man on the left was Sir Matthew Vale.”

Clara frowned. “Vale?”

“Yes.”

“As in Vale House?”

Mabel nodded.

Vale House stood on the northern edge of Bramblewick behind iron gates and enough yew hedging to conceal a minor cavalry regiment. It belonged to

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Sebastian Vale, the village solicitor, whose family had lived there for generations.

“And the woman beside him?”

“His wife, Evelyn.”

“The other two?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do.”

“I don’t.”

“Mabel.”

“For heaven’s sake, Clara, I was thirteen in 1958.”

“Old enough to remember people.”

“I remember Elvis Presley. That does not mean we were acquainted.”

Clara sat back.

Mabel’s chin lifted.

It would have been impressive if Clara had not noticed her fingers trembling against the mug.

### **The Village Begins to Help**

By three o’clock, Bramblewick had decided that Clara needed support.

Unfortunately, Bramblewick’s idea of support involved arriving in person and asking questions.

Tom Arkwright brought sandwiches from the café and stood behind the counter while Clara tried to persuade Mrs Pomeroy that the police really had said nothing useful.

“Was it murder?” Mrs Pomeroy whispered.

“I don’t know.”

“Poison?”

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"I don't know."

"Blow to the head?"

"I don't know."

"Rare book dispute?"

Clara stared at her.

Mrs Pomeroy adjusted her scarf.

"Well, one hears things."

"From whom?"

"I couldn't possibly say."

Tom murmured, "That usually means Mabel."

Mabel, from the armchair in the corner, said, "I heard that."

"Good."

The bell above the door rang again.

This time it was Sebastian Vale.

Clara recognised him from village committee meetings, where he had the polished manners of a man accustomed to chairing discussions he had no intention of losing.

He was sixty-two, silver-haired, impeccably dressed and carried a folded umbrella despite the clear sky.

"Mrs Bellamy," he said. "I heard about Edwin."

"So has Gloucestershire."

His mouth tightened in what might have been amusement.

"Terrible business."

"Did you know him well?"

"Everyone knew Edwin."

"That wasn't what I asked."

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Tom turned away to hide a smile.

Sebastian regarded Clara with greater interest.

“We served together on several committees.”

“Friendly?”

“Occasionally.”

“And the rest of the time?”

“Historically opposed.”

Mabel snorted.

Sebastian ignored her.

Clara remembered the photograph.

Sir Matthew Vale.

“Was Edwin researching your family?”

The pause was tiny.

But it was there.

“Edwin researched every family,” Sebastian said.

“He regarded privacy as a regrettable modern invention.”

“He came here yesterday to look at a book.”

“So I understand.”

Clara frowned.

“How?”

Sebastian looked towards Mabel.

Mabel looked offended.

“I haven’t told anyone.”

Tom coughed.

“What?” she demanded.

“You told me.”

“You don’t count.”

Sebastian’s expression remained mild.

“Edwin mentioned it to me yesterday morning.”

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Clara felt a flicker of interest.

“He told you which book?”

“No.”

“Did he say why he wanted it?”

“He said he had found something he should have dealt with years ago.”

Mabel’s mug stopped halfway to her mouth.

Clara noticed.

So did Sebastian.

For a second, the room became very quiet.

Then the bell above the door rang again.

A woman in a navy coat stepped inside.

She was perhaps forty, dark-haired, pale and visibly exhausted.

Her eyes moved quickly from Clara to Sebastian.

“You.”

Sebastian stiffened.

Tom’s easy expression disappeared.

Mabel whispered, “Oh dear.”

The woman closed the door behind her.

“Where is my father?”

Clara knew before anyone answered.

Edwin’s daughter.

“Elise?” Sebastian said.

Elise Pritchard looked at him as though she had found something unpleasant beneath a stone.

“I asked where my father is.”

Clara moved from behind the counter.

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“I’m Clara Bellamy. I’m afraid the police have taken him to Cheltenham.”

Elise stared at her.

Then understanding arrived.

Not dramatically.

Her face simply seemed to empty.

“No.”

“I’m very sorry.”

Elise gripped the edge of the counter.

“No. I spoke to him last night.”

Clara’s attention sharpened.

“What time?”

Sebastian said, “Clara.”

She looked at him.

“What?”

“This may not be the moment.”

Elise turned on him.

“You don’t get to decide what moment this is.”

Sebastian’s jaw tightened.

Clara said gently, “The police will need to speak to you.”

“I know.”

“Did your father tell you where he was?”

“He said he was at the bookshop.”

Mabel put down her mug.

Clara felt the room contract around that sentence.

“At what time?”

“About half past six.”

Clara stared at her.

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That was impossible.

By half past five, Clara had checked the shop before closing.

She had called, “Goodnight,” towards the rear corridor.

There had been no answer.

She had locked the front door at five forty-five.

“He called you from here?”

Elise shook her head.

“My mobile. I don’t know where he was exactly.”

“What did he say?”

Her eyes filled, but she did not cry.

“He said he was going to put something right.”

Sebastian looked away.

Clara caught the movement.

Elise noticed that too.

“What did you do?” she asked him.

“Nothing.”

“You always say that.”

Mabel stood.

“Elise—”

“Don’t.”

The single word stopped her.

Clara looked between them.

“You all know one another.”

No one answered.

Of course they did.

This was Bramblewick.

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The remarkable thing was not that they knew one another.

It was how badly they wished they did not.

Elise took a breath.

“My father rang because he wanted me to come home.”

“You arrived today?” Clara asked.

“Last night.”

Mabel’s eyes narrowed.

“When?”

“Just before ten.”

“And where did you stay?”

Elise looked at her.

“The King’s Lantern.”

Tom said quietly, “You didn’t go to Edwin’s house?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because we hadn’t spoken properly in three years.”

Clara wondered what counted as improperly.

Before she could ask, the police constable from the alley entered the shop.

“Mrs Bellamy?”

“Yes?”

“DS Reeves would like a word.”

Clara found Reeves outside beside an unmarked car.

He held a notebook.

“We’ve finished the first examination of the room.”

“And?”

“We’re treating the death as unexplained.”

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“That sounds carefully chosen.”

“It is.”

“Was it an accident?”

He gave her a level look.

“We don’t know yet.”

“What about the missing book?”

“That interests us.”

“And the note?”

“That interests us too.”

Clara folded her arms.

“Is there anything that interests you enough to tell me?”

A corner of his mouth moved.

“Mr Pritchard’s estimated time of death is between five thirty and seven yesterday evening.”

Clara felt cold.

“Elise says she spoke to him at half six.”

“So she tells us.”

“He may have been alive then.”

“Yes.”

“And I locked the shop before six.”

“Yes.”

Clara looked towards the windows of The Crooked Bookmark.

“Then if he died in that room, someone else must have been inside.”

Reeves did not answer.

That was answer enough.

He closed the notebook.

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“One more thing. You said the Harcourt book was on the third shelf.”

“Yes.”

“Did you examine it?”

“Briefly.”

“Anything unusual?”

“No.”

“Writing? Inscriptions? Loose papers?”

Clara thought back.

Green cloth.

Gold thistle.

A faded bookplate.

And—

“Yes.”

Reeves waited.

“There was a date written inside the front cover.”

“What date?”

Clara frowned, trying to see it in memory.

“I don’t remember exactly. Eighteen eighty-something, I think.”

“You’re sure?”

“No.”

“Think carefully.”

“I saw it for perhaps three seconds.”

Reeves made a note.

“Why does it matter?”

“We don’t know that it does.”

Which, Clara was beginning to learn, was another carefully chosen phrase.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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When she returned inside, Sebastian Vale had gone.

Elise was speaking quietly with Tom.

Mabel stood by the local-history shelves.

She had pulled out a thin pamphlet.

Clara joined her.

“What is it?”

Mabel handed it over.

The cover read:

### **A Brief History of Bramblewick Parish**

Published by the Bramblewick Historical Society.

1979.

Inside the front cover was a list of acknowledgements.

Edwin Pritchard’s name appeared near the bottom.

So did Matthew Vale’s.

Clara turned the page.

A grainy photograph showed Vale House in 1959.

The caption beneath it read:

**Vale House passed to Sir Matthew Vale following the death of his elder cousin, Beatrice Vale, in 1958.**

Clara looked at Mabel.

“Beatrice?”

Mabel said nothing.

Clara turned another page.

There was no photograph of Beatrice.

No biography.

No explanation of her death.

Only one sentence.

**Miss Vale died abroad, without issue.**

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara read it twice.

Then she noticed something tucked into the gutter of the pamphlet.

A scrap of paper.

Not old.

Not printed.

Freshly torn.

On it, in pencil, were three words.

**She never left.**

Clara looked up.

Across the shop, the bell above the door moved gently.

The door itself was closed.

Mabel whispered, "That wasn't there yesterday."

And from somewhere beyond the sealed rare-books room came a soft, unmistakable thud.

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## Chapter 3 — The Woman Who Never Left

The sound came again.

A dull bump, followed by a faint scrape.

Monty rose at once, ears pricked, while the warm smells of tea, old paper and Tom's cheese sandwiches suddenly seemed incapable of making The Crooked Bookmark feel cosy.

Clara held up one hand.

Nobody moved.

The rare-books room remained behind police tape at the end of the corridor, its oak door shut. Beyond it stood the small stockroom, and beyond that, a narrow yard surrounded by stone walls.

Another scrape.

Monty growled.

It was not an especially convincing growl. Monty sounded more like an elderly lawnmower failing to start, but Clara appreciated the sentiment.

Tom stepped towards the corridor.

"Stay here."

Clara followed him.

"Certainly not."

Mabel followed Clara.

Elise followed Mabel.

Tom looked over his shoulder. "Does nobody in this village understand the phrase stay here?"

"Perfectly," Mabel said. "We simply disagree with it."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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The police constable outside had disappeared towards his car, so Clara stopped before the tape and listened.

Nothing.

Then Monty pushed past them.

“Monty!”

He trotted straight through the kitchen and scratched furiously at the back door.

Clara stared.

“Oh.”

Tom opened it.

Monty surged into the yard.

A figure sprang away from the stockroom window.

“Oi!” Tom shouted.

The figure ran.

Clara caught only a flash of brown coat and grey hair disappearing through the narrow gate into the alley.

Tom went after them.

Mabel moved towards the gate.

Clara caught her sleeve.

“You are eighty-one.”

“I am aware.”

“You are not pursuing burglars.”

“At this speed I’d barely be pursuing arthritis.”

Elise had gone pale.

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know.”

Clara crossed the yard.

The stockroom window stood slightly open.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

She was certain it had been closed that morning.  
On the sill lay flakes of old white paint and something else.

A pinch of dark soil.

Monty sniffed enthusiastically.

“Leave it.”

He sneezed.

Clara leaned closer.

The window latch had been forced.

Not broken.

Lifted.

Someone had tried to get into the shop from the back.

Tom returned several minutes later, breathing hard and looking annoyed.

“Lost them by Church Lane.”

“Man or woman?” Clara asked.

“Couldn’t tell. Medium height. Brown coat. Flat cap, maybe.”

Mabel folded her arms.

“That describes half the parish council.”

Elise stared towards the alley.

“Did they get inside?”

“I don’t think so,” Clara said.

Then Monty began scratching beneath the stockroom window.

There was something wedged behind a wooden crate.

Clara pulled it free.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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A folded sheet of paper.

Not a note this time.

A photocopy.

At the top was the crest of St Bartholomew's Church.

Beneath it, in faded type, were the words:

**Parish Burial Register — 1958**

One entry had been circled.

**June 17 — Eleanor Grace Halloway — aged 27.**

Clara read it twice.

Mabel made a small sound behind her.

"You know that name," Clara said.

Mabel's face had become guarded again.

"Yes."

Before Clara could ask more, a voice came from the alley.

"I believe that belongs to me."

They all turned.

Gerald Pike stood at the gate.

The churchwarden was a narrow, stooping man in his late sixties with pale eyebrows, muddy shoes and the permanent expression of someone disappointed by modern hymn books.

He wore a brown coat.

And a grey tweed cap.

Tom looked at Clara.

Clara looked at Gerald.

Mabel murmured, "Well, that's inconvenient."

Gerald's eyes dropped to the photocopy in Clara's hand.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

"I'll take that."

Clara did not move.

"Why?"

"It's a parish document."

"It's a photocopy of one."

"Yes."

"Which was under my stockroom window."

Gerald tightened his mouth.

"I may have dropped it."

"While trying to climb through the window?"

His eyes widened.

"I was doing no such thing."

Tom said, "Someone in a brown coat just ran from the yard."

"There are many brown coats in Bramblewick."

"That defence is going to cause chaos at the parish council," Mabel observed.

Gerald glared at her.

Clara held up the sheet.

"Who was Eleanor Halloway?"

Gerald's expression changed.

Only slightly.

But enough.

"I've no idea."

Mabel said, "Oh, Gerald."

"What?"

"You've never been able to lie. Even as a boy you looked guilty before you'd done anything."

Gerald's cheeks reddened.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“I do not have to explain parish business to Mrs Bellamy.”

“You do if parish business is being pushed through my window.”

His mouth compressed.

Then he turned and walked away.

Clara called after him.

“Were you here last night?”

He stopped.

For a moment, she thought he might answer.

Instead he said, without turning round, “Some things are better left in archives.”

Then he continued towards Church Lane.

Elise stared after him.

“That sounded almost rehearsed.”

“No,” Mabel said. “Gerald rehearses badly.”

### **An Archive With Gaps**

Detective Sergeant Reeves was not delighted to be called back.

His displeasure increased when Clara told him they had chased someone through the alley.

“I didn’t chase anyone.”

“You followed.”

“Briefly.”

“Mabel didn’t.”

Mabel said, “Only because Clara discriminates against the elderly.”

Reeves looked at Tom.

“You?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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"I chased him."

"Thank you, Mr Arkwright. A refreshingly uncomplicated answer."

The photocopy went into another evidence bag.

So did a smear of soil from the sill.

Gerald Pike was found at the church ten minutes later and denied entering Clara's yard. He admitted the photocopy came from the parish archive but insisted several copies existed.

Reeves questioned him privately.

By four o'clock, Gerald had gone home.

He was not arrested.

Mabel considered this evidence that the police were "taking an unnecessarily leisurely approach to villainy".

Clara considered it evidence that they had no proof.

The shop remained closed.

Elise left to speak formally with the police.

Tom returned to the café.

Mabel, after refusing to discuss Eleanor Halloway for nearly twenty minutes, finally said, "She worked at Vale House."

Clara looked up sharply.

They were alone at the front table.

"As what?"

"A companion, mostly. Beatrice Vale was considered delicate."

"The woman who supposedly died abroad?"

"Yes."

"And Eleanor?"

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Local girl. Her father repaired clocks.”

“What happened to her?”

Mabel stared through the window.

“I was told she died.”

“Buried here?”

“So the register says.”

“But you don’t believe it.”

“I believe very little merely because somebody wrote it in a book.”

Clara thought of the altered shelves.

The missing Harcourt volume.

The handwritten date inside its cover.

“Did you know her?”

“A little.”

“Mabel.”

“I was thirteen.”

“You keep saying that as though thirteen-year-olds are blind.”

Mabel sighed.

“Eleanor was kind to me once. I’d fallen near the old mill and split my knee. She walked me home.”

“Was she a witch?”

Mabel gave Clara a startled look.

Then, unexpectedly, laughed.

“Oh, good heavens.”

“I’m asking because half the village appears to think anyone who knew which end of a herb was useful had supernatural powers.”

“Eleanor wasn’t a witch.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Elspeth Vale?”

“That’s another century and another collection of nonsense.”

“So why does everyone go peculiar whenever an old woman, a grave or the Vale family is mentioned?”

“Tradition.”

“That is not an answer.”

“In Bramblewick it frequently is.”

Mabel’s amusement faded.

“Eleanor was frightened before she died.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know. My mother said she’d been asking questions about Beatrice.”

Clara leaned forward.

“What kind of questions?”

“Whether anyone had seen Beatrice leave the village.”

Clara went still.

“But the history pamphlet says Beatrice died abroad.”

“Yes.”

“What did people believe at the time?”

“That she’d gone to Switzerland for her health.”

“And did she?”

Mabel looked at her.

“I never saw her leave.”

A gust rattled the shop window.

Across the lane, Tom was turning his café sign to CLOSED.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara picked up the photocopied parish pamphlet from earlier.

**Miss Vale died abroad, without issue.**

If Beatrice had not left Bramblewick, then the inheritance of Vale House became considerably more interesting.

“Who inherited after Beatrice?”

“Matthew Vale.”

“Sebastian’s grandfather.”

“Yes.”

“And Eleanor died a few days afterwards?”

Mabel nodded slowly.

Clara felt the shape of something old and ugly pressing through the gaps in the village’s respectable history.

Not the whole truth.

Not nearly.

But an outline.

She stood.

“Where are the Historical Society records kept?”

“In the old reading room above the village hall.”

“Who has access?”

“Edwin did. Gerald. Sebastian sometimes. And Dr Adrian Crowther.”

Clara paused.

She had met Adrian Crowther once at the King’s Lantern. Early fifties, charming, clever and considerably better dressed than a local historian had any practical reason to be.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“He’s the historian who wrote the new Bramblewick guide?”

“Yes.”

“He knew Edwin?”

“Very well.”

As if summoned by his name, someone knocked at the shop door.

Clara turned.

Adrian Crowther stood outside.

He smiled through the glass and raised a hand.

Mabel muttered, “That is either excellent timing or appalling timing.”

Clara unlocked the door.

Adrian entered carrying an umbrella tucked beneath one arm and a paper parcel under the other.

“I heard you’d had a dreadful day.”

“That information has travelled remarkably efficiently.”

“This is Bramblewick.”

He handed her the parcel.

Inside was a loaf cake from the bakery in Stow.

“Peace offering.”

“For what?”

“For being another villager about to ask you questions.”

His smile was warm enough to be convincing.

Almost.

He glanced towards the back of the shop.

“Was Edwin really found in the rare-books room?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara studied him.

“Yes.”

“And was he looking at the Harcourt?”

Mabel stopped moving.

Clara kept her voice casual.

“How did you know that?”

Adrian’s smile remained in place.

“Edwin mentioned it.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Before he came here?”

A pause.

“After, actually.”

Clara felt something click into place.

“After?”

“Yes. I saw him in the village.”

“What time?”

“A little after six.”

Mabel stared at him.

Clara said, “Where?”

“Outside the church.”

“Was he carrying anything?”

Adrian frowned as though searching his memory.

“A book, I think.”

“A green one?”

“Yes. Green cloth. Gilt spine.”

The missing Harcourt.

Clara’s pulse quickened.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

If Adrian was telling the truth, Edwin had left The Crooked Bookmark alive with the missing book after Clara thought he was still in the rare-books room.

And sometime later he had returned.

But something bothered her.

“The police think he died in the bookshop.”

“So I heard.”

“Did Edwin tell you why he had the Harcourt?”

Adrian’s expression softened.

“He said he’d found proof.”

“Proof of what?”

“He wouldn’t say.”

“Did he mention Beatrice Vale?”

That did it.

Not much.

A blink too slow.

A breath taken too carefully.

“No.”

Clara watched him.

Adrian smiled again.

“I’m afraid village history produces endless mysteries, Mrs Bellamy. Most become less interesting once you discover the truth.”

Mabel said, “That sounds suspiciously like something a historian would say when hoping nobody discovers the truth.”

Adrian laughed.

Then he moved towards the door.

“I’ll leave you to your cake.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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His hand was already on the latch when Clara noticed a smear of mud along the heel of his polished shoe.

Very dark soil.

Almost black.

The same colour as the earth beneath her stockroom window.

“Dr Crowther?”

He turned.

Clara pointed down.

“You’ve got mud on your shoe.”

Adrian glanced at it.

“Oh. Churchyard.”

“Today?”

“Yes.”

“Near the graves?”

“Generally where one finds churchyard mud.”

His smile was easy again.

He left.

Mabel watched him cross the road.

“That man has too many teeth.”

Clara barely heard her.

She was looking at the parish-register photocopy Reeves had allowed her to photograph before taking it away.

**Eleanor Grace Halloway — June 17, 1958.**

Something about the entry troubled her.

She enlarged the photograph on her mobile.

The typing was uneven.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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The ink faded.

But the date had been added in a slightly different typeface from the entries above and below.

Clara pinched the screen wider.

Then she saw it.

Not just a different typeface.

A different alignment.

The entry had been inserted later.

Someone had altered the burial register.

Her phone rang.

Unknown number.

Clara answered.

“Hello?”

For several seconds, there was only breathing.

Then a woman’s voice whispered:

“Stop asking about Eleanor.”

The line went dead.

Monty lifted his head.

Clara slowly lowered the phone.

Outside, Adrian Crowther had disappeared.

And on the pavement where he had been standing lay a small white scrap of paper.

Mabel went out and retrieved it.

She unfolded it beneath the shop light.

It was part of a photocopied parish record.

Across the torn edge were the final words of an entry.

**...remains never recovered.**

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### Chapter 4 — Tea, Testimony and a Missing Page

“If anybody telephones anonymously again, you are to hang up at once.”

Mabel was pouring tea with the severity of a magistrate passing a sentence.

Clara took the cup.

“I did hang up.”

“They hung up.”

“Which amounts to much the same thing.”

“It does not. One suggests control.”

Tom, who had returned from the café carrying sausage rolls and concern in roughly equal quantities, set a plate on the table.

“Reeves needs to know.”

“He does know,” Clara said.

Detective Sergeant Reeves had taken the telephone number, such as it was, and promised to see whether the call could be traced. He had also advised Clara, in language considerably more restrained than Mabel’s, not to make a habit of confronting anyone connected with Edwin’s death.

Clara had pointed out that Adrian Crowther had confronted her.

Reeves had closed his notebook.

Clara was beginning to recognise this as his preferred response to inconvenient logic.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

The Crooked Bookmark had reopened the following morning.

This was partly because Clara needed the routine and partly because Mabel had announced that closing indefinitely would “give the village ideas”.

“What sort of ideas?” Clara had asked.

“That you’re frightened.”

“I am frightened.”

“Yes, but there’s no reason to advertise.”

So the sign had been turned to OPEN at nine.

By nine twelve, three customers had arrived.

None bought a book.

One bought a postcard.

All three asked whether Clara had discovered who the murderer was.

The news that Edwin Pritchard’s death was now being treated as suspicious had travelled through Bramblewick with the efficiency of a medieval warning beacon.

At ten, Gerald Pike crossed the road, saw Clara through the window and abruptly entered the chemist’s.

At ten twenty, Sebastian Vale drove past twice.

At ten forty-five, Monty stole half a cheese scone.

And at eleven precisely, Agnes Cattermole entered the shop.

Mabel muttered, “Now we’re in trouble.”

Agnes was seventy-four, retired after thirty-eight years as headmistress of Bramblewick Primary School, and possessed the upright posture of a woman who had

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

spent decades reducing children to silence merely by removing her spectacles.

She was dressed in charcoal grey and carried a handbag large enough to contain examination papers, emergency biscuits and possibly a small disciplinary tribunal.

“Mrs Bellamy.”

“Miss Cattermole.”

“Agnes,” she corrected.

“Clara.”

Agnes nodded as if accepting terms.

Then she saw Mabel.

“Oh.”

Mabel smiled sweetly.

“Agnes.”

Tom quietly moved towards the café door.

Clara blocked his retreat with one look.

Cowardice, she thought, ought not to be rewarded.

Agnes approached the counter.

“I understand you found Edwin.”

“Yes.”

“Unfortunate.”

Mabel raised an eyebrow.

“Dead is generally considered more than unfortunate.”

Agnes ignored her.

“I came about a book.”

Clara almost laughed.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

It was a bookshop, after all, but in the circumstances the statement sounded suspicious.

“What are you looking for?”

Agnes placed a gloved hand on the counter.

“A volume of local photographs. Malcolm Dredge had it last year. *Bramblewick: A Village Remembered*.”

Clara knew the title.

She had seen three copies in the local-history section.

“One moment.”

She found the book and brought it back.

Agnes opened it immediately.

Not at the beginning.

Not at the index.

Straight to a section near the centre.

Her fingers stopped.

The colour left her face.

Clara’s attention sharpened.

“What is it?”

Agnes closed the book.

“Nothing.”

Mabel said, “You look as though nothing has just bitten you.”

Agnes stiffened.

“I simply remembered that this is not the edition I wanted.”

“What edition did you want?” Clara asked.

“The earlier one.”

“There was an earlier edition?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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A tiny pause.

“Yes.”

“What year?”

“1983.”

Clara frowned.

The book in Agnes’s hands was dated 1986.

“Was something changed?”

Agnes met her eyes.

“No.”

That was the second obvious lie Clara had heard in two days.

She was beginning to resent the assumption that buying a second-hand bookshop had rendered her incapable of noticing facial expressions.

Agnes set the book down.

“I’ll leave it.”

Clara said, “Did Edwin ever ask you about Beatrice Vale?”

Agnes’s hand froze on her handbag.

Mabel leaned back in her chair.

Tom stopped pretending to rearrange the postcards.

Agnes turned.

“You appear to have acquired a taste for questions.”

“Edwin died in my shop.”

“That does not make you a police officer.”

“No.”

Clara kept her voice gentle.

“It makes me the person someone telephoned and threatened yesterday.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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The severity in Agnes's face faltered.

For the first time she looked old rather than formidable.

"Threatened?"

"Told me to stop asking about Eleanor Halloway."

Agnes stared at her.

Then at Mabel.

Mabel said nothing.

Agnes whispered, "Eleanor?"

"You knew her?"

"No."

Too fast.

Clara stepped around the counter.

"Agnes."

The retired headmistress looked towards the window.

A pair of tourists paused outside to admire Monty.

Agnes lowered her voice.

"There was a photograph."

Clara felt a prickle along her arms.

"The one from 1958?"

Agnes looked at her sharply.

"You've seen it?"

"Part of it."

"Where?"

"In the shop."

"Who gave it to you?"

"No one."

"That photograph should have been destroyed."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Silence fell.

Even Mabel did not interrupt.

Clara said, "Why?"

Agnes's mouth tightened.

Then the bell above the door rang.

Sebastian Vale entered.

Agnes recoiled.

It was slight, but unmistakable.

Sebastian noticed.

"Agnes."

She picked up her handbag.

"I was just leaving."

"You haven't bought anything."

"I changed my mind."

She walked past him without another word.

Sebastian watched her go.

Then he turned to Clara.

"What did she want?"

"A book."

"Which one?"

Mabel said, "You could try buying something before interrogating the proprietor."

Sebastian gave her a patient look.

"I came to speak to Clara."

"Then you'll need to buy two things."

Clara almost smiled.

Sebastian placed a twenty-pound note on the counter.

"I'll take whatever that covers."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“You’ve just purchased four volumes of medieval sermons.”

He glanced at the shelf behind her.

“Fine.”

“They’re in Latin.”

“Excellent.”

Mabel looked faintly disappointed.

### **The Offer**

Sebastian did not want medieval sermons.

He wanted The Crooked Bookmark.

Clara realised this after five minutes.

“I’m prepared to make a serious offer,” he said.

They were standing near the front window while Tom and Mabel pretended not to listen from six feet away.

“For the shop?”

“For the building.”

“It isn’t for sale.”

“Everything is for sale.”

“Not this.”

Sebastian gave her the faint, indulgent smile Clara had disliked at committee meetings.

“You’ve owned it three months.”

“Yes.”

“You cannot yet know what you’ve taken on.”

“I know the roof leaks above biography.”

“That is hardly my point.”

“Then perhaps you should reach it.”

His smile vanished.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“The building adjoins land owned by my family. There are access complications.”

“No solicitor mentioned them.”

“I am a solicitor.”

“Which may explain why none were mentioned.”

Tom made a suspicious choking sound.

Sebastian lowered his voice.

“Clara, Edwin’s death has made this place complicated.”

“Edwin’s death has made Edwin’s death complicated.”

“There are documents here that ought properly to be elsewhere.”

Clara held his gaze.

“What documents?”

“I don’t know specifically.”

“Then how do you know they’re here?”

For the first time, Sebastian seemed to realise he had said too much.

He picked up the four sermon volumes.

“Consider the offer.”

“I haven’t heard one.”

“Two hundred and forty thousand.”

Mabel dropped a teaspoon.

The figure was far above what Clara had paid for the property.

Sebastian glanced towards the back of the shop.

Clara followed his eyes.

Not at the rare-books room.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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At the wall beside it.

Interesting.

“Why do you want the building?” she asked.

“Investment.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“That isn’t the reason.”

Sebastian’s face hardened.

“You are involving yourself in matters you do not understand.”

“Then explain them.”

“Some family histories are painful.”

“Painful enough to kill for?”

Tom stepped forward.

Sebastian’s expression turned cold.

“Be careful.”

Clara felt the warning land.

Not a threat exactly.

But close enough to make the room feel smaller.

Sebastian left with the Latin sermons beneath his arm.

Mabel waited until the door shut.

“Well.”

Tom said, “He overpaid.”

“Not for the books.”

Clara looked towards the back wall.

“What’s behind there?”

Mabel followed her gaze.

“The old staircase.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“What staircase?”

“The building used to connect to the house next door.”

“My cottage?”

“No. Before the properties were divided.”

Clara frowned.

“Where did it go?”

“To an upper storeroom, I think. Malcolm had it blocked up years ago.”

A memory stirred.

The rearranged books.

The locked room.

A body that seemed impossible to reach after Clara locked the front door.

“Could someone enter the rare-books room without using the corridor?”

Mabel stopped smiling.

Tom was already moving.

The police tape had been removed that morning, though Reeves had asked Clara not to disturb anything unnecessarily.

They entered the rare-books room.

It still felt wrong.

Edwin’s absence had become a presence of its own.

Clara faced the wall Sebastian had been watching.

Floor-to-ceiling shelves covered most of it.

Tom crouched.

“Here.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

At the bottom, behind a row of bound magazines, the skirting board was newer.

He ran his fingers along the edge.

“There’s a seam.”

Mabel said, “Malcolm always did hate draughts.”

Tom tugged.

Nothing happened.

Then Monty pushed his nose behind a low stack of books and began snuffling.

“Monty, no.”

He pawed once.

A book slid sideways.

Behind it was a small brass catch.

Clara stared.

Tom pressed it.

There was a quiet click.

The entire lower section of shelving moved forward by half an inch.

Mabel whispered something decidedly unladylike.

Together, Tom and Clara pulled.

The shelf swung open.

Behind it was a narrow doorway.

Beyond lay darkness.

Cold air touched Clara’s face.

Tom switched on his phone torch.

Stone steps climbed steeply upwards.

And on the second step lay a torn page.

Clara picked it up carefully by the edge.

It was old.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Cream paper.

Printed text on one side.

Handwriting on the other.

At the top of the handwritten side was a date.

**4 March 1959**

Beneath it were three lines:

**Matthew says nobody must ever know. Edwin has changed the register. Adrian's father has the letters.**

Clara's breath caught.

Mabel leaned closer.

"Edwin?"

"He would have been what? A boy?"

"Sixteen," Mabel said.

Clara turned the page over.

The printed side contained part of a title page.

She read the surviving words aloud.

"'A Gentleman's Rambles Through the Cotswolds...  
Felix Harcourt...'"

Tom stared at her.

"The missing book."

Clara nodded.

The page had been torn from it.

At the bottom, beneath the printed publication details, someone had written another date in ink.

Not eighteen eighty-something, as Clara had remembered.

**1897.**

And beneath that, in pencil, almost rubbed away:

**Not published until 1901.**

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara stared at the words.

Four years.

A small discrepancy.

Perhaps meaningless.

Yet Edwin had hidden something in the book, and someone had killed him to recover it.

Somewhere above them, inside the dark passage, a floorboard creaked.

Tom raised the torch.

“Who’s there?”

No answer.

Then came the unmistakable sound of footsteps running away.

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### Chapter 5 — The Passage Behind the Shelves

By Saturday morning, Bramblewick had transformed Edwin Pritchard's death from a tragedy into an organisational problem.

The bunting for the forthcoming Literary Weekend still needed hanging, the vicar had misplaced the booking form for the church lecture, and somebody had accidentally ordered three hundred programmes bearing the slogan **BRAMBLEWICK — WHERE EVERY STORY HAS A SECRET.**

Mabel considered this hilarious.

Clara did not.

The hidden passage behind the rare-books shelves had kept Detective Sergeant Reeves at The Crooked Bookmark until nearly midnight. The staircase climbed to an old landing between Clara's building and the adjoining property, then descended through a disused storeroom to a door opening on Church Lane.

The door had not been locked.

Anyone who knew the route could have entered the shop unseen.

Which meant Clara's locked front door proved almost nothing.

Reeves had taken the torn Harcourt page, photographed the passage and advised Clara yet again not to investigate.

Clara had promised nothing.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Now she stood beneath a ladder outside the village hall while Tom attempted to attach a string of bunting between two drainpipes.

“Left,” Clara called.

Tom moved it left.

“Other left.”

“I have only one.”

“Apparently not.”

Mabel sat on a folding chair supervising with a cup of tea.

Monty lay beside her, watching a dropped biscuit with the concentration of a military strategist.

Across the green, preparations for the Literary Weekend continued with the determined chaos of an event organised entirely by volunteers who had each been told they were in charge.

A handwritten notice outside the village hall announced:

### **FESTIVAL COMMITTEE MEETING — 11.00**

Someone had crossed out FESTIVAL and written LITERARY WEEKEND.

Someone else had crossed that out and written FESTIVAL again.

Clara was beginning to understand why Edwin Pritchard had enjoyed committees.

They gave people endless opportunities to acquire enemies.

“Clara.”

She turned.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Elise Pritchard was crossing the green.

She looked less exhausted than she had two days earlier, though grief still sat heavily around her eyes.

“I was hoping I’d find you.”

Clara left Tom to the bunting.

Mabel immediately became fascinated by something in the middle distance.

Elise noticed.

“Does she always listen?”

“Only when conscious.”

“I heard that,” Mabel said.

Elise almost smiled.

“I’ve been clearing my father’s house.”

Clara’s expression softened.

“That can’t be easy.”

“No.”

Elise looked towards the church.

“I found something.”

### **Edwin’s Last Appointment**

They sat inside The Crooked Bookmark with the CLOSED sign turned towards the street.

Elise placed a small pocket diary on the table.

“It was in Dad’s desk.”

Clara did not touch it.

“Have you shown the police?”

“Not yet.”

“You should.”

“I will.”

Mabel produced a plate of shortbread.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Elise stared at it.

Mabel said, “Bad news is more manageable with butter.”

Tom arrived from the café just as Elise opened the diary.

Most of its pages contained appointments in Edwin’s cramped handwriting.

Historical Society.

Dentist.

Archive.

Boiler.

Committee.

Then, on the Wednesday of his death:

**4.30 — Bellamy / Harcourt**

Below it:

**6.00 — A.C. Church**

Clara felt a small chill.

“A.C.”

“Adrian Crowther,” Tom said.

Elise nodded.

“I think so.”

Clara remembered Adrian standing in the shop, smiling easily.

He had claimed he met Edwin outside the church a little after six.

That part, at least, appeared to be true.

There was another entry beneath it.

**7.00 — S.V. Lantern**

Sebastian Vale.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Mabel put down her shortbread.

“So Edwin intended to see Sebastian at the pub afterwards.”

“Did he?” Clara asked.

Elise shook her head.

“I don’t know.”

Tom said, “I can find out.”

Twenty minutes later they were in the King’s Lantern, where landlord Peter Daines polished a glass and regarded Clara’s question with open suspicion.

The pub smelled of wood smoke, ale and Sunday roasts despite it being Saturday morning.

“Edwin?” Peter said. “Wednesday?”

“Yes.”

“He wasn’t here.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’d have noticed.”

“Was Sebastian Vale?”

Peter’s polishing slowed.

“For a bit.”

“What time?”

“Quarter to seven, perhaps.”

“Until when?”

“Half seven.”

Clara exchanged a glance with Mabel.

If Edwin had meant to meet Sebastian at seven, he had never arrived.

“Was Sebastian alone?”

Peter hesitated.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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That was enough.

Mabel leaned on the bar.

“Peter.”

He sighed.

“Agnes Cattermole was with him.”

Clara stared.

“The retired headmistress?”

“Yes.”

“They came together?”

“No. Agnes arrived first.”

“What were they discussing?”

“I run a pub, Clara. I don’t listen to customers’ conversations.”

Mabel coughed extravagantly.

Peter looked offended.

“I don’t.”

Tom said, “You told me last month that Derek Lawson was remortgaging his bungalow.”

“He was speaking loudly.”

“So were they?”

Peter lowered the glass.

“Agnes was upset.”

“About what?”

“I heard the word photograph.”

Clara felt the pieces shift again.

Agnes had said the old photograph should have been destroyed.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Now they knew that, around the probable time of Edwin's death, she had been discussing a photograph with Sebastian Vale.

Peter added reluctantly, "Sebastian told her it was handled."

"Handled how?"

"I don't know."

"Did Agnes leave first?"

"Yes. Just after seven."

"And Sebastian?"

"Twenty minutes later."

Mabel said, "So both had time to reach the bookshop."

Peter frowned.

"I didn't say that."

"No. Geography did."

The rear entrance to The Crooked Bookmark was less than four minutes' walk away.

Clara thanked Peter.

As they turned to go, he called after them.

"One more thing."

They stopped.

"Sebastian asked whether Edwin had been in."

"When?"

"Before Agnes arrived."

"So he was expecting him?"

"Looked like it."

Outside, Clara exhaled slowly.

Two suspects had just acquired opportunity.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Perhaps motive too.

But opportunity was beginning to feel cheap in Bramblewick.

Half the village seemed to possess it.

Back at the bookshop, they found Gerald Pike waiting by the door.

He looked miserable.

Which, Clara thought, was not unusual enough to count as evidence.

“I need to speak with you.”

Mabel said, “That sentence has yet to improve any day this week.”

Gerald ignored her.

Inside, he removed his cap.

“I took documents from the parish archive.”

Clara waited.

Gerald swallowed.

“Not to hide them.”

“You ran from my yard.”

“I did not.”

“Someone in your coat did.”

“Half the village owns that coat.”

“Yes. We’ve established a very unfortunate local fashion trend.”

Gerald looked towards the local-history shelves.

“Edwin asked me to find the original burial register.”

“The one containing Eleanor Halloway’s entry?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“It isn’t there.”

Clara frowned.

“But we saw the photocopy.”

“That copy was made years ago.”

“By whom?”

“Edwin.”

Mabel sat very still.

Gerald continued.

“He discovered the original register had been altered. An entire leaf had been removed and replaced.”

Clara remembered the odd alignment in Eleanor’s entry.

“What were you taking from the archive?”

“Other registers. Vestry minutes. Anything from 1958 and 1959.”

“To protect them?”

“Yes.”

“From whom?”

Gerald hesitated.

Clara said, “Gerald.”

“Adrian Crowther.”

The name landed heavily.

Tom folded his arms.

“Why Adrian?”

“He has been asking for access to everything concerning Eleanor Hallowsay.”

“He’s a historian.”

“He has keys.”

Clara stared at him.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“To the archive?”

“And the old storeroom above this shop.”

Silence.

“The hidden passage,” Clara said.

Gerald nodded.

“Adrian knows about it?”

“He wrote a paper on historic shop buildings fifteen years ago. Malcolm showed him.”

Mabel muttered, “Too many people know too many doors.”

Gerald reached into his coat.

Tom immediately stepped closer.

Gerald produced an envelope.

“I found this inside the vestry minutes.”

He placed it on the table.

The paper was yellowed and brittle.

Across the front, in faded ink:

**For Edwin Pritchard — if Matthew refuses.**

Inside was a single sheet.

The handwriting was hurried.

Clara read aloud.

““Edwin, you know what we did was wrong. Beatrice was alive when Matthew claimed Vale House. Eleanor knew it, and now Matthew says she must be stopped. I will not alter another document.””

Nobody spoke.

At the bottom was a signature.

**Arthur Crowther.**

Adrian’s father.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Mabel whispered, “Good Lord.”

There was more.

Clara continued.

“The Harcourt proves it. The date gives everything away. Matthew was foolish enough to use a book that did not yet exist.”

Tom frowned.

“What does that mean?”

Clara thought of the torn title page.

**1897.**

**Not published until 1901.**

Four impossible years.

An old lie constructed around a book.

And Edwin had known exactly where to find the evidence.

She turned the letter over.

Nothing.

Then Monty nosed the envelope.

A second, smaller piece of paper slipped from beneath the flap.

Clara picked it up.

It contained four words in Edwin’s handwriting.

**Arthur did not kill her.**

Below them was another line.

**Ask his son why he lied.**

The bell above the shop door jingled.

They all turned.

Adrian Crowther stood on the pavement outside, looking through the glass.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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His usual smile was gone.

His gaze dropped to the letter in Clara's hand.

Then he turned and walked quickly away.

Clara reached the door first.

"Adrian!"

He did not stop.

But as he crossed the lane, something fell from his coat pocket.

A brass key.

Clara picked it up.

Attached to it was a small wooden tag.

On one side were the words:

**HISTORICAL SOCIETY — ARCHIVE**

On the other, written in black ink, were two more.

**CROOKED BOOKMARK.**

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### Chapter 6 — The Historian's Second Key

The brass key was unexpectedly heavy.

Clara turned it over in her palm while Adrian Crowther disappeared beyond the war memorial, moving with considerably more speed than a man who had spent the previous week presenting himself as an entirely unhurried historian.

On one side of the wooden tag was written  
**HISTORICAL SOCIETY — ARCHIVE.**

On the other:

**CROOKED BOOKMARK.**

Mabel peered over Clara's shoulder.

"Well," she said, "that saves us having to wonder whether he possesses a key."

Tom came to the doorway. "We still don't know what it opens."

"We know what somebody thought it opened."

Gerald Pike had gone grey.

"That isn't an official archive key."

Clara looked at him.

"You're sure?"

"Ours have red tags."

"Then why does it say Historical Society?"

"I don't know."

Mabel folded her arms.

"Gerald, you have spent forty years arranging hymn sheets according to liturgical season. 'I don't know' is not your natural condition."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Gerald looked wounded.

“My hymn sheets are not relevant.”

“They rarely are.”

Clara stepped back into the shop and closed the door.

Monty gave the key an interested sniff before deciding that metal was inferior to the remains of Tom’s shortbread.

Clara placed the key on the counter.

“Adrian knew Edwin had the Harcourt. He knew the hidden passage. His father was involved in altering records. And now he drops a key labelled with the name of my shop.”

Tom nodded slowly.

“It doesn’t look good.”

“Which is exactly why I don’t like it.”

Mabel raised an eyebrow.

“You prefer your suspects with better presentation?”

“I prefer evidence that isn’t almost theatrical.”

Gerald stared at her.

Clara tapped the wooden tag.

“If Adrian murdered Edwin and had been secretly using this key, why label it CROOKED BOOKMARK?”

Tom considered that.

“To remember?”

“He’s a professional historian, not a Labrador.”

Monty looked up.

“Sorry.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Mabel picked up the envelope containing Arthur Crowther's letter.

"And Edwin wrote, 'Ask his son why he lied.'"

"Which doesn't say Adrian killed anyone."

"No."

Gerald shifted uneasily.

"But Adrian has been lying."

Clara looked at him.

"About what?"

Gerald took a long breath.

"Eleanor Halloway."

### **A Different Version of the Past**

According to Gerald, Adrian Crowther had spent nearly ten years researching a book about Bramblewick's history.

Not the cheerful guide sold beside the till in the village hall.

A serious history.

Families, estates, parish disputes, vanished industries and the occasional scandal sanitised sufficiently to avoid upsetting descendants with solicitors.

"Edwin was helping him," Gerald said.

"Until when?" Clara asked.

"About six months ago."

"What happened?"

"They quarrelled."

"About Eleanor?"

Gerald nodded.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“Adrian claimed she had left Bramblewick in 1958.”

Mabel frowned.

“The burial register says she died.”

“Exactly.”

“So which version did Adrian publish?”

“Neither. He removed her entirely.”

Clara thought of Agnes Cattermole and the photograph she said should have been destroyed.

“Why?”

“Adrian told the committee there wasn’t enough evidence.”

“And Edwin disagreed?”

“Strongly.”

Gerald looked towards the window.

“Edwin accused Adrian of protecting his father’s reputation.”

The room grew quiet.

Arthur Crowther’s letter had made one thing clear: Adrian’s father had known about whatever happened to Beatrice Vale and Eleanor Halloway.

But knowing was not the same as killing.

Nor was altering a record.

Clara had learnt enough about village committees to recognise that people could commit remarkable acts of moral cowardice without being murderers.

“What did Adrian say?” Tom asked.

“That Edwin was becoming obsessive.”

Mabel sniffed.

“Edwin was born obsessive.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“He said Edwin was trying to create a scandal out of fragments.”

Clara picked up the brass key.

“We need to know what this opens.”

Gerald looked alarmed.

“We should give it to the police.”

“We are giving it to the police.”

Clara reached for her mobile.

Mabel sighed.

“You’re becoming disappointingly law-abiding.”

“I own a bookshop. We rely on people respecting property.”

“You purchased stolen shelving from Malcolm.”

“I did not know it was stolen.”

“It came from a convent.”

“He said they were deaccessioning.”

Tom rubbed his forehead.

“I’m going back to the café.”

He did not make it.

Detective Sergeant Reeves arrived nine minutes later.

He looked at the key.

Then at Clara.

Then at Gerald.

Then at the key again.

“Where exactly did Dr Crowther drop this?”

“Outside the shop.”

“After seeing you?”

“Yes.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“And you called him?”

“Yes.”

“And he ran?”

“Walked very briskly.”

Mabel said, “He ran.”

Reeves wrote something in his notebook.

Clara wondered whether there was a page headed

### **LOCAL CIVILIANS — INCREASINGLY TIRESOME.**

“We’ll speak to Dr Crowther,” he said.

“Can we find out what the key opens first?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve just taken possession of it.”

“I meant you.”

Reeves closed his eyes briefly.

“I understood what you meant.”

He put the key into an evidence bag.

“Mrs Bellamy, I need you to stop treating suspicious objects as invitations.”

“Someone entered my shop through a secret passage.”

“Which is why we are investigating.”

“Someone threatened me.”

“Also under investigation.”

“Edwin died in my rare-books room.”

“I remain aware of that.”

Mabel said, “You do sound cross, Detective.”

“I am cultivating serenity.”

“You’re not very good at it.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Reeves ignored her.

He turned to Gerald.

“Mr Pike, I’ll need a list of everyone known to have had access to the Historical Society archive and the old passage.”

Gerald nodded.

“And,” Reeves added, “every duplicate key ever issued for either location.”

Gerald hesitated.

There it was.

Clara saw Reeves notice too.

“What?” he asked.

Gerald looked miserable.

“There was an unofficial duplicate.”

“For whom?”

“Edwin.”

Clara stared.

Reeves went very still.

“When was it made?”

“Years ago.”

“Who made it?”

“I don’t know.”

Mabel coughed.

Gerald glared at her.

“All right. I had it made.”

“For Edwin?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Gerald rubbed his forehead.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Because the society used to keep overflow records in the storeroom above the bookshop. Before Malcolm sealed the passage. Edwin wanted access.”

Reeves held up the evidence bag.

“And the wooden tag?”

Gerald looked at it.

“I labelled the keys.”

Clara felt a small but important shift.

“Then that could have been Edwin’s key.”

Gerald nodded.

Reeves said, “Could Dr Crowther have obtained it?”

“I suppose.”

“How?”

Gerald’s face tightened.

“From Edwin.”

Or after Edwin died, Clara thought.

Adrian’s incriminating key had just become considerably less incriminating.

A perfect red herring, she realised.

Almost too perfect.

Reeves departed with the key and Gerald’s letter.

Gerald followed to give a formal statement.

The shop became quiet again.

Tom finally escaped to the café.

Mabel remained.

Naturally.

Clara returned Arthur Crowther’s words to memory.

**Matthew says nobody must ever know. Edwin has changed the register. Adrian’s father has the letters.**

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Something bothers me,” Clara said.

“Only one thing?”

“Arthur refers to Edwin changing the register.”

“Yes.”

“But Edwin was sixteen.”

Mabel’s expression darkened.

“He worked at the church during school holidays.”

“Doing what?”

“Helping the vicar. Filing papers. Copying notices. Odd jobs.”

“Enough access to alter a parish record?”

“Possibly.”

“And Matthew Vale?”

“His family paid for half the church roof.”

“In villages, does that confer criminal privileges?”

“Traditionally it confers the right to believe it does.”

Clara went to the local-history shelf.

She removed the 1979 parish booklet and turned to the photograph of Vale House.

**Vale House passed to Sir Matthew Vale following the death of his elder cousin, Beatrice Vale, in 1958.**

“Why would a sixteen-year-old boy help falsify something like this?”

Mabel did not answer.

Clara looked at her.

“You know.”

“I suspect.”

“That is simply knowing with better manners.”

Mabel sighed.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Edwin’s mother worked at Vale House.”

Clara stopped.

“What?”

“As housekeeper.”

“For Matthew?”

“For the family. Edwin grew up in one of the estate cottages.”

“So Matthew could pressure him.”

“Quite easily.”

“And Arthur Crowther?”

“His father was the parish clerk.”

Clara stared at the booklet.

A wealthy man.

A frightened housekeeper’s son.

A parish clerk’s son.

Records altered by boys who could be controlled.

The old secret had not begun with Edwin.

But he had helped preserve it.

That explained the intended confession.

Perhaps.

Mabel’s voice softened.

“There’s something else.”

Clara looked up.

“Your photograph. The torn one.”

“What about it?”

“I remembered the fourth person.”

Clara waited.

“The young man standing beside Matthew Vale.”

“Yes?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Edwin.”

Clara pictured the photograph Monty had found.

Four figures remained after someone tore away the other half.

Sir Matthew Vale.

His wife Evelyn.

Two younger figures.

One had been Edwin Pritchard.

At sixteen.

Present at the centre of something he had spent nearly seventy years concealing.

“And the missing half?” Clara asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Who was on it?”

“I said I don’t know.”

Clara held Mabel’s gaze.

This time Mabel did not look away.

“I genuinely don’t.”

That was new enough to be convincing.

At half past three, Agnes Cattermole returned.

She entered without removing her gloves.

“Is Mabel here?”

Mabel emerged from behind gardening.

“No, I’ve left.”

Agnes shut the door.

Her face was pale.

“I’ve been thinking about what Clara said.”

“That makes one of you,” Mabel replied.

Agnes ignored her.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“I should have told the police years ago.”

Clara felt her heartbeat quicken.

“Told them what?”

“Nothing about Edwin’s death. About the photograph.”

Agnes opened her handbag.

From inside, she removed a brown envelope.

“I didn’t destroy it.”

Mabel sat down.

Agnes laid a photograph on the counter.

It was the missing half.

The torn edge matched.

Clara knew it immediately.

Three people stood outside Bramblewick church.

A young Edwin Pritchard.

A girl of perhaps seventeen whom Clara did not recognise.

And a striking dark-haired woman in a pale summer dress.

Someone had written a name beneath her feet.

**Beatrice Vale.**

Clara stared.

The photograph was dated June 1958.

The parish history claimed Beatrice had already gone abroad.

Agnes touched the young girl beside her.

“That’s my sister, Margaret.”

“Why was she with Beatrice?”

“She worked at Vale House.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“And why did you say this photograph should have been destroyed?”

“Because Edwin told me to destroy it.”

Mabel’s eyes sharpened.

“When?”

“1979. When the parish history was published.”

Clara looked at the date again.

June 1958.

“What happened to your sister?”

Agnes swallowed.

“She left Bramblewick.”

“When?”

“Three days after this photograph was taken.”

“Did she ever come back?”

“No.”

“And Beatrice?”

Agnes stared at Clara.

“That’s what I never understood.”

She turned the photograph over.

There was writing on the back.

Clara read it aloud.

**Beatrice and Margaret after the Literary Society lecture, 21 June 1958.**

Below it was a second note.

Written much later.

In Edwin’s hand.

**This photograph must not survive. The book proves the date.**

Clara’s skin prickled.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“The book.”

“The Harcourt?” Mabel asked.

Clara looked towards the rare-books room.

A book supposedly connected to events in 1958.

A publication date that did not fit something.

A falsified history.

And now a photograph Edwin had tried to destroy for the same reason.

Agnes said, “There’s one more thing.”

She reached into the envelope again.

A small newspaper clipping fell onto the counter.

### **BRAMBLEWICK LITERARY SOCIETY SUMMER LECTURE**

The clipping announced that on **21 June 1958**, Matthew Vale had delivered a lecture about local antiquarian books.

It included a quotation attributed to him:

**“My cousin Beatrice presented me with my treasured 1897 first edition of Harcourt shortly before departing for Switzerland.”**

Clara read the sentence twice.

Then a third time.

Mabel frowned.

“But the note said Harcourt wasn’t published until 1901.”

Clara nodded.

“So Matthew could not have owned an 1897 first edition.”

“Which proves he lied.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Yes.”

“But about what?”

Clara stared at Beatrice’s face in the photograph.

Not yet.

The answer was still obscured.

But another thought had begun to trouble her.

Edwin had known the publication discrepancy for decades.

So had whoever helped create the story.

That made the false date dangerous evidence.

Yet it could not, by itself, explain Edwin’s murder nearly seventy years later.

Someone had needed the Harcourt now.

Someone had feared what was inside it now.

The shop telephone rang.

Clara answered.

“Crooked Bookmark.”

For a moment, there was silence.

Then Adrian Crowther spoke.

“Clara, you need to listen carefully.”

His voice was strained.

Not charming.

Not amused.

Frightened.

“The police think that key was mine.”

“Wasn’t it?”

“No. It was Edwin’s.”

“We know.”

A pause.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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"Then you also need to know why I had it."

Clara gripped the receiver.

"Why?"

"Edwin gave it to me on Wednesday night."

Mabel came closer.

Clara switched on the speaker.

"At what time?" she asked.

"Just after six."

"When you met him at the church?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

Adrian breathed out.

"He said he was going back to the bookshop."

Clara's stomach tightened.

"With the Harcourt?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Another silence.

Then Adrian said, "Because he had finally found the letters."

Clara looked at Mabel.

"What letters?"

"The ones my father supposedly destroyed."

"Where were they?"

"Hidden inside the book."

There it was.

Not value because of the printing.

Value because of what had been concealed inside.

"Where are they now?"

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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"I don't know."

"Did you see them?"

"No."

"Then what did you lie about?"

Adrian did not answer immediately.

When he did, his voice was barely above a whisper.

"I lied about seeing Edwin alive after six fifteen."

Clara went cold.

"You said you saw him outside the church after six."

"I did."

"But?"

"But when the police first asked me where I was later, I told them I stayed at home."

"Didn't you?"

"No."

Mabel closed her eyes.

Clara said, "Where were you?"

"At the bookshop."

The room seemed to narrow around her.

"When?"

"About quarter to seven."

"Inside?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"The passage."

Mabel whispered, "Oh, Adrian."

Clara forced herself to keep her voice steady.

"Was Edwin alive?"

"Yes."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Did you speak to him?”

“Yes.”

“What was he doing?”

“He had the Harcourt open on the table.”

“And the letters?”

“I didn’t see them.”

“What happened?”

“He told me to leave.”

“Why?”

“Because someone else was coming.”

Clara’s pulse thudded.

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“Adrian.”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

A car passed outside.

Then Adrian said something that made Clara grip the receiver harder.

“When I left, Edwin was writing a note.”

“What note?”

“I only saw the beginning.”

Clara thought of the six words found in Edwin’s pocket.

**You should have left her buried.**

But Adrian said, “It began, ‘I should have told her—’”

Clara stopped breathing for a moment.

A different note.

One the police had never mentioned.

“What happened to it?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“I don’t know.”

A sharp sound came through the telephone.

Adrian gasped.

“Adrian?”

Something clattered.

Then the line went dead.

Clara called his name again.

No answer.

She rang back.

Once.

Twice.

On the third attempt, someone answered.

Nobody spoke.

Clara could hear breathing.

Then a voice said very softly:

“You were warned.”

The connection ended.

At Clara’s feet, Monty began to growl.

---

### Chapter 7 — A Lecture No One Wanted to Hear

Adrian Crowther was not dead.

Clara decided this was encouraging, although the circumstances in which he was found made optimism feel slightly ambitious.

Detective Sergeant Reeves discovered him twenty minutes after the telephone call, sitting on the floor of the Historical Society archive with a bruised shoulder, a split lip and a remarkable quantity of nineteenth-century parish correspondence scattered around him. Someone had struck him from behind, though not, according to Reeves, with enough force to cause serious injury.

“Which means,” Mabel said later, “either the attacker was merciful or incompetent.”

“Or interrupted,” Clara replied.

They were in Tom’s café because Reeves had temporarily closed the Historical Society rooms and requested that Clara remain somewhere publicly visible until he had finished asking questions.

Tom set a pot of tea between them.

“I’m starting to think public visibility is doing very little for your safety.”

Monty was beneath the table, where he had located a fragment of sausage roll and apparently concluded that the investigation was progressing splendidly.

Across the window, Bramblewick’s Literary Weekend banners fluttered above the village green. The

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

event began the following morning, and despite murder, intimidation and an assaulted historian, the committee had decided cancellation would be “letting unfortunate circumstances win”.

Nobody had identified what, precisely, unfortunate circumstances were trying to win.

Clara stirred her tea.

“Whoever attacked Adrian was searching the archive.”

Tom nodded.

“Or stopping Adrian from searching it.”

Mabel picked up a biscuit.

“Same difference if you’re the person with the bruise.”

Reeves entered a few minutes later.

His coat was damp from a sudden shower, and his expression suggested serenity had now been formally abandoned.

“Dr Crowther will be fine.”

Clara felt herself relax.

“Did he see who attacked him?”

“No.”

“What was he doing in the archive?”

“Looking for correspondence connected to Arthur Crowther.”

“The letters?”

“He says so.”

Mabel said, “Do you believe him?”

Reeves looked at her.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“Do you?”

“No.”

“Then for once we agree.”

Clara leaned forward.

“Why don’t you believe him?”

“Because Dr Crowther has lied repeatedly.”

“He admitted that.”

“He admitted one lie after being caught in another.”

“That’s practically the village constitution,” Mabel said.

Reeves opened his notebook.

“Adrian says Edwin gave him the key at the Church, told him he had recovered certain letters and asked him to keep away from the bookshop until the following morning.”

“But Adrian went anyway.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He claims he wanted to see the letters.”

“Because they involved his father.”

“That’s his explanation.”

Clara thought of Arthur Crowther’s letter.

**I will not alter another document.**

Whatever Arthur had done, he had eventually tried to stop.

“What did Adrian find at the shop?”

“According to him, Edwin. Alive. With the Harcourt book.”

“And no one else?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“He says no.”

“At quarter to seven?”

“Approximately.”

“And then?”

“Adrian left by the passage at ten to seven.”

“Meaning Edwin was alive after Sebastian Vale had already arrived at the King’s Lantern.”

Reeves’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“You have been comparing alibis.”

“Only geographically.”

Mabel said, “Very responsibly.”

Reeves closed the notebook.

“Mrs Bellamy, I would prefer that you stop doing even responsible geography.”

Clara ignored that.

“What was missing from the archive?”

“We don’t yet know.”

“Was anything added?”

That caught him.

He paused.

“Why do you ask?”

“Because people keep leaving documents in places where they weren’t before.”

A moment passed.

Then Reeves took a photograph from his coat pocket and placed it on the table.

It showed a single sheet of yellowed paper lying on the archive floor.

“Found beneath Dr Crowther.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara read the heading.

**Private Memorandum — Edwin Pritchard**

Beneath it were three lines.

**I altered the burial register.**

**Arthur Crowther altered the estate inventory.**

**Matthew Vale dictated both.**

Mabel's face tightened.

Clara looked at Reeves.

"That sounds like a confession."

"Part of one."

"Part?"

"The page ends there."

"So the rest is missing."

"Yes."

"Was it old?"

"The paper is approximately thirty years old."

Clara sat back.

Edwin had begun confessing long before he died.

He had simply never finished doing it publicly.

**The Respectable Version**

By late afternoon, Adrian had returned home under police supervision.

Clara reopened The Crooked Bookmark for two hours, mainly because she was tired of being told where she ought to sit.

At five, Agnes Cattermole arrived carrying a cake tin.

"I baked."

Mabel looked alarmed.

"You haven't baked since the millennium."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“That was because people complained.”

“They were correct.”

Agnes ignored her and placed the tin on the counter.

“I remembered something.”

Clara had learnt that in Bramblewick, this sentence could lead anywhere from murder to marmalade.

“About 1958?”

Agnes nodded.

“My sister Margaret wrote to me after she left.”

“You still have the letter?”

“No. Mother burnt it.”

Mabel made a disgusted noise.

“People in this village have destroyed enough paper to keep a bonfire going until Christmas.”

Agnes sat.

“Margaret said Beatrice had planned to challenge Matthew’s claim to Vale House.”

Clara frowned.

“Claim? I thought Beatrice owned it.”

“She did.”

“Then why would Matthew have a claim at all?”

“Because he said Beatrice had agreed to transfer the estate to him before going abroad.”

“Had she?”

“No.”

Agnes’s answer came immediately.

“My sister was certain of it.”

Tom entered carrying two mugs and paused near the door.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Clara said, "Then Matthew needed people to believe Beatrice had left voluntarily."

"Yes."

"And later that she had died abroad."

Agnes nodded.

Mabel's voice was quiet.

"Where was Beatrice really?"

Agnes looked towards the window.

"My sister thought she was still at Vale House."

The room went still.

Clara felt the six-word note rise in her mind.

**You should have left her buried.**

"Buried where?" she asked.

Agnes shook her head.

"I don't know."

Tom said, "Do you think Beatrice was murdered?"

"I think Margaret believed something terrible had happened."

"Why did Margaret leave?"

Agnes twisted her gloves.

"She was frightened."

"Of Matthew?"

"Yes."

"And Eleanor?"

Agnes closed her eyes briefly.

"Eleanor stayed."

Clara's thoughts sharpened.

The parish register claimed Eleanor died on 17 June.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Yet Beatrice appeared in a photograph dated 21 June, four days later.

If Eleanor knew Beatrice was still alive, then the falsified burial entry might have been designed to confuse identities.

Or conceal a disappearance.

“Could the grave listed as Eleanor’s contain someone else?” Clara asked.

Agnes stared at her.

Mabel stopped moving.

Tom’s expression changed.

No one answered.

They did not need to.

The churchyard stood less than a hundred yards away.

Clara could see the top of the yew trees through the bookshop window.

A grave with the wrong name.

A missing woman.

A stolen inheritance.

And Edwin’s note.

Or rather, the note placed in Edwin’s pocket.

“You should have left her buried,” Clara murmured.

Mabel went pale.

“That may not have been addressed to Edwin.”

Clara looked at her.

“What?”

“Suppose it wasn’t a warning to him.”

“Then what was it?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“A quotation.”

Clara stared.

Mabel continued.

“Something someone had said before.”

The idea settled uneasily.

A note could be evidence.

Or theatre.

Someone had wanted the police to think Edwin died because he dug into an old burial.

But Edwin had intended to confess his own role.

That motive was different.

Much more immediate.

The shop door opened.

Sebastian Vale walked in.

He looked exhausted.

Not polished.

Not controlled.

For the first time, he looked like a man whose family history had ceased to obey him.

“I need to speak to you.”

Mabel said, “Everyone does.”

Sebastian ignored her.

“It’s about my grandfather.”

Clara folded her arms.

“What about him?”

“He lied.”

No one moved.

Sebastian looked towards the local-history shelves.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“About Beatrice. About Vale House. About nearly everything.”

“And you knew?”

“Not until recently.”

“How recently?”

“Six months ago.”

Clara felt something cold settle in her stomach.

“The same time Edwin and Adrian quarrelled.”

“Yes.”

“Edwin told you?”

“He showed me a letter.”

“One of those hidden in the Harcourt?”

“I assume so.”

“Did you see the book?”

“No.”

“What did the letter say?”

Sebastian’s jaw tightened.

“That Beatrice never transferred the estate.”

“And?”

“That Matthew forged the documents.”

There it was.

Three generations of wealth, property and status resting on fraud.

Clara said, “Why didn’t you go to the police?”

“Because I was trying to establish whether it was genuine.”

“By offering me far too much money for the bookshop?”

His silence answered.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“You thought the letters were here.”

“Yes.”

“Did you come here on Wednesday night?”

“No.”

“You were at the King’s Lantern.”

“Yes.”

“Until half past seven?”

“Approximately.”

“Agnes confirms it.”

Agnes stiffened.

Sebastian looked at her, surprised.

Clara watched him carefully.

He appeared relieved.

That mattered.

A guilty man could be relieved by corroboration.

An innocent one could too.

“Why did Edwin want to meet you?” Clara asked.

Sebastian’s face changed.

“He said he was going to make everything public.”

“The fraud?”

“Yes.”

“Only the fraud?”

A long pause.

“No.”

Clara waited.

“He said there was something worse.”

“What?”

“He wouldn’t tell me.”

“Did he mention his own part?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Sebastian looked at her.

“Yes.”

Mabel drew in a breath.

“He said, ‘I helped Matthew do it, and I’ve spent the rest of my life pretending that made me less guilty.’”

Clara felt sorrow push through the puzzle.

Edwin had not been murdered for discovering the old secret.

He had lived with it.

Helped create it.

Perhaps helped sustain it.

His danger began only when he decided to confess.

Sebastian moved towards the door.

Then stopped.

“One more thing.”

Clara waited.

“Edwin said someone else knew he planned to confess.”

“Who?”

“He wouldn’t say.”

“Why tell me that?”

“Because he was frightened.”

“You didn’t mention this to Reeves?”

“I did today.”

Clara studied him.

“Why today?”

Sebastian looked tired.

“Because yesterday I was still trying to protect my family.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“And today?”

“Today I’m trying not to protect the wrong person.”

He left.

The shop fell silent.

Tom broke it.

“Well.”

Mabel said, “That family is going to have an interesting Christmas.”

Clara barely heard them.

She was thinking about Edwin’s movements.

Five o’clock at the shop.

Six o’clock with Adrian.

Seven o’clock appointment with Sebastian, never kept.

Alive at six fifty, according to Adrian.

Then someone else entered the bookshop.

Someone Edwin had expected.

Someone who knew about the letters.

Someone who knew Edwin intended to confess.

But Clara still lacked the link.

A murder could be explained by opportunity and fear.

A fair solution required more.

She walked to the shelf where the Harcourt had once stood.

The sermons remained slightly out of order.

Beside them was an old catalogue Malcolm Dredge had prepared years earlier.

Clara pulled it down.

The Harcourt entry was handwritten.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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**Harcourt, Felix — A Gentleman's Rambles Through the Cotswolds. First edition. London, 1901.**

She froze.

First edition.

1901.

Not simply “not published until 1901”.

First edition.

The false inscription in the missing book had said 1897.

Matthew Vale had later publicly claimed Beatrice gave him his treasured **1897 first edition**.

An impossible object.

A book that did not exist.

But if the false date had been part of a story invented in 1958, why had nobody noticed?

Clara turned to Agnes.

“When was that newspaper clipping printed?”

“1958.”

“No. The copy you gave me.”

Agnes frowned.

“It was reproduced in the 1983 edition of *Bramblewick: A Village Remembered*.”

Clara's pulse quickened.

“The edition you came looking for.”

“Yes.”

“And the 1986 edition?”

“The quotation was removed.”

“Who edited the revised edition?”

Agnes thought.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Then her face changed.

“Edwin.”

Clara looked at Mabel.

Not enough.

Still not enough.

But closer.

Much closer.

Then Monty barked at the door.

A young woman from the Literary Weekend committee stood outside holding a box of donated books.

“Sorry,” she said when Clara opened it. “These are for tomorrow’s charity stall. Dr Crowther said you were sorting them.”

Clara frowned.

“I’m not.”

“Oh.”

The woman looked at the label.

“Well, it says Crooked Bookmark.”

Clara took the box.

On top lay a stack of modern crime novels, two cookbooks and a battered biography of Dickens.

Beneath them was a slim green volume.

Gold thistle on the spine.

Clara stopped breathing.

The missing Harcourt.

Mabel whispered, “Good heavens.”

Clara did not touch it.

She read the label on the box again.

**DONATIONS — LITERARY WEEKEND**

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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And underneath, in smaller handwriting:

**From the estate of E. Pritchard.**

Edwin's books.

Clara looked at the green volume.

Someone had returned the missing evidence to the village in plain sight.

And tomorrow, unless she found out why, it would sit on a charity stall surrounded by hundreds of people.

# The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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## Chapter 8 — The Book That Should Not Exist

“No one touches it.”

Clara’s voice came out more sharply than intended.

Monty, who had been approaching the box with his usual conviction that all cardboard eventually contained food, stopped mid-sniff.

Mabel stared at the green volume.

“Not even you?”

“Especially not me.”

“That is unexpectedly sensible.”

“I do occasionally surprise myself.”

Clara telephoned Detective Sergeant Reeves.

This time, he arrived within twelve minutes.

The Harcourt remained exactly where Clara had found it, lying beneath the biography of Dickens in a box supposedly donated from Edwin Pritchard’s estate. The green cloth binding was faded, the gold thistle on the spine rubbed nearly smooth, but Clara recognised it immediately.

Reeves put on gloves.

“Who delivered the box?”

“Lucy Warren. Literary Weekend committee.”

“Who gave it to her?”

“She collected several donations from the village hall storeroom.”

“And who put this label on it?”

Nobody knew.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Naturally.

In Bramblewick, Clara thought, anonymous cardboard boxes seemed to enjoy greater freedom of movement than most residents.

Reeves lifted the Harcourt carefully.

The front board opened.

Everyone leaned forward.

Inside, in faded brown ink, was the inscription Clara remembered.

**Matthew Vale, Christmas 1897.**

Beneath it, in another hand:

**From Beatrice, with affection.**

Mabel inhaled.

Reeves looked at Clara.

“This is the date you mentioned?”

“Yes.”

He turned several pages.

Nothing fell out.

The book had been hollowed.

A neat rectangular cavity had been cut through perhaps a hundred pages near the centre.

Empty.

Tom swore softly.

Reeves glanced at him.

“Sorry.”

Mabel peered at the cavity.

“So that is where the letters were.”

Clara nodded.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Or where someone wanted them to believe the letters had been.

The difference mattered.

Reeves examined the inside edge of the hollow.

“There’s adhesive residue.”

“An envelope?” Clara asked.

“Possibly.”

“And no letters.”

“No.”

“So somebody returned the book after removing them.”

“Most likely.”

Clara stared at the impossible inscription.

Christmas 1897.

A first edition published in 1901.

The lie was almost embarrassingly obvious once one knew where to look.

Yet for nearly seventy years it had survived.

Why?

Because nobody had reason to question an old inscription in an old book.

A false detail became respectable simply by ageing.

Rather like half the village, Mabel would have said.

The bell above the door rang.

A woman swept in wearing a camel coat, dark glasses and the expression of somebody who had never knowingly entered a room without expecting it to improve.

Clara recognised her.

Cressida March.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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The newest resident of Bramblewick had arrived six months earlier, bought the old rectory for a sum discussed with profound bitterness at the King's Lantern, and announced plans to "revitalise the village's cultural economy".

So far this had involved suggesting artisan market stalls, boutique accommodation and replacing the Literary Weekend's folding chairs with rented velvet ones.

Cressida removed her glasses.

"Oh. Police."

Reeves looked at her.

"Yes."

"How unfortunate."

Mabel murmured, "People keep saying that."

Cressida smiled at Clara.

"I came about our conversation."

"We haven't had one."

"Our future conversation, then."

"I'm occupied."

Cressida's gaze moved to the Harcourt in Reeves's gloved hands.

Something flickered across her face.

Recognition.

Then it vanished.

Clara saw it.

So did Reeves.

"You know this book?" he asked.

Cressida recovered beautifully.

"I know books."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“That wasn’t the question.”

She smiled.

“I’ve seen that one before.”

“Where?”

“At Edwin Pritchard’s house.”

Clara felt her pulse quicken.

“When?”

“Last week.”

Mabel sat forward.

“What were you doing there?”

Cressida gave her a thin smile.

“Visiting.”

“Edwin disliked visitors.”

“Perhaps he liked me.”

“No one likes you that quickly.”

“Mabel,” Clara said.

“What? I’m saving time.”

Reeves said, “Why were you visiting Mr Pritchard?”

Cressida hesitated.

Then sighed.

“I was trying to buy the bookshop.”

Clara stared.

“My bookshop?”

“Not from you.”

“That would certainly simplify negotiations.”

Cressida looked irritated.

“I approached Edwin because I believed he had an interest in the property.”

“He didn’t.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“I know that now.”

“Why would you think he did?”

“Because Edwin told me the old passage included a historic right of access.”

Clara’s attention sharpened.

The hidden passage.

Cressida continued.

“I want to combine several properties around Church Lane into a small literary hotel and events space. The Crooked Bookmark would be ideal as the central shop.”

“No.”

“You haven’t heard the proposal.”

“I’ve heard the words literary hotel.”

Tom looked down quickly.

Mabel did not bother.

She laughed outright.

Cressida’s expression cooled.

Reeves lifted the Harcourt slightly.

“When did you see this at Mr Pritchard’s house?”

“Monday.”

“Did you touch it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He showed it to me.”

Clara stared at her.

“What did he say?”

“That it might be the most important book in Bramblewick.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“Did he show you what was inside?”

“No. He wouldn’t.”

“Did he mention letters?”

Cressida’s silence answered before she did.

“He may have.”

Reeves’s voice hardened.

“What exactly did he say?”

Cressida looked towards the window.

“He said there were letters proving that Vale House had been obtained through fraud.”

Mabel gave a small whistle.

“And you thought that might affect your redevelopment plans.”

Cressida turned.

“I thought nothing of the kind.”

“You wanted properties owned by the Vale family.”

Clara suddenly understood.

The lane behind the bookshop included two cottages, a former stable and an old warehouse.

All owned by Sebastian Vale.

If the Vale estate became entangled in an inheritance dispute, Cressida’s project could collapse.

Reeves clearly reached the same conclusion.

“Where were you Wednesday evening?”

“At home.”

“Alone?”

Cressida’s jaw tightened.

“Yes.”

A poor alibi.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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At last Bramblewick had produced one without tea, a committee or a pub landlord attached.

### **The Hollow Centre**

After Cressida left, Reeves took the Harcourt away. Clara disliked watching it go.

Not because it belonged to the shop, though technically it did.

Because she had the peculiar feeling that the answer had briefly been in front of her and had left again.

The Literary Weekend opened the following morning beneath a sky the colour of weak tea.

By nine thirty, the village green contained two marquees, four authors, a poetry society, six trays of cakes and a man dressed as Charles Dickens who had come from Banbury and appeared uncertain why.

The church hosted talks.

The village hall hosted booksellers.

The King's Lantern hosted everything else.

The Crooked Bookmark was busier than Clara had seen it since she bought the place.

Monty wore a tartan neckerchief provided by Mabel and accepted admiration as his natural entitlement.

For several hours, murder almost receded behind commerce.

Clara sold fourteen crime novels, three gardening books and a surprisingly expensive atlas to a man who spent ten minutes insisting he did not collect atlases.

Then Elise Pritchard arrived.

She carried a battered leather document case.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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"I found this in Dad's wardrobe."

Clara's heart sank.

"Have you telephoned Reeves?"

"Yes. He's coming."

"Good."

Mabel appeared at Clara's elbow.

"What's in it?"

Elise gave a tired smile.

"You two really are becoming alike."

"We are not," they said together.

Inside the case were photocopies.

Dozens.

Old estate papers.

Parish entries.

Letters.

But not the original letters from the Harcourt.

Clara spread several copies across the table.

One was a letter from Beatrice Vale dated **23 June 1958**.

Four days after the photograph supposedly proved she had already left Bramblewick.

Another, addressed to Eleanor Halloway, read:

**Matthew believes he can force me to sign. He cannot. If anything happens, you know where I have placed the originals.**

Clara read it again.

"What originals?"

Elise shook her head.

The next page was stranger.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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A statement in Edwin's handwriting.

Not dated.

**I told Matthew where Eleanor had hidden the letters. I believed he meant only to frighten her. When she disappeared, I altered the burial entry because he threatened my mother. I have carried that cowardice ever since.**

Mabel sat down heavily.

There it was.

Edwin's part.

He had not merely known the old secret.

At sixteen, frightened and manipulated, he had helped create the lie that allowed it to survive.

Clara continued reading.

**Arthur altered the inventory. I altered the register. Agnes's sister saw Beatrice afterwards. Matthew arranged the rest.**

Tom had joined them.

"What does 'arranged the rest' mean?"

"No idea."

Clara turned the page.

The final paragraph had been crossed through several times, but remained legible.

**The person most endangered by my confession is not Sebastian Vale. He will lose money, but money can be restored. Reputation is harder. There is one person whose entire life's work rests upon the version of Bramblewick history we manufactured.**

Clara went very still.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Tom said, “Adrian.”

Mabel frowned.

“He built his career on the village history.”

“And on his father’s reputation,” Clara said.

Elise looked frightened.

“So Adrian killed Dad?”

Clara shook her head.

“Possibly. But this is too convenient.”

She had said the same about the key.

Adrian’s motives were obvious.

Almost ostentatiously so.

His father had helped falsify evidence.

His published history omitted Eleanor.

He had lied about entering the bookshop.

He had access to the passage.

And yet—

Someone had attacked Adrian.

Unless he had staged it.

Possible.

But something else bothered Clara.

She picked up the photocopy of Beatrice’s letter.

“What did Adrian say when he told me about the Harcourt?”

Mabel thought.

“That Edwin had found the letters.”

“No. Before that.”

Tom frowned.

“He said Edwin had the Harcourt open.”

“Yes.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara looked at the photocopies.

“If Adrian knew the book had been hollowed, why didn’t he mention it?”

“Perhaps he didn’t notice.”

“He is a book historian.”

Mabel’s eyes sharpened.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning either the book had not yet been hollowed when Adrian saw it—”

“Or he never saw it open,” Tom finished.

Clara nodded.

One of Adrian’s statements was false.

But which?

A cheer rose outside as the Literary Weekend chairman attempted to open the festivities and accidentally pulled down half the bunting.

For once, nobody in the shop looked.

Elise turned another document over.

Something was written on the back.

A name.

**Dorothy March.**

Clara frowned.

“March?”

Cressida.

Elise stared.

“That was her grandmother.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me once.”

Mabel took the sheet.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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It was a copy of a 1959 conveyance.

A small parcel of land had been transferred from Matthew Vale to Dorothy March for the sum of one pound.

The property description covered the old mill meadow.

The place associated with Bramblewick's witch stories.

And, according to local legend, the place where Elspeth Vale had once gathered medicinal herbs.

Clara's skin prickled.

Why would Matthew Vale give land to Cressida's grandmother immediately after Beatrice disappeared?

Before anyone could answer, a crash came from the rear of the shop.

Monty barked.

Clara ran.

The hidden shelf stood open.

Someone was in the passage.

She caught a glimpse of a coat disappearing upwards.

This time she did not follow.

She slammed the shelf shut and dropped the brass floor bolt Tom had fitted the previous day.

A second later something struck the other side.

Hard.

Once.

Twice.

Then silence.

Mabel arrived behind her, breathless.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Who was it?”

“I couldn’t see.”

Clara looked down.

Something had fallen just inside the doorway before she closed it.

A Literary Weekend programme.

On the front was the list of speakers.

One name had been circled.

**Dr Adrian Crowther — “Fact, Folklore and the Making of Bramblewick” — Sunday, 3.00 p.m., St Bartholomew’s Church.**

Across the bottom someone had written:

**He knows the wrong date.**

Clara stared at the words.

Not the false date.

The wrong date.

Suddenly the inscription inside the Harcourt no longer seemed merely evidence of Matthew Vale’s old fraud.

It was evidence of something happening now.

Something somebody had said.

Somebody had known the publication date before they should have known it.

Clara’s heart began to beat faster.

She could almost see the shape of the answer.

Not yet.

But by tomorrow afternoon, when Adrian Crowther stood before half the village to lecture about fact and

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

folklore, Clara suspected somebody would make certain he never finished.

And this time, she intended to understand the date before they tried.

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## Chapter 9 — The Date in the Margin

By Sunday morning, rain had polished Bramblewick to a shine.

Water silvered the cobbles, dripped from the yews around St Bartholomew's and persuaded the Literary Weekend committee to relocate two outdoor events, one book-signing table and Charles Dickens into the village hall.

Dickens was taking it badly.

Clara stood behind the counter of The Crooked Bookmark with a cup of tea growing cold beside her and Edwin's photocopied papers spread across the desk.

Monty slept under the radiator.

Mabel arrived at nine carrying an umbrella, a newspaper and two bacon sandwiches.

"You look dreadful."

"Good morning."

"Have you slept?"

"Some."

"That means no."

Clara accepted the sandwich.

Outside, visitors hurried beneath umbrellas towards the church, where Adrian Crowther was due to speak at three.

**Fact, Folklore and the Making of Bramblewick.**

The title had begun to feel less like a lecture and more like a threat.

Mabel removed her coat.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Reeves has a constable at Adrian’s house.”

“Good.”

“And another at the church.”

“Better.”

“And he says if you interfere he will personally lock you in the vestry.”

Clara looked up.

“Did he actually say that?”

“No. But it was strongly implied.”

Clara returned to the papers.

She had read Edwin’s statement until the words blurred.

Matthew Vale had stolen an inheritance.

Arthur Crowther had altered an estate inventory.

Edwin had altered a burial register.

Eleanor Halloway had known too much.

Beatrice Vale had remained in Bramblewick after the date on which Matthew claimed she had gone abroad.

And the Harcourt contained an impossible inscription dated 1897 in a book first published in 1901.

That old lie mattered.

But Clara was increasingly convinced it mattered in a second, newer way.

Someone had known about the false publication date before the police made it public.

Someone whose alibi depended on not having seen the book.

Mabel placed the newspaper aside.

“You’ve got that expression.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“What expression?”

“The one you had just before dismantling Sebastian’s argument about the shop access.”

“I did not dismantle it.”

“You made him buy medieval sermons.”

“That was incidental.”

Clara picked up her notebook.

“Tell me everything Adrian said the first time he came into the shop.”

Mabel frowned.

“He said Edwin had mentioned the Harcourt.”

“Yes.”

“He said he saw Edwin after six.”

“Yes.”

“And he described the book.”

Clara stopped.

“Exactly.”

Mabel looked at her.

“Green cloth. Gilt spine.”

“He said he saw Edwin carrying it outside the church.”

“Which he probably did.”

“Probably.”

Clara flipped back through her notes.

Then she found another line.

Later, during Adrian’s telephone call, he had said Edwin had the Harcourt open on the table when Adrian entered the bookshop at about quarter to seven.

That claim had bothered her.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

But not enough.

Not until now.

“Adrian said he saw the book open.”

“Yes.”

“He also said he never saw the letters.”

“Correct.”

“If the book was hollowed at that point, he would have seen the cavity.”

“Unless Edwin had covered it.”

“Possibly.”

Mabel sat opposite her.

“You don’t believe that.”

“No.”

Clara reached for Malcolm Dredge’s old catalogue.

**First edition. London, 1901.**

Then she remembered something Cressida had said.

She had seen the Harcourt at Edwin’s house on Monday.

Edwin had told her it might be the most important book in Bramblewick.

But he had not shown her what was inside.

Clara stood.

“I need Cressida.”

Mabel sighed.

“That is not a sentence many people have willingly spoken.”

**The Wrong Date**

They found Cressida March in the village hall arguing about table linen.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Within ten minutes, she was sitting in Tom's café with Clara, Mabel and a pot of coffee she had ordered instead of tea, which Mabel regarded as evidence of moral instability.

Clara placed Malcolm's catalogue entry in front of her.

"When you saw the Harcourt at Edwin's house, did he mention when it was published?"

Cressida looked irritated.

"No."

"Did you open it?"

"Yes."

"What did you see?"

"The inscription."

"Which one?"

"Matthew Vale. Christmas 1897. From Beatrice."

Clara leaned forward.

"Did you notice the publication date?"

"No."

"Did Edwin?"

"He laughed about something."

Clara's pulse quickened.

"What?"

Cressida thought.

"He said, 'That date has ruined lives for seventy years, and nobody has bothered to check it.'"

Mabel and Clara exchanged a look.

"Did he tell you the correct date?"

"No."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“Are you certain?”

“Yes.”

“When did you learn it was 1901?”

Cressida frowned.

“I didn’t.”

Clara stared at her.

“You know now.”

“Because you just told me.”

Fair.

Clara sat back.

Cressida had no reason to pretend otherwise.

“Why did Edwin show you the book?”

“He wanted me to stop trying to buy the properties.”

“Why?”

“Because he said once the truth came out, nobody would know who legally owned half the land I wanted.”

“Did that anger you?”

“Enormously.”

Mabel said, “Refreshing.”

Cressida turned to her.

“I am capable of being angry without murdering pensioners.”

“Most of us are.”

Clara asked, “Where were you Wednesday evening?”

“I told the police. At home.”

“Did anyone ring you?”

“No.”

“Deliver anything?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“No.”

“Use your landline?”

“I don’t have one.”

Another poor alibi.

But Clara no longer cared.

The date was elsewhere.

She thanked Cressida and left.

Halfway across the green, she stopped so suddenly  
Mabel nearly walked into her.

“What?”

“Agnes.”

“What about her?”

“Her photograph.”

The photograph from 21 June 1958.

Edwin had written on the back:

**This photograph must not survive. The book  
proves the date.**

Mabel frowned.

“Yes.”

“The photograph does not prove the publication  
date.”

“No.”

“The book does.”

“Yes.”

“So why connect the two?”

Mabel stared.

Clara felt the final shape beginning to emerge.

“The photograph proves Beatrice was in  
Bramblewick after Matthew said she had left. The book

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

proves Matthew fabricated the story about Beatrice giving it to him.”

“Agreed.”

“But Edwin’s murderer wasn’t trying merely to protect Matthew.”

“No.”

“They were protecting the later version of events.”

The historical version.

The one published, lectured upon and repeated for decades.

Mabel’s face changed.

“Adrian.”

“Perhaps.”

“But we already knew his career depended on it.”

“Yes. And that is exactly what has been distracting us.”

Clara was walking now.

Fast.

Mabel followed.

“The note said he knows the wrong date.”

“Yes.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Adrian may not be the target.”

Mabel stopped.

Clara turned.

“Suppose whoever wrote that meant Adrian knows the date the murderer gave the police.”

Mabel’s eyes narrowed.

“Which date?”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara thought back to every conversation.

Then remembered Detective Sergeant Reeves's first visit.

**Estimated time of death between five thirty and seven.**

Adrian placed Edwin alive at six fifty.

Sebastian was at the King's Lantern by quarter to seven.

Agnes was there around the same time.

Cressida was home.

Gerald claimed to be at the church.

But one person had offered a more precise account.

A person who had mentioned the Harcourt before Clara had publicly explained its significance.

Clara went cold.

"Tom."

Mabel stared at her.

"No."

Not Tom Arkwright.

Clara shook her head.

"Not Tom. Peter."

"The landlord?"

"No."

She pressed a hand to her forehead.

"I'm mixing conversations."

Mabel waited.

Clara forced herself to slow down.

Who had known the date?

Sebastian had seen letters but not the book.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Cressida had seen the inscription but not the correct date.

Agnes knew the quotation from the 1983 history.

Gerald knew registers, not books.

Adrian was the historian.

But someone else had discussed the Harcourt's publication history in a way that had sounded natural at the time.

Arthur Crowther's son.

Adrian.

Of course.

Yet if Adrian had killed Edwin, why attack himself?

To redirect suspicion?

Possible.

But there was still something missing.

They reached The Crooked Bookmark.

Detective Sergeant Reeves was waiting outside.

"You've been looking for me," Clara said.

"I have."

His expression was grave.

"We've identified the handwriting on the anonymous note left in Edwin's pocket."

Clara's heartbeat quickened.

"Whose?"

"Not Adrian Crowther's."

Mabel gripped the handle of her umbrella.

"Whose?"

Reeves looked at Clara.

"Edwin's."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Silence.

The six words—

**You should have left her buried.**

—had been written by Edwin himself.

Not by the murderer.

Clara felt the entire case tilt.

“He wrote it?”

“Yes.”

“Then it wasn’t a threat.”

“We don’t think so.”

“A quotation,” Mabel whispered.

Just as she had suggested.

Reeves nodded.

“We found the same phrase in Edwin’s old papers. It appears in a draft statement.”

Clara’s mouth went dry.

“Who said it originally?”

Reeves hesitated.

“Matthew Vale.”

“To whom?”

“Arthur Crowther.”

Clara stared.

After Eleanor disappeared.

Matthew had warned Arthur to stop disturbing the story they had created.

The murderer had not planted the six-word note at all.

They had simply failed to remove it.

One false assumption vanished.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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And with it, Clara saw another.

“The murderer didn’t know Edwin had that note.”

Reeves frowned.

“Possibly.”

“But they did know about the Harcourt.”

“Yes.”

“And the letters.”

“Yes.”

“And the publication date.”

Reeves’s expression changed.

“Why do you keep returning to the date?”

Clara looked past him towards the church.

The three o’clock lecture was less than an hour away.

“Because somebody told us something they could only know if they had seen the book after Edwin recovered it.”

Mabel went very still.

Clara’s thoughts raced through Adrian’s statements.

He had lied about leaving.

He admitted entering the passage.

He claimed Edwin was alive at six fifty.

That alibi protected Adrian.

But it also fixed the murder after six fifty.

What if Edwin had already been dead?

Then Adrian’s account was not merely a lie about his own movements.

It was the mechanism protecting somebody else.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Reeves,” Clara said, “what time did Adrian say he first learnt the Harcourt was published in 1901?”

The detective frowned.

“He told us Edwin explained it during their meeting at the church.”

“When?”

“Around six ten.”

Clara felt the final piece click.

“That’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because Adrian told me Edwin refused to explain what he had found. He said Edwin only told him he had proof.”

Reeves stared.

Clara continued.

“And when Adrian first visited my shop, he described the Harcourt as though he already knew which edition mattered. Later he claimed he saw it open here. His story keeps changing around the date.”

Mabel said quietly, “So Adrian killed Edwin.”

Clara shook her head.

“No.”

Reeves’s eyes sharpened.

“Then who?”

Clara looked towards St Bartholomew’s.

“Someone Adrian has been protecting.”

The church bells began to ring for the afternoon lecture.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Across the green, villagers and visitors moved towards the doors.

Adrian Crowther was due to stand before them and tell Bramblewick how history became legend.

Clara finally understood why he had lied.

Not to conceal his own crime.

To conceal the person whose reputation mattered more to him than his own.

She turned to Reeves.

“We need to get to the church.”

“Why?”

“Because the murderer’s alibi only works if Edwin was alive at ten to seven.”

“And?”

“He wasn’t.”

Clara picked up the Literary Weekend programme.

“The publication date proves it.”

Outside, the bells continued ringing.

And somewhere among the people entering St Bartholomew’s was the person who had killed Edwin Pritchard.

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### Chapter 10 — The First Edition of a Lie

St Bartholomew's had hosted christenings, weddings, funerals, harvest festivals, school concerts and at least one memorable parish meeting concerning a disputed compost heap.

Clara suspected it had never hosted the unmasking of a murderer during a lecture on local history.

Rain tapped against the stained-glass windows as nearly eighty people settled into the pews. The Literary Weekend committee had placed a lectern beneath the chancel arch, beside a vase of dahlias and a sign reading **FACT, FOLKLORE AND THE MAKING OF BRAMBLEWICK.**

Mabel sat in the front row.

Tom sat beside her.

Detective Sergeant Reeves stood discreetly near the side aisle, accompanied by two uniformed officers.

Clara remained at the back.

At precisely three o'clock, Adrian Crowther walked to the lectern.

His bruised face earned sympathetic murmurs.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "Bramblewick has always had an uneasy relationship with its own history."

Mabel turned in her seat and looked at Clara.

Clara almost laughed.

Under other circumstances, it would have been an excellent opening.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Adrian continued.

“We prefer stories in which the wicked are clearly wicked, the innocent recognisably innocent, and the truth eventually tidies itself away.”

His eyes found Clara.

Something changed in his expression.

He knew.

Perhaps not everything.

But enough.

Clara walked down the aisle.

“Adrian.”

The church fell silent.

One of the Literary Weekend organisers whispered,  
“Oh, not again.”

Adrian held the sides of the lectern.

“Clara, perhaps we could speak afterwards.”

“No.”

Reeves moved closer.

Clara stopped beside the first pew.

“You told the police Edwin explained the Harcourt’s publication date to you when you met outside the church at about ten past six.”

Adrian said nothing.

“You said he told you the book was published in 1901.”

“Yes.”

“And that the inscription dated 1897 proved Matthew Vale’s story was false.”

“That is correct.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“No,” Clara said. “It isn’t.”

A murmur moved through the church.

Adrian’s face tightened.

Clara continued.

“The first time you came into my shop after Edwin died, you told me you’d seen him outside the church carrying the Harcourt. You described it perfectly. Green cloth. Gold thistle.”

“I had seen it before.”

“Perhaps. But later you said Edwin never explained what proof he’d discovered. Then you told the police he explained the publication discrepancy during your meeting.”

“That was a misunderstanding.”

“No. It was an adjustment.”

Reeves watched Adrian carefully.

Clara felt the old bookshop catalogue in her coat pocket.

A small thing.

Four handwritten words and a date.

Enough.

“Edwin didn’t explain the publication date to you outside the church,” she said. “He couldn’t have.”

Adrian’s voice remained calm.

“Why not?”

“Because he hadn’t discovered it yet.”

For the first time, Adrian looked genuinely startled.

Clara took Malcolm Dredge’s catalogue from her pocket.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

“When Edwin came to The Crooked Bookmark on Wednesday afternoon, he knew the Harcourt mattered because of what had been hidden inside it. The letters. But the false inscription wasn’t what brought him there.”

She opened the catalogue.

“Malcolm had catalogued the Harcourt as a first edition published in 1901. Edwin only noticed the importance of that after returning to the shop.”

Mabel leaned forward.

Clara continued.

“He had spent decades believing Matthew’s story about receiving the book from Beatrice in 1897. He knew the book contained hidden papers, but he had never checked the bibliography.”

Adrian gave a small laugh.

“You cannot possibly know when Edwin noticed a printed date.”

“Yes, I can.”

Clara looked towards Elise, seated three pews back.

“Because Edwin wrote it down.”

Elise removed a photocopied page from her bag.

Reeves had found it that morning among the papers recovered from Edwin’s house.

Clara had seen it only minutes before the lecture.

Edwin’s handwriting was dated Wednesday.

**5.42 p.m. — Malcolm’s catalogue confirms Harcourt first published 1901. Matthew’s inscription is impossible. At last I understand why Arthur said the date gave us away.**

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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The church was utterly still.

Clara looked at Adrian.

“At five forty-two Edwin was still in my shop. He had only then confirmed the date.”

Adrian swallowed.

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

“It proves he could not have told you about it at ten past six outside the church.”

“Then he told me later.”

Clara nodded.

“Yes.”

Adrian’s eyes narrowed.

“That is exactly what I have always said.”

“No. You said something else.”

She took one more step towards him.

“You said Edwin was alive at quarter to seven when you entered the rare-books room.”

Adrian said nothing.

“You needed that to be true because your alibi depended on Edwin being alive after you left him.”

Mabel whispered, “Oh.”

Clara finally saw it all laid out.

Not a complicated murder.

A complicated lie afterwards.

“You met Edwin at the church around six,” she said. “He gave you the duplicate key because he trusted you. He told you he intended to make a public confession during the Literary Weekend. Not just expose Matthew

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

Vale, but admit that he had altered Eleanor Halloway's burial entry when he was sixteen."

Adrian's jaw clenched.

"He intended to destroy several families."

"No. He intended to tell the truth."

"He intended to turn frightened boys into criminals seventy years after the fact."

"Your father was one of those boys."

The words landed.

Adrian looked away.

Clara understood now.

Arthur Crowther's reputation had been the foundation beneath Adrian's entire career.

Adrian had spent decades presenting his father as the meticulous parish historian who had preserved Bramblewick's documentary past.

Edwin's confession would reveal Arthur had helped falsify it.

"You wrote books praising your father's work," Clara said. "You gave lectures about his archive. Your professional reputation was built on records he helped alter."

Adrian's voice hardened.

"My father was threatened."

"So was Edwin."

"My father tried to put things right."

"Eventually."

"You know nothing about him."

"I know you were willing to kill Edwin to protect him."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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A gasp came from somewhere behind Mrs Pomeroy.  
Adrian stared at Clara.

Then he smiled.

It was the same charming smile he had worn the first day he brought her loaf cake.

Only now Clara could see how much effort it required.

“An accusation is not evidence.”

“No.”

Reeves spoke for the first time.

“But false statements to the police are.”

Adrian’s smile faded.

Clara continued.

“You went back to the bookshop through the passage. Edwin was there with the Harcourt. He had already confirmed the 1901 publication date.”

She pictured the rare-books room.

The overturned chair.

The disturbed shelves.

“You argued.”

Adrian said nothing.

“You tried to persuade him not to confess. He refused.”

Still nothing.

“You knocked him backwards.”

Reeves had told Clara that morning what the post-mortem finally established.

Edwin had suffered a fatal head injury after striking the edge of the low reading table.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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No weapon.

No elaborate plan.

One angry shove.

One terrible fall.

A cosy mystery's violence reduced to its ugly essence: a moment somebody wished they could take back.

"You didn't intend to kill him," Clara said.

Adrian's face twitched.

There.

The smallest confirmation.

"But once he fell, you chose to protect yourself rather than help him."

Adrian whispered, "He was dead."

"You checked?"

Silence.

Reeves's face hardened.

"You removed the letters from the Harcourt," Clara said. "You rearranged the shelf trying to make it look as though someone had searched the room. You left through the passage."

"And the book?" Adrian asked quietly.

"You took it."

"Then why return it?"

"Because the police knew it existed. Keeping it was more dangerous than putting it somewhere it might be sold anonymously among hundreds of donated books."

Clara glanced towards Mabel.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“You labelled the charity box as Edwin’s estate donation.”

Adrian’s shoulders seemed to sag.

“The attack in the archive?” Reeves asked.

Adrian closed his eyes.

Clara answered.

“There was no attacker.”

Tom let out a low breath.

Adrian looked at her.

“You cannot prove that.”

Reeves said, “We probably can.”

He removed a small clear evidence bag from his coat.

Inside was a fragment of plaster.

“The marks on the archive shelving and the bruising on your shoulder are consistent with you throwing yourself against it. And there was no unidentified trace evidence where you claimed someone struck you.”

Mabel murmured, “Incompetent, then.”

Clara almost smiled.

Adrian’s gaze moved towards the church door.

One of the constables quietly blocked it.

“You staged the attack because suspicion was turning towards you,” Clara said. “Then you telephoned me, admitted enough lies to make the rest seem truthful, and invented an unknown visitor Edwin was supposedly expecting.”

Adrian’s composure finally cracked.

“You don’t understand what Edwin was going to do.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“He was going to confess.”

“He was going to destroy my father.”

“Your father is dead.”

“Reputation survives.”

“So does truth.”

Adrian gripped the lectern.

“My father lived with what Matthew Vale forced him to do. He spent the rest of his life preserving this village. Every record, every map, every family paper—”

“And every lie?”

Adrian flinched.

Clara’s voice softened.

“Arthur’s letter proves he regretted it. Edwin’s confession would have proved the same.”

“That isn’t how people would have remembered him.”

“Perhaps you should have trusted them to decide.”

For several seconds, the only sound was rain.

Then Adrian looked down.

“When Edwin said he would read the confession here today, I told him he was a sanctimonious old coward.”

Elise closed her eyes.

Adrian’s voice became quieter.

“He said that was exactly what he had been.”

Nobody moved.

“He said he had spent sixty-eight years choosing fear and was tired of it.”

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara felt a sudden ache for the difficult, secretive old man she had known only briefly.

“What happened then?” Reeves asked.

Adrian stared at the lectern.

“I grabbed his arm.”

“And?”

“He pulled away.”

A pause.

“I pushed him.”

Elise made a small sound.

Adrian did not look at her.

“He fell against the table.”

“Did you call for help?” Reeves asked.

Adrian closed his eyes.

“No.”

The confession seemed to drain the room of air.

Reeves approached him.

“Adrian Crowther, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Edwin Pritchard.”

As the caution continued, Adrian offered no resistance.

The Literary Weekend audience watched him leave through the church doors between two officers.

Mabel waited until they were gone.

“Well,” she said.

Someone behind them laughed nervously.

Then everyone began talking at once.

**The Truth Beneath the Story**

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

The remaining pieces came together over the following days.

The letters removed from the Harcourt were found in Adrian's house, concealed behind a false back in a filing cabinet.

They confirmed that Beatrice Vale had never transferred Vale House to Matthew.

She had confronted him in June 1958 after discovering he had forged preliminary documents.

Eleanor Halloway had helped Beatrice hide evidence.

Matthew retaliated by manufacturing a story that Beatrice had gone abroad and by pressuring Edwin and Arthur Crowther into altering records.

But Beatrice had not been murdered.

That was the final surprise.

She had escaped Bramblewick with Agnes Cattermole's sister Margaret, using money Eleanor secretly provided.

The two women eventually settled in Scotland.

Beatrice died there in 1974.

Eleanor, meanwhile, had deliberately allowed a false report of her own death to stand so Matthew would stop searching for her. She left Bramblewick soon afterwards and lived under her married name in Northumberland.

The grave bearing Eleanor Halloway's name was empty.

Matthew's phrase—

**You should have left her buried**

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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—had referred not to a body, but to the false record.

A dead woman on paper was safer for him than a living witness.

Sebastian Vale surrendered the relevant estate papers to solicitors and announced that ownership of several properties would require formal review.

Cressida March abandoned the phrase “literary hotel” after Mabel threatened to organise a petition.

Gerald Pike returned the parish documents he had removed.

Agnes donated the complete 1958 photograph to the Historical Society.

And Adrian Crowther’s lecture was replaced on the final afternoon by an unscheduled talk from Clara entitled **Never Trust an Inscription Without Checking the Title Page.**

Mabel insisted the title was too long.

The audience disagreed.

A week later, The Crooked Bookmark was quiet again.

Rain had given way to golden autumn sunshine.

Tom brought coffee.

Mabel brought unsolicited advice.

Monty brought in half a twig and deposited it proudly beside travel writing.

Clara stood behind the counter and looked around her shop.

Three months earlier she had come to Bramblewick believing she was beginning a smaller life.

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## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

She had been wrong.

It was simply a different one.

The bell above the door jingled.

A delivery driver entered carrying a battered cardboard box.

“Books for Bellamy?”

“That’s me.”

He set it on the counter.

“No sender.”

Clara frowned.

“Who arranged the delivery?”

“Couldn’t tell you. Came through the depot.”

Mabel immediately appeared from behind biography.

“Open it.”

“You have remarkable hearing.”

“I heard cardboard.”

Clara cut the tape.

Inside were old books.

Mostly ordinary.

Gardening.

Poetry.

Two detective novels.

A 1930s cookbook.

At the bottom lay a small leather-bound journal.

No title.

Clara lifted it carefully.

Something slipped from between its pages.

A black-and-white photograph.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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It showed The Crooked Bookmark many decades earlier.

Three people stood outside.

Clara recognised none of them.

But on the shop window, painted in old-fashioned lettering, was a name she had never seen before:

**HALLOWAY & BELL — BOOKSELLERS**

Mabel stopped breathing.

Clara turned the photograph over.

In faded pencil were seven words.

**Eleanor knew what was beneath the floor.**

Below them was a date.

**14 October 1959.**

Monty suddenly began scratching at the floorboards beneath the counter.

Clara stared down at him.

Mabel stared at Clara.

“Oh, no,” Clara said.

Monty scratched again.

Mabel smiled.

“Oh, yes.”

# The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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## Epilogue — One More Chapter

Three weeks after Edwin Pritchard's funeral, Bramblewick returned to normal.

This was not the same as becoming quiet.

Mrs Pomeroy had developed strong opinions about the new recycling timetable. Gerald Pike had begun a campaign to replace two hymn books nobody else had noticed were missing. The Literary Weekend committee had already scheduled a meeting to discuss whether next year's programme should contain fewer murders.

Mabel considered this unreasonable.

"Murders sell tickets," she said.

Clara looked up from the box of books she was pricing.

"You do realise a man actually died?"

"Of course. I'm talking about fictional ones."

"You weren't."

"I might have been."

It was a bright October morning, cold enough for the windows of The Crooked Bookmark to mist around the edges.

Outside, Bramblewick glowed beneath autumn sunshine. Leaves had gathered along the lane in copper heaps, the church tower rose against a pale blue sky, and Tom was standing outside his café attempting to persuade Monty that a sausage roll was not part of his employment contract.

Monty remained unconvinced.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara smiled.

The shop was doing rather better than before Edwin's death, which produced mixed feelings she had decided not to examine too closely.

Visitors came because they had heard about the murder.

Some bought books.

Some asked inappropriate questions.

One woman from Bath had stood in the rare-books room for nearly ten minutes before asking Clara whether she could "feel anything".

"Cold," Clara had replied.

The woman had been delighted.

The hidden passage had been properly secured.

Detective Sergeant Reeves had insisted on it.

Tom had installed two new bolts, a reinforced latch and something he called a security plate.

Mabel had suggested a trapdoor.

Reeves had suggested Mabel stop suggesting things.

Relations between them remained cordial.

Mostly.

The bell above the door rang.

Tom entered carrying three mugs.

"One coffee, two teas."

Mabel inspected hers.

"Proper tea?"

"I value my windows."

Tom handed Clara her coffee.

"How's business?"

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“Good.”

“That sounded disappointed.”

“I’m British. Enthusiasm requires planning.”

Tom smiled.

For a moment, Clara became oddly aware of how comfortable the three of them looked in the shop.

Mabel in the old armchair beside local history.

Tom leaning against the counter.

Monty returned from outside with what appeared to be half a leaf attached to his beard.

Three months earlier, Clara had known none of them.

Three months earlier, she had thought beginning again meant leaving things behind.

Now she was beginning to think it meant allowing unexpected things in.

The thought was both comforting and alarming.

Mabel put down her tea.

“Sebastian came into the café yesterday.”

Tom nodded.

“He did.”

Clara looked between them.

“And?”

“And nothing,” Tom said.

Mabel said, “He has sold the Bentley.”

“That seems dramatic.”

“Apparently lawyers are still sorting out the Vale properties.”

Clara felt little satisfaction in that.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Sebastian had inherited the consequences of choices made decades before he was born. He had protected them longer than he should have, certainly, but Clara had stopped believing inheritance was limited to money and houses.

Families inherited silences too.

Sometimes those proved considerably more expensive.

“And Elise?” Clara asked.

“Still clearing Edwin’s house,” Tom said. “She’s keeping some of his papers.”

“Good.”

“She said she may give the rest to the archive once everything’s catalogued.”

Mabel sniffed.

“Assuming Gerald doesn’t rearrange them according to ecclesiastical significance.”

The shop bell rang again.

This time, Detective Sergeant Reeves entered.

Mabel looked at Clara.

“You haven’t found another body?”

“No.”

Reeves removed his coat.

“I heard that.”

“You were meant to.”

Clara smiled.

“What brings you here?”

“Book.”

Mabel stared.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“A genuine customer?”

Reeves ignored her and approached the counter.

“I need something for my sister.”

“What does she read?”

“Crime.”

Mabel made a small triumphant noise.

Reeves looked at her.

“Fictional crime.”

“I assumed.”

Clara moved towards the shelves.

“Traditional? Psychological? Police procedural?”

“Something without too much blood.”

Mabel said, “A cosy mystery.”

Reeves looked suspicious.

“What is cosy about murder?”

“Tea afterwards.”

Clara laughed.

She chose a book from the shelf and handed it to him.

Reeves read the back.

“Amateur detective?”

“Yes.”

He looked at Clara.

“No.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking it.”

“I was thinking £8.50.”

He paid.

Before leaving, Reeves paused beside the counter.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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His gaze dropped.

The old photograph from the anonymous box lay inside a clear protective sleeve.

### **HALLOWAY & BELL — BOOKSELLERS**

He had already examined it.

The police had found no useful fingerprints and no indication of who had sent the box.

Reeves nodded towards it.

“Still no more deliveries?”

“No.”

“And you haven’t pulled up the floor?”

Clara gave him her most innocent expression.

Mabel looked suddenly fascinated by the ceiling.

Reeves sighed.

“That expression is not reassuring.”

“I haven’t pulled up anything.”

“Good.”

He pointed towards Monty.

“Keep him away from it too.”

Monty wagged his tail.

Reeves left.

The door closed.

Silence lasted approximately four seconds.

Mabel said, “He didn’t say Tom couldn’t pull it up.”

Tom nearly dropped his coffee.

“I am not pulling up Clara’s floor.”

“Not today.”

“Not ever.”

Clara picked up the photograph.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

She had studied it dozens of times.

The old shopfront.

Three indistinct figures.

The painted words:

**HALLOWAY & BELL — BOOKSELLERS**

And on the reverse:

**Eleanor knew what was beneath the floor.**

The date still bothered her.

**14 October 1959.**

More than a year after Eleanor supposedly disappeared from Bramblewick.

A year after Matthew Vale's elaborate deception had begun to settle into accepted fact.

Mabel leaned closer.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Thinking."

"I do apologise."

"You get a particular crease between your eyebrows."

"I have several."

"This one means trouble."

Clara returned the photograph to its sleeve.

"I'm not investigating."

"Of course not."

"There isn't even a crime."

"That we know of."

Tom groaned.

"No."

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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Clara smiled.

“For once, I agree with Tom.”

She carried the photograph to the desk and placed it inside a drawer.

Then she closed it.

Firmly.

The mystery could remain there.

For now.

She had books to price.

Invoices to pay.

A leaking gutter to discuss with Tom.

And Mabel had somehow volunteered The Crooked Bookmark to host the village reading group despite Clara having specifically said no.

Life, Clara was discovering, generated sufficient complications without encouragement.

She reached for the next book in the box.

Beneath the counter came a faint scratching sound.

Everyone stopped.

Monty was lying beside Tom.

Nowhere near the floorboards.

Clara slowly looked down.

Another scratch.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just the dry scrape of something shifting beneath old timber.

Mabel’s eyes brightened.

Tom closed his eyes.

## The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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“No,” he said.

Clara stared at the floor.

A narrow gap had appeared between two boards.

Something pale showed beneath it.

Paper.

Very old paper.

Clara looked at Mabel.

Mabel looked at Clara.

Neither spoke.

Then Clara reached for her tea.

It had gone cold.

She sighed.

“Well,” she said, “we’d better put the kettle on.”

# The Murder at Bramblewick Bookshop

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