The Book That Would Not Lie Flat

A Lost Bookmark Mystery

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This is a work of fiction. The characters and events are fictional.

Production note

The text was generated with OpenAI tools. Drafting, editing and production were carried out with AI under the publisher’s direction.

The Book That Would Not Lie Flat

The man in the photograph wore a sun hat wide enough to shelter a small table. On his left stood a row of runner beans. On his right, somebody's hand held up a teacup, apparently in protest.

Ruth turned the photograph over. Colin, June 1989. Behind the writing was a faint round stain.

'I'd be protesting too,' Kit said. 'He'll have put everything in the shade.'

The photograph had come out of a cake book Freda Sutton had donated that morning. It was a book in which every useful page had been enlarged by butter. Ruth put the photograph in an envelope and laid it beside the tray of seedlings waiting for collection.

'Are those definitely marigolds?' she asked.

'The label says so.'

'I'm asking about the things growing beside it.'

'Freda says they'll be easier to identify in June.'

Mallow had made several attempts to identify them by sitting on them. Kit had moved the tray to the top of the filing cabinet, where he could only look offended. His basket remained empty. He had chosen a cardboard box which was too small for him and was sleeping with his head over one edge.

Ruth checked his water and picked up the tray.

'I'll be back before lunch.'

'Bring something with cheese in it.'

'We have bread and cheese here.'

'I meant for me.'

The garden club's seed exchange occupied the meeting room behind Edie's cafe. People called it a seed exchange

even though the seedlings, cakes, raffle and opinions had long since taken over. Ruth could hear a disagreement about slugs before she reached the back door.

Freda stood beside a table of donated prizes, trying to undo the knot in a length of bunting. She had the envelope Ruth recognised from the book donation tucked beneath her elbow.

'You found something,' she said when she saw Ruth's small envelope.

'Your brother, I think.'

Freda took out the photograph. For a moment she forgot the bunting.

'That hat. It came from a jumble sale. He wouldn't let anyone alter the brim.'

'It looks very effective.'

'It was. He knocked a whole tray of cuttings off a shelf with it.'

She held the photograph a little farther away.

'That's my hand. I'd brought his tea and he said he couldn't stop until he'd finished the row. So I stayed there holding it until he did.'

'Was it a long row?'

'He was very slow at the end.'

She smiled and put the picture carefully into her handbag.

'I'm glad it turned up. I didn't mean that to go with the books.'

On the prize table lay another book, much larger than the cake book: Growing in Small Gardens. Its green jacket showed a brick path between high summer borders. Freda opened it to the title page.

For Colin, in spite of the hat. Keep growing. Judith Parnell.

'He went to hear her speak at the county show,' she said. 'I thought somebody else might like to have it.'

Ruth looked at the pencilled number beside it. Raffle prize six.

‘It’s a generous donation.’

‘He’d tell me not to be silly about a book.’

Freda ran her finger along the edge of the page. She did not close it.

A broad strip of pale cloth had been pasted across the front hinge. When she took her hand away, the board lifted. Ruth put a small ceramic pear on its corner.

‘Colin repaired that himself,’ Freda said. ‘Always too much glue. He could make anything last, as long as you didn’t expect it to move afterwards.’

‘We can put it in my cradle,’ said a woman behind them.

Tessa Ling was unpacking her pottery. Her stall occupied half the next table; the other half was reserved for plants which needed more persuasive labels. She held up a curved blue book support, then set it down to show how it worked.

‘Not a donation,’ she added quickly. ‘A loan. Unless anyone wants to buy it.’

Freda thanked her. Ruth lifted the pear and guided the book into the cradle. It stayed open, though one side of the jacket slid a little away from the cream endpaper.

‘You could leave it on the inscription,’ Ruth said.

‘Until Hector comes. He wanted to photograph the front for the listing. He says it might be worth rather more than we thought.’

Hector Dean arrived before Ruth had finished putting the marigolds on their table. He sold books at the monthly market, with a cloth over his trestle and a portable shelf for anything he called specialist. Ruth bought from him occasionally. He had an excellent memory for prices she had paid and a poorer one for prices he had promised.

He carried a flat cloth bag and wore his reading glasses on a cord. His coat was folded over one arm, although the morning was warm.

‘I’ve brought a couple of copies for comparison,’ he told Freda. ‘Same edition, different condition. It’s the inscription we need to value, rather than the jacket.’

He took a green book from his bag and put it beside the cradle. Its jacket was worn along the bottom edge. Ruth could see the two pale lines where somebody had tried to mend it with old transparent tape.

‘Mine’s only reading stock,’ he said. ‘Twenty pounds would be a generous estimate for yours. Personal inscriptions can put people off.’

Freda’s face changed.

‘You said rather more.’

‘Before seeing it. You wouldn’t want me to mislead anyone.’

He adjusted the ceramic cradle until it stood square with the edge of the table. Ruth moved the pear out of his photograph.

‘I’ll send the pictures to you, Ruth. Freda says you’re helping put the notice up.’

‘Just the notice,’ Ruth said. ‘I haven’t agreed to identify the seedlings.’

Hector photographed the open title page. Then he closed the book, lifted it out of the cradle and turned it towards the light from the window.

‘I’ll do a better one of the jacket over here. Too much reflection.’

Ruth stepped aside to let Martin Dace pass with a trolley of folding chairs. One wheel caught on the door strip. She held the door while he lifted it free.

‘If you put any more tables in here,’ he said, ‘you’ll have to let people in through the roof.’

‘We’re trying to sell them plants, Martin. They’ll need to reach the door afterwards.’

‘I’ve brought the narrow chairs. That’s my contribution.’

When Ruth turned back, Hector had put the closed book on the table beside its empty cradle. His own copy had gone into his bag. His telephone chimed as he sent the two photographs.

Ruth looked at them on her screen. The inscription was legible. In the second image, Hector held the green jacket tilted towards the window, one finger keeping the front board slightly open. A blue corner showed beneath the flap. Ruth put up the room’s event notice using the jacket photograph, then set her telephone on the shelf beside the raffle tickets.

‘Could I have a small cake box, Edie?’ Hector called. ‘I promised to take that plate back for you. It’ll slide about in the bag.’

‘It’ll slide about in a box too.’

‘Not if it’s the right size.’

Edie came through with an empty shallow white box. She put it on the end of the prize table.

‘There. I’ll fetch the plate when I’ve finished serving. It’s in the cupboard.’

‘I can wait.’

He folded the lid back along its crease. Ruth saw him set the box on the chair behind his coat.

A drop of water landed on Martin’s sleeve.

He looked up at the window. Someone had watered the geraniums on the sill until the saucer overflowed.

‘Not again.’

He fetched a cloth, shifted the prize book to the dry end of the table and pushed a plastic basin beneath the drips. Tessa moved her pots to make room. Freda crossed out the

old position on the plan she was giving the volunteers and wrote PRIZES BY DOOR in large letters.

For the next half-hour the room filled with the sort of people who came for one plant and went home carrying trays. Ruth sold marigolds, accepted a jar full of buttons in mistake for raffle money, and helped a man who wanted to know whether his wife had already bought a cucumber. He did not want to buy a second one. He had lost sight of her behind the hanging baskets.

At eleven, Freda came to the seedling table.

'Would it look very bad,' she asked, 'if I put something else in place of the book?'

Ruth waited.

'I've been thinking about the photograph. I know it's silly. I still have his tools and half his garden. There's no shortage of things.'

'The draw hasn't happened.'

'People have bought tickets.'

'Then ask Edie what you can substitute. It's your club.'

Freda looked towards the prize table, where a visitor was choosing which paper square to put her name on.

'Perhaps I'd better leave it.'

She went back before Ruth could say more.

A few minutes later Tessa brought the book across, holding it open with both hands.

'Have I got the wrong one?'

The title page was blank beneath the author's printed name.

Ruth took it. The inscription was gone. So was the stiff cloth repair. The endpapers were blue.

'That isn't Freda's book.'

'I know. She asked me to put it in the cradle again. She wanted the writing to show. I didn't tear anything.'

There was no missing leaf or fresh cut. Ruth turned the board back and looked at the hinge. Sound paper. A neat little bookseller's label at the foot of the blue endpaper.

Freda joined them, followed by Martin, whose wet sleeve had become a wet cardigan cuff.

'It's Hector's copy,' she said. 'Where's mine?'

Hector was at the far end of the room speaking to a visitor. He came over when she called.

'I put yours back,' he said. 'Are you sure it hasn't been moved again?'

'I moved it,' Martin said. 'Away from the water.'

'Could there have been a muddle then?'

'I moved one book. I didn't bring a spare.'

Hector took off his glasses.

'I'm sure this is perfectly ordinary. My copy was next to it. Somebody's picked up the wrong one. I'll look in my bag.'

He put the bag on the table and took out a green book. The two pale tape marks ran along the jacket's lower edge. He opened it to a clean title page.

'Here. Mine.'

Ruth looked from that copy to the other. The jacket she held had none of the tape marks. Its spine was worn near the top, just as Freda's had been.

Two ordinary copies, one with the jacket from the signed book.

Tessa put a hand on the cradle to stop it rocking.

'I've had people all round the stall. I didn't watch it every minute.'

'Nor did I,' Martin said. 'But it wasn't going into a damp patch with me standing here.'

Freda's shoulders had drawn up. Her eyes moved between the two books.

'The first one was definitely mine. Ruth saw it.'

‘Yes,’ Ruth said.

‘I haven’t taken it back.’

‘Nobody said you had.’

‘I was going to ask. I know how that sounds.’

Edie arrived with a plate wrapped in a tea towel. She stopped when she saw the books and put the plate down.

Ruth returned the substitute to the table. People were still passing coins over the plant stall behind them. A little girl was trying to persuade her grandfather that a single tomato plant would feel lonely. Ruth wished the room were quieter. She could not ask it to become empty for them.

‘Could we delay the draw?’ she said.

Edie nodded. ‘I’ll take over your table.’

‘And if somebody could cover Tessa’s?’

‘I’ll ask.’

Martin brought two chairs. He put them beside Freda and Tessa without deciding which woman needed to sit down. Neither did.

Ruth fetched her telephone from the shelf. The first photograph showed the inscription exactly as she had seen it. The pale repair strip was visible at the bottom of the hinge.

The second showed the jacket held up to the window. Beneath Hector’s finger was the corner of a blue endpaper.

She enlarged it.

There was the tiny cream bookseller’s label, too. She had thought that corner was shadow when she put the notice up.

‘You sent me these before Martin moved the book,’ she said.

Hector looked at the screen.

‘What of it?’

‘The second picture has this copy inside Freda’s jacket.’

‘You can’t tell that from a photograph.’

She laid the substitute open beside the first image. Blue paper, little cream label, sound hinge.

‘Could you close the repaired one without that cloth strip showing?’ Tessa asked.

‘You might hide the strip. You couldn’t turn the endpaper blue.’

Freda took Ruth’s telephone. She looked at both images in turn, moving between them with a slow deliberate finger.

‘You took those,’ she said to Hector. ‘You closed my book. Then you took this.’

‘All sorts of things happened while Ruth was at the door.’

‘That was when you were photographing it,’ Ruth said. ‘You sent them before anybody else moved it.’

It was not a photograph of a theft. She could not tell Freda that it was. But the change was already there, before the leaking geranium and Tessa’s efforts with the cradle, before Freda had begun to ask about taking the donation back.

Hector put his own copy into his bag.

‘I’m not going to stand here while everyone decides I’ve stolen something. I’ve tried to help.’

‘Where is the cake box?’ Edie asked.

‘By my coat.’

‘I’ll have it. You haven’t got the plate yet.’

He looked towards the chair.

Ruth did too. The white box had been closed. Its lid sat slightly proud along one side.

Edie held out the wrapped plate.

‘No need to carry an empty box.’

Hector fetched it. Instead of giving it to her, he put it on the table and pressed the lid down with his palm.

‘There’s nothing in it. I only closed it so somebody wouldn’t put rubbish in.’

‘Then let me put the plate in,’ Edie said.

He lifted the lid a few inches, as though she might slide the bundle beneath it. The tea towel caught on the edge. Edie lifted it clear, and the lid came up with it.

Inside was a gardening book without a jacket.

Ruth saw the pale cloth at the front hinge. The stiff board lay crooked against the edge of the box.

For several seconds no one reached for it.

'I'm taking care of that,' Hector said.

'For whom?' Freda asked.

'It was going to be left beside a leaking window. You heard me say it needed valuing.'

'Twenty pounds,' she said.

'That was an initial assessment.'

'You put another book inside its jacket.'

He looked towards the door. People moved to let a woman through with a tray of beans, then closed the gap again.

Freda took the book from the box and opened it. Colin's inscription filled the space beneath the title. She checked the front hinge, then a small pencil mark near the back.

'That's mine.'

She sat in one of Martin's chairs. Her hand remained over the inscription.

Ruth asked Hector to stay while Edie contacted the police. He said there had been a misunderstanding. She told him she would describe what she had seen and give them the photographs. She would not decide the rest over a prize table.

He remained beside his bag. Edie took the plate away.

The club moved the raffle into the cafe while they waited for the officer who would take their accounts. Nobody announced a thief's name over the little speaker they used for the draw. The first prize, a hamper which had become

steadily heavier all morning, went to the man with the cucumber problem. His wife made him carry it.

Freda stayed in the meeting room. Ruth brought her a glass of water and sat beside her.

'I'd have given him a book if he'd asked,' Freda said. 'Not this one. But there are plenty I could have given him.'

Ruth could think of nothing that would make that observation less sad.

'I don't want to put it back in the draw.'

'Then don't.'

'I'll bring the good secateurs on Monday. The boxed pair. Nobody needs three pairs of good secateurs.'

'Ask the club first.'

'I'm asking the club.' She looked across at Edie. 'Will those do?'

'Yes. I'll put a note on the prize list. We've got the other gardening set for today.'

Freda closed the book. The front board rose a little beneath her hand.

'There. Still won't do what it's told.'

Ruth fetched Tessa's ceramic pear and put it on the cover.

'Would you like to buy that?' Tessa asked. 'It seems to have found employment.'

Freda laughed once, unexpectedly, and asked the price.

By the time Ruth returned to the shop, Kit had sold three dictionaries and found a missing glove inside the gardening section. The marigold tray was empty, except for two seedlings whose identity had remained too uncertain for a sale.

'No cheese?' Kit asked.

Ruth put a paper bag on the counter.

'One cheese scone. Edie says the other is for me.'

'Was there a dispute?'

'Not about the scones.'

Mallow woke in his inadequate box and stretched until one paw pushed through the handhold. Kit freed it without disturbing the box. He went to his water bowl and drank as if nobody had ever thought to provide him with anything.

Ruth took the empty photograph envelope from her bag. On its front she had written Freda's name and the date. She put it in the recycling.

'Was she pleased to get the picture back?' Kit asked.

'Yes.'

'That's good.'

'It was a very large hat.'

Kit divided the scones, keeping their crumbs on the bag. Ruth sat down at the window table and accepted the half she was given.

A Note from Eleanor Harbury

Thank you for visiting Wrenmouth for this shorter mystery. I hope you enjoyed spending an afternoon with Ruth, Kit, Edie and Mallow.

Ruth’s first full-length case is The Alibi in the Atlas, book one of The Lost Bookmark Mysteries. It begins with a hotel receipt tucked inside a donated atlas, and a room Ruth knows never existed.

About the Author

Eleanor Harbury is the pen name behind The Lost Bookmark Mysteries, a series of seaside whodunits featuring forgotten keepsakes, stubborn friendships, and a bookseller with a talent for noticing what everyone else overlooks.