

Seven Years

Bibliomysteries

by Peter Robinson, 1950–

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It is one of the greatest pleasures of my retirement to set out early on a fine morning for some ancient town or city renowned for the quantity and quality of its second-hand bookshops.

Much of my enjoyment, I will admit, lies in the anticipation of what I might discover on the overflowing shelves of cramped anterooms and attics. I take my time getting to my destination, enjoying the countryside as I drive along. I also combine my book-buying expeditions with a visit to a nearby cathedral, country churchyard, or place of historic interest, and I round off my excursion with a late lunch at a local inn, where I thumb through my day's purchases and enjoy a pint or two of ale with my meal.

Though my tastes are catholic, there are certain subjects I seek out in particular: poetry, literary criticism, and biography being prime among them. I have always been of a literary bent, and in my working life I was an academic, a Professor of Classics at Cambridge, no less. I was good enough at my job, with well-respected translations of Catullus and Ovid to my name, as well as a brief introduction to Latin verse which I am pleased to say has been adopted as a first-year university recommended text. These days, however, I prefer to spend less time poring over dead languages than I do enjoying the writers of my native tongue. Having aspired to poetry once in the long ago days of my youth, I especially enjoy reading verse and accounts of the lives of the great poets.

Naturally, with second-hand books one has to keep an eye out for damage of a physical nature and for other people's scribblings. Underlining of text I detest, especially when it is done in ink, but though I also disdain marginalia in general, there have been occasions when I have chosen a specific copy of a book simply because of the interesting observations of a previous reader. One can feel an astonishing degree of kinship with such anonymous scribblers, whether one agrees or disagrees with them.

One fine English autumn morning, I had been wandering the streets of Beverley, a town hitherto unknown to me, on the eastern fringes of my allotted region. I had been delighted with the magnificent Gothic minster, golden in the late morning sunlight, and it was time to seek for books. I have learned over time that one will usually find the most interesting bookshops in rambling Dickensian structures hidden away in the mazes of narrow crooked alleys behind market squares and main shopping streets, so that was where I headed first.

After a delightful hour or two of exploration, I found myself carrying my weighty book bag into a pub, whose chalked blackboard promised first class food and well-kept cask ales. I bought a pint of Timothy Taylor Golden Best and ordered a plate of gammon, chips and peas and settled contentedly at a wobbly corner table in the small lounge. Rays of sunlight filtered through the windows and caught the motes of dust in their stately dance, the way that the film projectors once did with cigarette smoke in the cinema, and I was thankful that the pub was almost empty and the landlord had foregone the cacophonous allure of slot machines and piped music. As I sipped my ale and savored its bitter taste, I felt that all was well with the world, and I reached for my bag of books.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I found that the selection of Robert Browning's poetry I had been so thrilled to find had been defaced on the flyleaf. I am usually careful enough to flip through a book before I buy it, but in this instance the pages had stuck together and that prevented me from noticing the inscription on my cursory examination in the shop. As far as I had been able to tell, the book was in mint condition; there were no signs of wear, no price-clipping or creases on the

spine, and certainly no tell-tale coffee rings on the cover. In fact, it looked as if it had never been read.

Curious, I sipped some more ale and held open the flyleaf so that I might read the offending scribble:

“Miss Scott,

You know you want to read Browning’s poetry. *My Last Duchess* and *Porphyria’s Lover* in particular. *The Ring and the Book*, too, perhaps, though that one is rather long and much abbreviated here. No poet quite captures adultery, betrayal, madness and the act of murder the way Browning does. Try this:

‘...I found

A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.’

(*Porphyria’s Lover*)

Then she is *his* forever. Don’t you just *love* that? Doesn’t it sound like fun? I know that I would enjoy it. And don’t forget our little bargain. The time is fast approaching!

Happy Reading, Miss Scott!

Barnes”

This highly unusual inscription sent a chill through me, despite the warmth of the day. I felt as if someone had just walked over my grave, as my mother used to say. When the serving girl brought my food and knelt to push a wad of folded beer mat under the table leg to correct the wobble, I pushed the book aside and tucked in, having hardly realized in the morning’s excitement just how hungry I was.

But as I ate, I couldn’t help but mull over what I had just read.

I realize that at this point you may well be wondering whether I am overreacting to what is, after all, merely a damaged second-hand book. After all, I could always return it to the shop for a refund, or perhaps attempt to slice out the ravaged page with a razor blade at home. I hadn’t read Browning in a long time and was looking forward to reacquainting myself with his work, but I certainly didn’t think I could enjoy reading this particular copy. It had been defiled. There was something about the tone of the inscription that disturbed me deeply. What sort of person, I wondered, would write something like that in a gift? In a volume of poetry? There seemed a definite aura of taunting cruelty about the words, a certain delight in causing another unease and discomfort. If “Miss Scott” had seen this, no wonder she had dispatched the book to a second-hand shop immediately.

“*Porphyria’s Lover*” had always disturbed me. I remember the frisson of forbidden delights I experienced when I first came across it in the sixth form. Could one really say this sort of thing in poetry? In that same burnished, heightened language of Shakespeare, Shelley and Keats? My pleasure was akin to the thrill of discovering Lord Rochester’s sexually explicit verse a few years later, in my student days.

There is something about the matter-of-fact nature of Browning's use of language in "Porphyria's Lover," the contrast between its serene tone and the violent deed itself, the sensuality of the hair and "her little throat." One can easily imagine the murderer sitting there, content with his handiwork, his arm around the beautiful, unfaithful lover he has just strangled, smiling, happy, convinced that he now has possession of her forever.

Perhaps the whole thing was intended as a sick joke, I told myself, but I couldn't stop wondering who these people were, and why this Barnes fellow had written those words. Whatever had Miss Scott done to him to bring about such a deliberate desire to cause her discomfort? And how long ago had this occurred? The book could have been sitting on the shelf for years, as many volumes of poetry often do in second-hand bookshops. In the meantime, what had become of Miss Scott and Barnes? Was there a murder to be investigated?

And who had sold the book to the dealer? Miss Scott, herself? Had she even seen the inscription? It was possible that she hadn't if the pages had been stuck in the same way they were when I flipped through the book. In which case, what had happened next? Had Barnes followed through with his veiled threat? What exactly was "the time fast approaching" for? What was their "bargain?" Was this inscription a sort of warning, or the first salvo in a campaign of terror, something to frighten her, the sort of thing one hears young people do to one another on the Internet these days? And if she had not seen it, had not got the warning, what had become of her?

One of my first thoughts, deduced mostly from the formal address and writer's use of his surname, was that it had been a teacher-pupil relationship, and that the boy was trying to get revenge for the misery he felt his English teacher had inflicted upon him. Perhaps she had forced *The Mayor of Casterbridge* or *Jude the Obscure* on him at too early an age? But what schoolboy buys his teacher a volume of poetry? An apple is one thing, but a book quite another. Was the relationship something more? One of those teacher-pupil affairs one reads about with alarming frequency these days? Had Miss Scott sexually abused Barnes?

Or was Barnes a university student? I remembered my own teaching days, not so far behind me, and I quickly realized that most of those who had passed through my doors had been more than capable of pulling such a prank, if prank it was, though I had never come across a university student who had referred to his professor as "Miss." Was I seriously misjudging the whole business, reading more into it than there was?

I thought I possibly was, so I sipped some more ale, put the book aside and delved deeper into the contents of the rest of the bag. Soon I was on my second pint of Timothy Taylor and enjoying Victoria Glendenning's introduction to her inscription-free biography of Anthony Trollope, the mysterious Barnes and Miss Scott, if not quite forgotten, then at least relegated to a dim antechamber at the back of my mind.

I awoke the following morning from a troubled sleep, the Browning still weighing heavy on my mind. Though I could remember only scraps, I suspected the dreams that had woken me so often during the night were connected with the book's mysterious inscription.

As the days went by, Miss Scott and Barnes crept their way back to the forefront of my thoughts. I found myself, in idle moments, attempting to construct mental pictures of what they looked and sounded like. Miss Scott I saw not as a Miss Jean Brodie type, but more as a Hitchcock blonde with her hair piled high. Tippi Hedren in *The Birds* or Kim Novak in *Vertigo*, without the Hollywood glamour. In my imagination, Miss Scott has the deportment of someone who attended a Swiss finishing school and spent many hours walking the corridors with a volume of Proust balanced on her head. Her voice is low, a husky contralto, and her accent educated, with the broad Yorkshire vowels well hidden behind hours of enunciation lessons. She is private, secretive, even, with a rare but heart-melting smile, and her pale, flawless skin blushes often. Her eyes are dark blue and hard to read. She gains easy control of the classes she teaches, but she does so through the calm strength of her personality and through her elegance and poise, rather than by means of authority and status. It is not that the students are afraid of her; they just don't want to upset or disappoint her. She favors cream tailored jacket and skirt outfits over blue silk blouses, and all her skirts end modestly below her knees, offering just a tantalizing glimpse of her shapely legs.

As for Barnes, he doesn't come through quite so clearly. There's a mischievous look about him, as if he has just got away with something, a naughty boy constantly on the verge of a smirk. His hair is dark, parted on the left, though one restless comma is always slipping over his right eye. He wears a nondescript school uniform, navy blazer, grey trousers, striped tie, black shoes, nicely shined. He's not outwardly scruffy, but he is a boy, after all, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, a sixth former, at any rate, and his pockets are full of a jumble of bits of string, rubber bands, a penknife, loose coins, maybe even a French letter or two, just in case, chewing gum, a packet of cough drops, a crumpled handkerchief and a couple of Bic ballpoints. He keeps a small writing pad in his inside pocket to jot down passing thoughts, mostly unpleasant ones, like the inscription on the book.

That was what I came up with when I let my early-morning imagination run away with me. I wondered whether I would ever get to find out how close my pictures were to the truth because, by then, whether I knew it fully or not, I was determined to find out who Barnes and Miss Scott were and what their relationship was.

In order to begin, I had to return to the bookshop and see if I could find out anything from its owner. Perhaps he would know who they were. What I would do with the information if I got it, I had no idea, but I couldn't simply leave things as they were. I had to know more. It was as if I had been given a teaser, a trailer, the opening chapter of an author's next book tacked on after the end of the one I had just read, and I had to see the film, had to read the next book.

As I drove back to Beverley several days later, I tried to work out what I would say to the shop owner. I could hardly show him the inscription; he would probably think I was insane. Of course, I realized it was more than likely that he would have no idea at all who had sold the book to him. I should imagine people who work in second-hand bookshops get quite a lot of customers dropping in with boxes or shopping bags full of old books. But there was a slim chance, and I didn't want to ruin it from the outset by giving the impression that I was some sort of madman or stalker. No, I had to be careful.

The best approach, I thought, would be to say that I had found something in the book that I wanted to return to its owner. The problem with that was that it gave rise to a lot more difficult questions. What had I found? If it was of value, then why hadn't the owner already returned to ask about it? If it was a letter or some such thing, wouldn't it have the owner's address on it? I could work out answers to most of these questions, but a great deal depended on how long the book had been on the shelf.

Obviously, whatever had been mislaid couldn't be time sensitive and could have been lost elsewhere. By now it might well have been written off as gone forever. But it should be something that the owner would welcome back again, even if she had been able to live without it for some time. To my mind that left only one thing: money.

Perhaps Miss Scott had used a ten pound note as a bookmark and had forgotten about it? That sounded unlikely to me, but I supposed it could have happened. Would the shop owner be suspicious? How many people would drive all the way back to return a ten pound note? Leaving aside the matter of honesty, it would cost me more than that in petrol to return it. But the bookseller needn't know how far I had come. I decided, in the end, that it had to be money. But twenty pounds would make my story more believable than ten. Though unusual, it could be convincing. I had done a similar thing once, myself, slipping a five pound note, a repaid loan, between the pages of a university library book I was carrying at the time. Later, I had returned the book before remembering to remove the note. I was fortunate in having an understanding librarian on that occasion, so I got my money back.

When I had parked my car, I headed first for W.H. Smith's, on the High Street. There I bought the smallest package of envelopes I could find and, back in my car, slipped a twenty pound note into one of them and wrote "window cleaner" on the front, hoping that would convince the bookseller. I know that twenty pounds seems a lot for a window cleaner, but window cleaners are about the only people one pays in cash these days. Perhaps Miss Scott lives in a house with a lot of windows? Putting my concerns aside, I sealed the flap, let it dry, then gently tore it open, as I imagined anyone would do in the real situation of finding such an envelope in a second-hand book.

I had great trouble finding the bookshop again in the labyrinthine alleys, and by mistake first entered the wrong one, the place where I had bought the Trollope biography. I soon realized my error when I saw the man behind the messy front desk, but couldn't stop myself glancing through the new arrivals. After a moment's hesitation, I also couldn't stop myself buying Florence Hardy's life of her husband, Thomas Hardy, which all the experts say he wrote himself. I had a list of books I was "looking for," though not in the sense of actively pursuing them through online sellers or eBay and so on, and this *Life* was on it. Another one I could cross off.

Feeling that much better and strangely more confident after my purchase, I entered into the labyrinth again. It had started to rain rather heavily by then. Just as I was about to give up and return when the weather improved, I found the shop. No wonder it had been hard to locate again. Its facade was narrow and humdrum, its green paint flaking and faded. No hand-painted sign hung over the

door; the grimy windows were small, more like those of a terrace house than a shop. When I stood outside, I saw three or four books on display, but there was nothing interesting about them—one had something to do with steam trains, another with numismatics and a third was a coffee-table book on Holy Island. The name over the window was hardly legible, but with a bit of effort, I worked out that it said “Gorman’s Antiquarian Bookshop,” which was a bit of a cheek, I thought, eyeing the box of tatty paperbacks on a trestle by the door at fifty pence each. Peter Cheyney, Sax Rohmer, Hammond Innes, Erle Stanley Gardner, and “Sapper” do not an antiquarian bookshop make.

Inside, this particular establishment consisted of a warren of small anterooms, connected by narrow passages and short staircases of dry creaking wood, each room stacked from floor to ceiling with books, either upright on shelves or in piles that rivalled the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The uneven floors seemed to meet the walls at odd angles, and I remembered that my footsteps had sounded loud on the uncarpeted floorboards of warped, worn and knotted wood. It was a miracle the whole place didn’t just fall down. The smell was not unpleasant, an old bookshop smell of dust and paper, mostly, with an undercurrent of old pipe tobacco and rich leather, like a fine Cabernet, and just a hint of mildew. Gorman kept his stock in decent condition, but with all the will in the world, you can’t avoid the rising damp and occasional leaks in an old building like this one. The foistiness was not at all unpleasant, at least not to a habitué like me; it merely adds to the ambience.

I had considered showing Gorman the book I had bought and decided against it. Instead, I had noted down the particulars, including the ISBN number and condition. As he read the sheet of paper I handed him, Gorman scratched his head. A few flakes of dandruff drifted like snow on to the shoulders of his grey pullover. His hair was thin, and what there was of it was uncombed and long unwashed. He clearly hadn’t shaved for several days, either.

“Browning?” he said finally, handing back the sheet and pushing his old National Health glasses up on his nose. “Not much call for Browning these days. His literary stock’s gone right down, you might say.” His chuckle sounded like an automatic coffee maker in its death throes. “Now, your Metaphysicals and your Romantics, that’s a different story. Donne, Marvel, Keats and Shelley, they all sell like the proverbial hotcakes. Even old Willie Wordsworth and his daffodils. And your Victorian novelists—Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy, Mrs. Gaskell, and don’t forget your Brontë sisters—I can’t keep ’em on the shelves. Not that anyone who buys them actually reads them, you understand. I put it down to telly, myself. BBC drama.” He shook his head as if pronouncing a verdict on BBC drama. “But your Victorian poets? You can’t give ’em away. I don’t know why. I quite enjoy a bit of Tennyson myself every now and then. ‘Onward, onward, rode the six hundred’ and all that. Stirring stuff. Can’t say I care much for Browning, though. Bit of a pervert, wasn’t he? All that rot about murder and adultery. Take ‘My Last Duchess.’ Didn’t the duke in that one have his wife done away with just because she looked at other blokes?”

“I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.” I quoted.

“Yes... er... well, quite. Like I said, not much call for that sort of thing.”

“Yes, but would you have any idea from *whom* you bought this particular volume?” I tapped the sheet of paper in my hand.

“Whom?”

“That’s right.”

He scratched his head again. “Well, I don’t rightly know. I mean, I get a lot of people coming in here.”

We both cast a glance around the shop when he said that, and when I turned back to him, he continued, “On a good day, like. There’s good days and there’s bad days.”

There had been no-one else in the place the last time I had been there, either, but I saw little point in mentioning that to him. “So there’s no possible way you can tell me who sold you this book?”

“I didn’t say that, did I? Keep perfectly good records, I do. There’s no taxman can fault me on that. You’re not—”

“No,” I said firmly. “I am not a tax auditor. As a matter of fact, I’m a retired Professor of Classics. Cambridge.”

He didn’t seem quite as impressed as most people do when I mention the hallowed name of the university. “Professor, eh?” he said. “That explains it, then.”

“Explains what?”

He pointed to the sheet of paper. “Browning. I’ll bet he knew his classics, didn’t he? All those artists and Renaissance stuff. Plenty of fellow perverts back then.”

“These records you keep,” I said. “Would it be at all possible for you to consult them and try to find out for me who brought this book in?”

“I suppose I could,” he said without moving. “But I don’t ask customers for their names and addresses. No one likes that. Smacks too much of the police state, being asked for your name and address and telephone number. I mean, you wouldn’t like it if I asked you for your personal details when you came in here to buy or sell a book, would you? I think a person should be allowed to buy and sell things in perfect anonymity. That’s one of the freedoms our fathers fought for. Within reason, of course. I mean, when it comes to guns or explosives or drugs, that’s a different matter. Need a redchester for that sort of thing.”

Redchester? I realized he probably meant “register.” My heart sank. “Are you telling me,” I said slowly, “that you can’t do as I ask? I thought you said you could help.”

“Up to a point. That’s what I meant. Up to a point. I was just explaining that I can’t you give you a name and address. Or telephone number. Not that I would if I could. I mean, you say you’re not a tax investigator, that you’re some sort of professor, but you could be a policeman, for all I know.”

“Do I look like a policeman?”

To my dismay, he took my question seriously and studied me from head to foot.

“Well, no,” he said. “If you ask me, you rather resemble George Smiley. You know, from the John le Carré books. Not the Alec Guinness version, you understand, or Gary Oldman, but George Smiley as you might imagine he’d look if you didn’t see him as Alec Guinness or Gary Oldman, if you follow my drift.”

I thought the only thing I had in common with Smiley was that I sometimes appear invisible. People tend not to notice me, or if they do, they mark me down immediately as uninteresting and harmless, then pass me by without a second glance. When some people walk into a room, everyone turns to look at them; when others walk in, no-one bats an eyelid. That’s me.

"I suppose you could be a spy," Gorman added. "Like Smiley was."

"Oh, for crying out loud, man," I said. "What would a spy be doing asking for the identity of someone who bought a second-hand book from you?"

"I could think of any number of reasons." He paused. "Why do you want to know?"

Here it was at last, the question I had prepared for but still dreaded. I told him about finding the envelope of money in the book. To my surprise, he took my explanation at face value.

"Well, I must say, sir, that's very honest of you," he said. "Very honest, indeed. And honesty's a quality I appreciate. There's not many as, coming across a twenty pound note, like, wouldn't simply put it in their pocket and spend it down the pub. But you want to return it to its rightful owner."

"Yes," I said, with a sigh. "Indeed I do."

"Commendable. Highly commendable."

"Can you help me?"

"I'm afraid not," Gorman said. "At least, not as much as you'd like me to."

"How, then?"

"I have a list of books bought and sold."

"And what will that tell me?"

He put his finger to his nose. "We'll have to see, won't we?"

And his chair legs scraped against the floorboards as he moved to stand up.

It seemed to take an eternity, but Gorman disappeared into a backroom and reappeared carrying the sort of large hardbound ledger one might expect to encounter in a Dickens novel. He set it down on the counter before him.

Smiling to reveal stained and crooked teeth, he tapped the tome. "If it's to be found, it will be found in here," he said gnomically and started turning the pages, stopping occasionally to mutter to himself, moving back and forth through the ledger, running his index finger down a page, then pausing and turning back to the beginning to inspect some sort of list of contents. I didn't know what system he used to organize his sales and purchases ledger, but it seemed to take him a long time to emit that little "Ah-ha" of success which indicated to me that he had found what he—and I—was looking for.

"What is it?" I asked, leaning forward, finding it impossible to rein in my enthusiasm. "Have you found it?"

He looked up at me. "Now hold your horses a moment," he said. "I think I have. Yes. Like I said right from the start, you're lucky it's Browning. We don't get many of his books in, so this must be the one." He consulted the list with his index finger again, muttering all the while. "Yes," he said, looking up at me. "That's the one. Well, that is a surprise."

"What is?"

"The date. That batch only came in a month ago, and there was me thinking Browning had been on the shelf for years." He made that strange dying coffee machine sound again, which I placed halfway between a chuckle and snuffle. Perhaps one should call it "snuckling" or "chiffling?"

"Poor old Browning. Left on the shelf. Get it?"

"A month isn't very long. Do you remember who brought it in?"

"Can't say as I do. I told you not to get your hopes up."

“What *do* you remember, then?”

He snuckled again. “You might well end up spending that twenty quid in the pub tonight, after all,” he said. “All I can tell you is that your Browning came in on the 28th of September, along with seven other books. Eight in all.”

A month was certainly not long. “Do you remember anything at all about the person who sold them to you?” I asked.

“Afraid not. I’ve got a terrible memory for faces. Besides,” he went on, “have you considered that whoever brought the books in to sell might not have been the original owner? Second-hand books go through a lot of hands sometimes. Might be third hand, or fourth hand.”

I *had* thought of that and countered it with my own observations and theory. I had examined the book closely and saw no signs of other price markings other than the original Waterstones sticker. Usually a second-hand book dealer will pencil a price on the flyleaf, and pencil marks always leave some traces. But there was nothing. And judging by the book’s condition, I had concluded that it hadn’t been read, and that it was more than likely Miss Scott had not seen the inscription, as the pages had been somehow stuck together. Gorman had obviously missed it, too. His penciled price appeared on the page *after* the flyleaf.

The only stumbling block to my theory was that Miss Scott must have either been given the book by hand or received it through the post. In either case, the odds were that she knew who had given it to her. Perhaps, if she saw by the postmark that it was from Barnes, she had dropped it straight into the box of items to be taken and sold, wanting nothing to do with him. It was a theory. “Do you have any other useful information?” I asked.

“Depends what you think is useful. The price I paid, which I am not willing to divulge to you, no matter who you might be. And the titles of the accompanying volumes in the batch.”

I brightened a little at that. “Accompanying volumes?”

“Yes. Like I said, it came in a box with seven other titles.”

“Would you tell me what they are? These titles.”

Gorman chewed his lower lip. “I don’t see why not,” he said finally. “After all, you are a customer. There might be something you’re interested in. You might actually buy one or two of them.”

I took his hint. “Naturally,” I said. “Goes without saying.”

He nodded, satisfied, then started to reel off a list of titles, Penguin, Virago or Oxford World’s Classics, for the most part, which I jotted down in my notebook. As he said, there was nothing remarkable about any of them—Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Jane Howard, Elizabeth Taylor, a selection of Rilke’s poetry, a biography of Mary Shelley—but I was already thinking that if the books were still in the shop, then one of them might reveal a bit more information about the seller. A slip of paper with an address, used as a bookmark, for example. Wishful thinking, I know, but one can always hope.

“Might I have a look around your shop for them?” I asked.

“Be my guest,” said Gorman. “But just so you’re not wasting your time, I’ll tell you now that *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice* have already been sold. I told you I couldn’t keep Victorian fiction on the shelves. And before you get all pedantic with me, yes I know Jane Austen wasn’t a Victorian, strictly speaking.” I

crossed the two novels off my list, which left me five more to find, then I headed into the maze of interconnected rooms along the corridor and got to work.

Though I am used to not being noticed, it did occur to me that a man of my age and appearance, especially in the old mac I was wearing against the chilly rain, might be regarded as somewhat suspicious if seen hanging around a public—which is to say private—school, even a minor one like the Linford School. I determined, therefore, to make my entrance speedy and decisive by driving straight up to the front door and getting out of the car with a confidence and determination that announced I was here for a reasonable and legitimate purpose, and there was no need to call the police.

I had struck it lucky in Gorman's shop on the fourth book, the biography of Mary Shelley. There was no name and address, but there was, on the title page, a stamp bearing the name of the school and its address, a small village just over the Humber Bridge, on the flatlands of northern Lincolnshire. I had been right, I thought, in assuming Miss Scott to be a teacher, and the Linford School was no doubt where she taught. Along with the Mary Shelley biography, I also bought both Elizabeth Taylor's *In a Summer Season* and Elizabeth Jane Howard's *Falling*—all at what I thought to be a fairly exorbitant price, I must say—just to make Gorman happy, and set off.

The school building, Linford Hall, was Elizabethan or Jacobean in origin, in the “prodigy house” style, a redbrick mansion with a busy roofline, mullioned windows and extensive grounds. Rather than benefitting from the landscaping genius of an Inigo Jones, these grounds had been given over to playing fields and running tracks, deserted on the day of my visit. If Linford Hall didn't quite match the palatial grandeur of Longleat or Temple Newsham, it was still impressive enough to the unsuspecting visitor.

The solid oak door stood atop a flight of stone stairs under an arched brick porch. I hadn't seen anyone about as I drove up the gravel drive, and there was a distinct hush about the place. The staff car park to the right of the main building was almost full, however, so I assumed that classes must be in progress. That was all right with me. I was willing to wait. I carried the Shelley biography, which at the right moment I would say had fallen accidentally into my hands, and as I was passing... I was hoping that one of the teachers would be willing and able to tell me to whom the book had belonged so that I could return it. If necessary, I would bring up the name of Miss Scott somehow. I planned to begin by asking for general information about the school and its teachers.

Once inside the cavernous reception hall, I noticed the odd pair or group of girls moving quietly about the place, carrying books. Footsteps and voices echoed in the grand space. The ceiling was ornate, decorated with Renaissance-style angels radiating outwards from a glittering chandelier, and the wainscoted walls were dotted with large portraits of old families, and perhaps even past headmasters.

“Can I help you, sir?”

I must have looked lost, though I was more struck by wonder at the grandeur of the school, because a young woman had approached me. Her tone was helpful and friendly, rather than accusatory. My harmless appearance was working in my favor. “I wonder if I might have a word with your headmaster?” I said.

She smiled. "I'm afraid *Miss Morwyn* is busy at the moment. We've had a bit of a flu epidemic here, and several of the regular teachers are off sick. I'm sure Ms. Langham, her deputy, will be able to help you out. What is it you're inquiring about?"

"Nothing specific," I said. "I'm just looking for some information and background."

"Very well. If you'll just wait here a moment."

And she clip-clopped off down the broad passage lined with administrative offices. In moments she was back to tell me that Ms. Langham would see me now, though she could spare only fifteen minutes as she had a class to teach at eleven o'clock. I said that would be fine and followed the young woman down the corridor. After a brief knock, she ushered me into a nondescript office, furnished with the usual practicalities of teaching, which these days, of course, included a computer as well as the requisite filing cabinets and bookcases. The room was tidy enough, and it looked out on the playing fields at the back of the school.

Ms. Langham stood up to greet me. She was about my height, which isn't very tall, and slim, with auburn hair loosely tied at the back of her neck, where it fanned out over her shoulders. Her oval face was lightly freckled and her eyes a watchful and intelligent pale blue. A touch of lipstick would have done wonders for her rather thin lips. Her clothes were as conservative as one would expect in such a place as Linford—not tweedy, but a dark skirt over a high-necked blouse. I would have guessed her age to be mid-forties, at the most. She was no conventional beauty, but I have to confess that I found her immediately attractive. She smiled, sat down again and bade me sit opposite her. "Well, Mr...?"

"Aitcheson," I told her. "Donald Aitcheson."

"Well, Mr. Aitcheson, what can we do for you today?"

She sounded more like the girl behind the counter at Starbucks than a teacher. I felt like asking for a double espresso and a blueberry muffin, but instead I said, "I was wondering if you might be able to tell me a little about the school, its history, reputation, staff, standards, courses of study and so on."

"Of course." She paused. "This is quite unusual, however. We don't generally have people calling at the school for a chat about our standards and reputation. But seeing as you're here... Do you mind my asking why you wish to know?"

"I'm looking for a suitable institution to send my son, and I was wondering if Linford might fit the bill."

She stared at me, looking puzzled, for a moment before answering. "Well, Mr. Aitcheson," she said finally, "much as I hate to disappoint you, I'm afraid Linford definitely won't fit the bill. Not in the least."

"Why not?"

She tilted her head and narrowed her eyes. "I would have thought you might have done at least the modicum of research before you came all the way out here, I must say. We're easily Googled."

"I don't understand."

"Linford Hall is a *girls'* boarding school, Mr. Aitcheson. We don't have any boys here."

Then who the hell is Barnes? I almost said out loud. My mind was already spinning in search of alternative explanations. Perhaps we were in a D.H.

Lawrence scenario. Barnes as Mellors, the gamekeeper, or something like that. It was a possibility. Surely they must have a few men about the place, if only on a daily basis, to help with the heavy lifting and so forth. Not to mention maintaining the extensive grounds. But would a “Mellors” character be likely to know about Browning and send a teacher a book with the inscription that so intrigued me? I doubted it. I tried not to let my disappointment show

“Naturally, we employ several men in various capacities,” Ms. Langham went on, as if reading my thoughts, “but we most definitely do *not* accept male pupils.”

“I see,” I said. “Of course not. My mistake.”

She smiled, but it wasn’t in her eyes. “So sorry to disappoint. Now, if—”

“I can’t imagine why my friend never mentioned this,” I said, rallying.

“Friend?”

“The friend who told me about this place. I must have got it mixed up with somewhere else.” I smiled.

“You have no daughters, then, I assume?”

“None.” I didn’t have any sons, either, but I wasn’t going to tell Ms. Langham that.

“Then I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“I also have a book I’d like to return to you, a biography of Mary Shelley, with your school stamp. As I happened to passing this way, I just thought I’d drop in and... well...”

Ms. Langham continued to stare suspiciously at me. I much preferred not being noticed.

I took a deep breath. “She mentioned a Miss Scott, my friend did. When she asked me to return the misplaced library book. Apparently it belonged to a Miss Scott.”

Ms. Langham frowned. “Miss Scott?”

“Yes. I think Scott was the name.”

“I’m afraid Miss Scott is no longer with us,” she said through tightening lips. “Look, what’s your game? What’s this all about? Why are you really here? Are you a reporter? Is that it? A private detective? One of the parents? We’ve dealt with the problem.”

“Ms. Langham! I don’t see why you should leap to such conclusions merely because I asked about Miss Scott. Why assume I’m a reporter? Did she leave under a cloud or something? Was there a scandal?”

“All I can tell you is that Miss Scott is no longer employed at this establishment. And now, if you’ll—”

“Where is she?”

“I really have no idea, and even if I did I wouldn’t tell you. Now I think it’s time you left before I call the police. As you can imagine, we have to take special care to keep an eye open for any suspicious looking males hanging around the premises.”

At that, I jumped out of my chair and held out my hand, palm towards her. “There’s no need for that. I was just... I mean, I was simply...” I put my hand to my forehead and groaned. “Would you at least tell me *when* she left?”

Her hand hovered over the telephone. “I don’t see as it’s any of your business, but she left our employ shortly after the beginning of term. Late September. About

a month ago. Caused us more than a little trouble finding a replacement at such short notice, if truth be told.”

“Was it a sudden departure?”

She touched the handset and lifted it slightly from its rest. “Mr. Aitcheson, you really must leave now.”

“All right,” I said, sitting down again and opening my briefcase. “All right. Please don’t do anything rash. I’m not a reporter or a detective. Just give me one minute, and I’ll show you why I’m here, if you’re interested. One minute. Please.”

I could see her thinking it over. Finally, her curiosity got the better of her. She let the phone drop back in its cradle. “Very well,” she said, in the stern tone of a deputy headmistress. “Please illuminate me.”

I decided on the spur of the moment to leave Mary Shelley out of it and put my cards on the table. I showed her the edition of Browning with the inscription. She read it, turned a little pale, I thought, then handed the book back to me and said. “There’s a decent pub in the village. The George and Dragon. Meet me there at half past twelve.” Then she walked over and opened the door. “Now I really must go.”

“What did you say your occupation was, Mr. Aitcheson?” Ms. Langham asked as she sat opposite me in the George and Dragon, a rambling old country pub with a whitewashed facade, window boxes full of geraniums and a well-appointed dining room, with white tablecloths and solid, comfortable chairs.

“I didn’t,” I answered her, “but I’m retired.”

“From what?”

“I was Professor of Classics. At Cambridge.”

She nodded as if I had answered a question correctly. “Indeed you were.”

“You’ve decided to trust me? You believe I’m not a reporter or a private eye?”

Ms. Langham nodded and smiled. “After class, I Googled you. Quite an impressive career.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that.”

“No need for false modesty, Professor Aitcheson. Catullus and Ovid, no less. Two of my favorites. I checked the school library, and we have your translations on our shelves. One of them even has a small author’s photograph on the back, which matches your photo on Wikipedia. And you in person, of course, though perhaps it was taken a few years ago?”

“Ah, the computer age,” I said. “Yes, it was a few years ago, alas, and I had far more hair and a few less pounds then.”

She laughed. “Look, if we’re going to talk about this business, we might as well be on a first name basis. I already know your name is Donald. I’m Alice.”

“Pleased to meet you, Alice. So there is something to talk about, then?”

Alice frowned. “I’m not sure yet, but I think there might be.” She tapped the book I had put on the table between us. “This is quite extraordinary,” she said, picking it up and rereading the inscription. “And another book in the same lot led you here?”

“Yes. A biography of Mary Shelley. With the Linford School stamp. I didn’t want to mention it at first because... you know...”

“You thought it might get this Miss Scott into trouble?”

“Possibly.”

“Very gentlemanly of you to lie to me about it, then. Though as we don’t know exactly who sold it to the second-hand bookshop, we shouldn’t be too fast to point the finger of blame. Perhaps someone stole it from her?”

At this point, a young waitress, barely out her teens, came to take our orders. When I suggested we share a bottle of Chablis, Ms. Langham looked at me apologetically and said, “If I had an alcoholic drink at lunchtime, my pupils would surely smell it on my breath, and my life wouldn’t be worth living.” She glanced at the waitress and said, “Isn’t that right, Andrea?”

The waitress blushed and nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll have a diet tonic water, please.”

I ordered a pint of bitter. “Ex pupil?” I asked, when Andrea had gone.

Ms. Langham nodded. “Not one of our greatest successes, but I’m a firm believer in letting people find their own niche in life. Andrea wants to be an actress, so this is just a temporary stopgap for her. At least she hopes so. I must say, she made a passable Duchess of Malfi in the school production last year.”

“I never imagined *The Duchess of Malfi* as the sort of play one performs in a girls’ boarding school. Or any school for that matter. A bit too bloodthirsty, surely?”

Ms. Langham smiled. “Times have changed.”

“So it would seem. I’m beginning to wonder exactly what sort of school Linford Hal is. *The Duchess of Malfi*? Translations of Catullus and Ovid in the library? ‘Porphyria’s Lover?’”

She laughed. “You can’t blame us for that last one. Besides, we like to think of ourselves as progressive. Though we don’t have Ovid’s erotic poems, you understand. Just the *Metamorphoses*.”

“Even so. I translated both volumes.”

“I know.”

Our drinks arrived and we gave our food orders to Andrea. I sipped my beer and watched Alice Langham as she read the inscription again. “This is what brought you here?” she asked. “Truly?”

“Yes. I’m curious. Well, probably a bit more than that. You said yourself that you find it extraordinary. There’s something distinctly chilling about it, don’t you find? The tone of the inscription. The reference to enjoying poems about murder and so on. The ‘bargain’ and the reference to time approaching. It could be a taunt, or even a thinly veiled threat, something intended to frighten her.”

Alice Langham closed the book and slid it back over the white cloth. “Yes, I agree,” she said, giving a little shudder. “It’s really quite nasty. That’s why it interests me, too.”

“Did you know Miss Scott?”

“Oh, yes. I knew Marguerite Scott. Not well, but I knew her.”

“And was she the kind to run off with school property?”

“Not as far as I know. I’m sure the book was her own. She simply stamped it as an identifying mark.” Alice shrugged. “Even if it did belong to the school library, we’d hardly be bothered enough to hunt her down, or it.”

“And the Browning?”

“A gift, it seems.”

“Do you know anyone called Barnes?”

She shook her head. "No. That's the puzzling thing. It doesn't ring any bells at all. I mean, it's not an uncommon name. I've racked my brains since we first talked. I'm certain we have had pupils called Barnes in the past, but we don't have any at the moment. Of course, it needn't be anyone connected with the school, though I will admit it sounds rather that way. Do you think Miss Scott is in danger? That reference to the time being near?"

I nodded. "It's possible. The book was sold to Gorman only a month ago, around the time you told me Miss Scott left Linford School, though there's no telling how long she'd had it on her shelves before then, I suppose."

"But the danger could still be imminent, couldn't it, if she sold the Browning as soon as she received it?"

I nodded. "Something may have already happened to her. That's one of the things I want to find out. Where she is. Whether this Barnes fellow has done her any harm. You wouldn't tell me where Miss Scott lives before. Will you tell me now?"

She gave me an address in a village a few miles from Beverley.

"Is she still there?" I asked.

"I assume so. Though she wouldn't need to inform the school of a change of address." She paused. "I remember seeing the place once. We were on our way to Beverley for a talk. Official teachers' professional development day. For some reason, I was giving her a lift, and we passed this... mansion. She said I might not believe it, but it was where she lived. It was quite impressive. As I remember, it's a rather palatial manor house in a desirable location. Her husband used to be something high up in finance. Born into money, too. Very well off, apparently. Anyway, it doesn't sound like the kind of place one gives up so easily."

"I suppose not. Nor does it sound as if the person who lives in such a place needs to cart a box of old books to sell in Beverley. What happened to this husband?"

"He died. Drowned, I believe. A swimming accident. I'm afraid I don't know all the details. She never said any more than that and, well, it wasn't something one pried into, disturbing old feelings and all, probing old wounds."

"Drowning, you say? An accident?"

"That's what she said."

"Hmm. How long ago did it happen?"

"I'm not sure. Seven or eight years, or thereabouts. Before she came to Linford Hall, at any rate."

"Did Miss Scott come from around here?"

"As far as I know, they'd always lived in the same house she's in now, at least since they were married. I don't know where Miss Scott lived before then. I think she taught in Hull for a while before she came here, though."

"I assume she didn't need to work."

"I suppose not. But one thing I will say about Marguerite is that she's an excellent teacher. She loved her job. She wasn't the type to hang about the house all day and... well, do whatever people do when they hang around the house all day."

"I read quite a bit, watch old films, do a little gardening, go for—"

Alice laughed. "I don't mean you. You're retired, and even though you're entitled to be as lazy as you want, I'm sure you use your time most productively. Marguerite was a hard worker. I think she needed her job. Maybe not for the money, but because it meant something to her."

"Yet the school let her go. She never remarried?"

"Not that I know of. And I think I would have known. After all, she was with us for four years. A wedding would have been hard to overlook."

"And the story behind her abrupt departure from Linford?"

"Aha," said Alice. Thereby hangs a tale. And she put her finger to her lips as Andrea delivered their meals.

I have to confess that I had been expecting some titillating story of lesbianism in a girls' boarding school, or perhaps a confirmation of my *Lady Chatterley's Lover* theory, a sexual liaison between posh Miss Scott and the school groundskeeper or gardener. After all, what else could a teacher do that was terrible enough to lose him or her the job? It turned out that Linford School was a law unto itself in that respect.

Crushes happened often enough, Alice told me, and in most cases they could nipped in the bud before they progressed to a serious level. Students had even had crushes on her, she admitted. Sexual assault, unwanted fondling and the like were much rarer, though a games mistress had been fired three years ago for squeezing a student's breast.

"Did a troublesome student have a crush on Marguerite Scott?" I asked.

Alice shook her head. "No. Nothing like that. Unless it was an extremely well-kept secret."

"Which you think is unlikely?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. It would be difficult to keep that sort of secret around Linford."

It turned out that Marguerite Scott's sins had been of a very different order: persistent absenteeism and a fondness for the bottle being the chief among them, which perhaps helped explain Alice Langham's reluctance to sample a glass of Chablis at lunchtime. The principal was a strict teetotaler, she told me, which hadn't helped. Finally, Miss Scott had taken one day off too many and was discovered to be drunk in class after an extended lunch with an old friend. Had she played truant that time, rather than return to school in her inebriated state, her punishment might have been less severe. But not only had she returned to Linford Hall late that afternoon, she had driven her car there and parked it sloppily, scuffing the side of the biology teacher's Toyota as she did so. The students in the one class she attempted to teach that afternoon complained that she was repeating herself, giggling and bumping into her desk, and that her writing on the blackboard was an illegible scrawl. One of them said that when she stood up to leave, Miss Scott pushed her back into her chair roughly.

There was no breathalyzer except the principal herself, who deemed Marguerite Scott unfit to carry out her responsibilities, and as this wasn't her first warning, she was to leave immediately. According to Alice, nobody seemed to have bothered to ask Miss Scott why she had acted in such a manner calculated to result in her dismissal, and it remained a mystery to this day.

"How long had she been behaving that way: drinking, absenteeism?"

“Only since after we got back from the summer holidays. Previous terms she’d been perfectly well behaved, if a little aloof and cool in her manner.”

“Not warm and fuzzy, then?”

“Not in the least.”

“What happened next?”

“Nothing. That was it. She left without a fuss. In fact, I happened to be quite near Gwyneth’s office at the time—that’s our principal, Gwyneth Morwyn—and you wouldn’t believe the language that came out of Marguerite Scott’s mouth. Well, perhaps you would, having been at Cambridge and all, but it was quite shocking to me at the time, and I’m no prude. So whether she had any chance at all of keeping her job when she went in for her little chat with Gwyneth, she certainly had ruined any possibility of forgiveness when she emerged.”

“And none of you kept in touch with her?”

“No. She wasn’t... I mean, she didn’t really mix with the rest of the teaching staff. She was polite enough, but like I said, she always remained rather aloof. She made no effort to fit in. She never talked to us about her life, never shared experiences, asked advice or anything.”

“The other teachers disliked her?”

“I wouldn’t say disliked. Not actively, at any rate. But she certainly wasn’t *well* liked. She had no close friends at Linford. There was no strong connection, no sense of her belonging to the community. That time she pointed out her house, it was about all she said during the entire journey.”

“And the drinking?”

“Fairly recent, too. Definitely after we returned from the summer holidays. I mean, she wouldn’t have lasted as long as she did—which is about four years—if she’d been at the bottle the whole time. You can’t hide a thing like that in a closed community like a girls’ boarding school. It’s hard to keep secrets. I’m not saying she might not have been a secret drinker, at home, though I doubt even that.”

“She had other secrets?”

“Well, we all have secrets, Mr. Aitcheson.”

“Donald, please.”

“Donald, then. Perhaps she did, but they remain secrets. And I’m not only talking about shameful secrets and the like. She didn’t even participate in the normal day to day conversations in the staff room. Whether one fancies a particular actor, or actress, what kind of books, films, and music one likes, what one thinks of Brexit or the latest terrorist incident. Marguerite never joined in any of those sorts of discussions, let alone complained about her life, or a love affair, or anything. We didn’t even know if she had love affairs. She was a dark horse.”

“And her behavior turned self-destructive only in the last few weeks of her tenure, as far as you know?”

“Yes. The drinking, being even more anti-social, taking days off whenever she felt like it and not even bothering to report in sick. Of course, we didn’t know at the time, but it was probably because of hangovers.” She shook her head slowly.

“What?”

“Sometimes I just think we could have been a bit more... proactive. Because of her attitude, nobody really demonstrated any concern for her, asked her if there

was anything wrong, if we could help with her problems in any way.” She bit her bottom lip. “Sometimes I feel a bit guilty.”

I swirled my beer in the glass and drank some. “And as far as you know,” I said, “you’re absolutely sure there’s nobody involved in this whole business called Barnes?”

“Nobody.”

“What was her husband’s name?”

“George or Gary. Something like that. With a G anyway.”

“And her married name, or maiden name, wasn’t Barnes?”

“No. According to the school records, her married name was Scott, and her maiden name was Fairbanks. She was always called *Miss* Scott here as a courtesy. No matter what their marital status, no teacher at Linford School is referred to as *Mrs.*”

“But *Ms.* is OK?”

She smiled. “It wasn’t always.”

I rubbed my chin, decided I needed a shave. “So Miss Scott remains a puzzle wrapped inside an enigma, then.”

“I’m afraid so. What next?”

“I suppose I shall have to pay her a visit,” I said, “assuming she did, as you suggested, keep on the house. I want to make sure she hasn’t come to any harm. It sounds as if she was worried about something, perhaps even frightened. The sudden drinking and all. It could have been caused by anxiety, stress or fear. And I don’t think she actually read the inscription in the Browning, though I’m convinced it was meant for her. There must have been other communications from this Barnes. Ones that did get through to her.”

Alice Langham looked at her watch. “Heavens, I really must get back to school or I’ll be sharing the same fate as Miss Scott, drink or no drink.”

I stood up, shook her hand and thanked her for her time and help.

“Will you... I mean, will you let me know if you find anything out?” she asked me before she left, a slight blush on her cheeks. She wrote something on a beer mat and passed it to me. “Perhaps it would be better if you phoned me at home rather than at the school. I’m in most evenings.”

“And if Mr. Langham answers?”

“There is no Mr. Langham. Not for some years.”

I didn’t enquire any further, partly because I didn’t want to know what fate had befallen Mr. Langham. I had long thought my battered old heart damaged beyond repair, but I must confess that the offending organ gave an unexpected flutter when Alice Langham lowered her eyes and handed me the beer mat. While I would never have dared to admit it, hardly even to myself, the prospect of talking to, and even perhaps seeing, the charming Ms. Langham again was not without its appeal. “I most certainly will,” I said. “As soon as I find anything out.”

As I drove back over the Humber Bridge, I glanced east towards where the estuary widened. Far below me, the Humber pilot’s boat guided a large cargo ship out to the North Sea. Once back on the Yorkshire side, I found a garage, filled up with petrol and asked directions to the address Alice Langham had given me.

I thought of Alice as I drove along the country lanes. It was a long time, more years than I cared to remember, since a woman, any woman, had had that sort of

effect on me. I can't describe it easily in words, but meeting her, talking with her, had been so natural that I felt as if I had been doing it all my life. Or that I wanted to do it all my life. I told myself there's no fool like an old fool, remembered the days of depression and endless poetic outpourings after Charlotte had abandoned me for an engineering student all those years ago. Remembered how I had finally made the effort, pulled myself together and devoted myself to an academic career, subjugated my feelings and desires to the demands of dead languages and dead poets. Despite the connection I had felt with Alice, I knew I couldn't progress any further. Doing so would involve a move on my part so heavily laden with the risk of rejection that I knew I could never make it.

It was a beautiful, clear day in late October, and the landscape was so flat that I could see for miles around me. I saw what I thought to be Marguerite Scott's house long before I reached it, some distance down the road, standing very much alone in its several acres of grounds. When I got closer, I saw that the grounds were walled, and beyond the wall stood an area of woodland through which a drive wound its way to the front of the house. The house wasn't as large as it had been in my imagination, but it was certainly a substantial dwelling. Victorian, I guessed, with a certain Gothic touch in turrets, gargoyles and gables. It certainly didn't seem as if the place had ever been a farm; more likely it had once belonged to a member of the local gentry, and the family no doubt had to sell it after the war, when it became almost impossible for the old families to cling on to their estates without turning them into zoos or fairgrounds and opening them to the public. Though this place was grand enough, it wasn't quite in that league. Nevertheless, it made me wonder again why somebody who lived in such a mansion would need, or want, to sell books to a second-hand bookshop.

I pulled up outside the front door and rang the bell. After I had been standing there a few moments enjoying the birdsong and the gentle breeze sighing through the leaves, the door opened and a woman I took to be Miss Scott stood before me. She didn't match the version of my imagination in any way, save that her hair was blonde. It wasn't piled up like a Hitchcock ice queen's, however, but expensively layered. She was a slighter figure than I had imagined, too, wearing designer jeans, dangling earrings and black polo neck jumper. She was definitely attractive, but her face had a sort of pinched look about it. Or perhaps she was simply looking guarded because a stranger stood at her door. Suspicion loomed in her light brown eyes.

"Miss Scott?" I ventured. "Miss Marguerite Scott?"

"Who's asking?"

"My name is Donald Aitcheson. You don't know me, of course, but I assure you that I come only out of friendship and concern." I was so glad to find her alive and well that I was quite forgetting how my arrival might have made her nervous or frightened. I wasn't sure how to put her at her ease.

She frowned. "You what?"

"Perhaps if you'd let me come in I could explain."

At that, she closed the door even more, as if to make a shield between us. "I think I'd rather you explained yourself first," she said. "A woman can't be too careful these days. You might look harmless enough, but..."

Her voice wasn't low and husky, but somewhat nasal, and the Yorkshire vowels were definitely present. I gave her my best smile. "I can assure you, I am exactly as harmless as I look."

"That remains to be seen. What do you want with me? Miss Scott is my school name. If you're selling something I—"

"I'm not a salesman," I said, reaching into my briefcase for the Browning, which I realized would probably be my passport into the house. I could tell that she recognized the book as soon as she saw the cover, but her expression gave no indication that she knew of the sinister and threatening inscription. She looked puzzled rather than apprehensive. I opened it to the flyleaf and held it up for her to see. She frowned as she read the words, put her hand to her mouth.

"Oh, my God," she said. "I never saw that. I..."

"But it was yours?"

"Yes. It was sent to me. Where did you get it? What are you doing here?"

I looked pleadingly at her. "I'll explain everything. May I?"

She stood aside. "Of course. I'm sorry. Please come in, Mr...?"

"Aitcheson," I reminded her, following her through a cavernous hall into a cozy and comfortable sitting-room, decorated in light pastels, with a large, empty fireplace on the far wall, in front of which lay a sheepskin rug.

"Please sit down," she said. "How did you find me?"

I sank into a deep armchair. "The school. Linford Hall. There was a book with the name stamped on it in the box you sold to Gorman, a biography of Mary Shelley, along with the Browning, of course, which I bought, also without seeing the inscription."

"Gorman?"

"Yes, the second-hand book dealer."

She looked completely blank, then recognition seemed to dawn. "A second-hand book dealer, you say? Well, well, the little devil."

"I don't understand."

"I distinctly told Martha, the woman who comes in once a week to clean for me, to drop the box off at the Oxfam shop in town. She must have decided she could make a few extra pounds by selling the lot to this Gorman."

"I see. Well, it couldn't have been much. I wouldn't be too hard on her."

"Oh, I have no intention of being hard on her. Good cleaning ladies are hard to find these days. I'll let it go by. And you? Are you the bookseller's assistant or something? Are you here to tell me there was a valuable first edition among my books?"

I laughed. "I'm afraid not. No, I was just intrigued by the inscription. Curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to know who you were, make sure you're all right, find out who Barnes is and what it all means. You must admit, the inscription is rather disturbing."

"It's the first time I've set eyes on it."

"The pages were stuck together," I said. "I missed it, myself, or I probably wouldn't have bought the book. But surely now that you have seen it, it means something to you? Barnes, for example?"

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

Caution impelled me to say no, just in case the thought of my spreading her business about scared her off and caused her to clam up. “They’d probably think I was crazy,” I said.

“You say they gave you my address at the school?”

“Yes.”

“They shouldn’t have done that,” she said, and stared at me for a while, as if she couldn’t believe it. “There must be some rules about passing on personal information. Ethics or whatever. Did they tell you all about me as well?”

“No,” I lied. “Why should they? What is there to tell?”

“I still don’t understand why you should be interested in all this. It’s nothing but a silly joke.”

“Is it? I suppose I’ve got too much time on my hands, now I’m retired. I was worried about you. And I like puzzles. Are you sure everything’s all right, Miss Scott? If I received something like this, I would be more than a little annoyed, if not downright nervous or angry. Why assume that you will like to read about murder? What is it nearly time for?”

“Lots of people are fans of murder mysteries.”

“But Browning’s poems are a little more disturbing than a murder mystery. And I don’t think whoever wrote this—Barnes, I suppose—meant to refer to your taste in fiction. He quotes from ‘Porphyria’s Lover,’ for example, a very creepy soliloquy written from the murderer’s point of view.”

“Are you trying to tell me you think I’m in some sort of danger, Mr. Aitcheson, that someone is fantasizing about murdering me?”

“I don’t mean to scare you unduly, but I do think it’s a distinct possibility that whoever wrote this is unbalanced, yes. Have you had any more communications from this Barnes person?”

“This is absurd. I mean it’s very sweet of you to be concerned, but really...”

“Tell me about Barnes.”

“It’s just someone I knew a long time ago.”

“The book is quite new, and it was only sold to Gorman a month ago. How did you come to get hold of it?”

“Are you grilling me, Mr. Aitcheson?”

I took a deep breath. “Perhaps I am letting my curiosity get ahead of me. But you have to admit the whole thing is very peculiar. The tone of the inscription piqued my curiosity. Was this Barnes a friend of yours?”

“An old lover, actually,” said Miss Scott. She seemed to be more relaxed now, and she leaned back in her armchair and crossed her legs, a slightly mischievous smile playing on her lips and yes, I couldn’t have sworn to it, but I thought she was starting to enjoy herself.

“Ah... I... er... I see. Then why... I mean, it’s rather an odd thing for an old lover to write, isn’t it, and to quote Browning like that?”

She smiled. “What can I say? He’s an odd person.”

“Does it have anything to do with your husband’s death?”

“My husband’s death? Who told you about that? What do you know about that?”

“The secretary at Linford School might have mentioned you were a widow,” I lied. “He drowned, didn’t he? Your husband.”

“You know a lot. That was a long time ago.”

“And how long ago was Barnes?”

“That’s an impertinent question, Mr. Aitcheson. I must say, you’re being very perverse about this matter, not to mention persistent. I told you, it’s nothing. And even if it were, it would be none of your business.”

“Are you sure you’re not in any danger, Miss Scott, that you haven’t been threatened in any way? Perhaps I can help you?”

“Of course not. And I don’t need your help. I told you, it’s just a silly joke, that’s all. It came through the post about a month ago. I have no idea who sent it. I didn’t even see the bloody inscription, and I can’t stand Browning. I vaguely remember a few of his poems from university, but that’s all. Nor do I read detective novels. I dumped it in the box and asked Martha to take it to the Oxfam shop. Somehow it ended up in the hands of your Mr. Gorman. End of story.”

“But you do know someone called Barnes, don’t you? You indicated that it was someone you knew a long time ago. Someone a bit odd. Why has he reappeared in your life now? Was he something to do with your husband’s death?”

Miss Scott contemplated me for a moment in some confusion, then she seemed to come to some sort of a decision. She relaxed even more, and her tone softened. “I can see you’re not going to give up easily,” she said. “Would you like some tea? Or something stronger? Then maybe I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Tea will be fine,” I said.

“Excuse me for a moment, then,” she said, and disappeared into the kitchen. I could hear the heavy ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece as I glanced around at the paintings on the walls. I must say I am not a great fan of modern art. I prefer a painting to look like something I can at least recognize. I don’t expect my art to be a photographic representation of the world—impressions are all right with me, Monet, Cezanne and the like, even Van Gogh—but these swirls and blobs and lines of color just seemed ugly and pointless. They were no doubt originals, and perhaps even worth a small fortune, but they did nothing for me except perhaps make me feel slightly uncomfortable and dizzy. I kept thinking I could see the walls moving out of the corner of my eye.

Miss Scott returned with the tea, and I realized as she poured that now I had found her I wasn’t sure what it was that I really wanted to know. She was right in that I seemed to have a bee in my bonnet about the inscription, even now that I had met her and I knew that she was unharmed. Maybe I had been making a mountain out of a molehill all along? I was beginning to feel rather silly about the whole business.

“I realize it’s probably nothing to do with me,” I said, after a sip of strong sweet tea, “and I’m sorry for barging in on you like this. But as I said, I’ve always been interested in puzzles, in solving them, I mean, and for some reason this one just grasped my interest.”

“Barnes was a fairly despicable character,” she said. “I suppose you were right to some extent to be worried about me. Thank you for that. But I don’t think he’s a danger to me anymore.”

“How did you know him? I know you said he was a...”

“A lover, yes. For a short while.”

I sipped more tea. “How long ago?”

"I suppose we met about six or seven months before my husband's death."

I almost choked on my tea. "You're telling me you were having an affair with this Barnes while you were still married?"

She smiled. "One is usually married if one has an affair, Mr. Aitcheson."

"And since?"

"Affairs?"

"Barnes."

She shook her head. "No, we parted company shortly after my husband's death. His usefulness was over, and we seemed to do nothing but argue. I suppose you could say Barnes was my bad boy, and bad boys have their uses, but they don't usually last very long."

"Did you see Barnes again?"

"Not until recently. He came back into my life about six weeks ago. I realize I had told him, seven years before, that I knew he would, but it was still a shock I wasn't quite prepared for."

"What did he want?"

"His share, of course."

I drained my tea cup and put the saucer down on the tray. "His share?"

"Yes. Of the loot. My husband's fortune. I didn't begrudge him it, of course, he'd certainly earned it, but that doesn't mean I was willing to give him it. Not after so long. And he's been quite beastly towards me. I mean, you saw that inscription, and it bothered even you, a stranger."

"But you didn't see it."

"No. But I'm not saying I haven't heard from him. That he hasn't threatened me. That he wasn't blackmailing me."

"What about the names? Miss Scott and Barnes. Isn't that rather an odd form of address?"

"He always called me Miss Scott. I was a school teacher. It was his idea of a joke. He was mocking me. And Barnes happened to be his first name, by the way. Barnes Corrigan."

"And the Browning?"

"Well, Browning *did* write about murder a fair bit, didn't he? Though I never read the book and have only vague memories from university. I suppose Barnes thought it was fitting to remind me of what..."

I was beginning to feel way out of my depth. I must have looked it, too, for Miss Scott leaned forward, patted my hand and said, "Poor Mr. Aitcheson."

"Please explain," I said. My tongue felt thick and furry in my mouth.

"I was going to say that he must have sent the book to remind me of what we'd done together," Miss Scott went on. "Not literally, you understand. Nobody strangled anyone with their own hair, if I remember my 'Porphyria' correctly. But you get the idea. I owed him, and he was reminding me of it. We'd made a bargain, and the time was close for payback. Pity I never saw the bloody inscription."

"What had you done together? You owed him? Payback? For what? Why?"

"Barnes helped me murder my husband. Well, not with the actual murder, I don't think he had the guts for that, so I did it myself, but with the cover up afterwards."

"Why are you telling—"

“Shh. You wanted to hear the story. My husband didn’t drown, Mr. Aitcheson. He was already dead. That was Barnes. Well, Barnes didn’t really drown, either, but he faked the drowning, and as far as everyone was concerned, he was my husband, and he went for his swim every morning, regular as clockwork. One morning he simply didn’t come back. The currents were strong, the sea unpredictable. I was in a small cafe in the village at the time. The perfect alibi. You see, Barnes resembled George to a certain extent, and we were in Cornwall, among strangers, a long way from home, in a rented cottage rather remote from the nearest village. Nobody knew George there, and Barnes made sure he never got especially close to any of the locals. We were very anti-social. We might have gone abroad, but I’m sure they would have asked more questions over there. It was relatively easy in Cornwall. A pile of clothes on the beach. My real husband’s, by the way, in case they tested for DNA, which they didn’t. Body washed out to sea. Barnes swam to a cave, actually, and made his escape in a small boat he’d previously moored there in a cave for that very purpose.”

By this point I was having serious difficulty speaking. Not only that, but my head was throbbing, I felt sick and dizzy and my knees were trembling. I was also starting to have trouble breathing. It was getting difficult to cling on to what little consciousness I had left.

“It won’t be long now,” Miss Scott said. “This benzodiazepine is fairly quick acting. Then I’ll figure out what to do with you.”

I could only gape, my mouth wide open.

“It worked a treat,” she said. “The only problem is that if you don’t want to create a stir and have too many questions asked, then you have to wait seven years before the legal declaration of death. Before you can inherit and cash in the insurance policy. If I’d made too much of a fuss too soon, they might have thought I had done it for the money. Which I had, of course.”

“But why?” I gasped. “You were rich already.”

“My *husband* was rich, Mr. Aitcheson. That’s a different thing. George was a workaholic, and luckily the object of his addiction was making money. Unfortunately for me, though, he liked to hang on to it. He was tight as a... well, you can fill in the blank yourself. I had to negotiate for every bloody penny I got. That’s why I had to keep on working. Lucky for me I liked my job. After... when it was over down in Cornwall... all I had to do was keep my cool, and I could do that. All in all, it was rather a lot of money, and well worth waiting for. I didn’t mind teaching for seven more years when I knew what was coming to me after that. I was only twenty-six at the time, which means I’m only thirty-three now. Plenty of time ahead of me for fun. And as I had a job and a steady income, it would have looked bad if I’d gone for the money sooner. It wasn’t as if I *needed* it. But Barnes and I never got along well after... well, after the deed. Guilt, perhaps. Thieves falling out. The need for secrecy. Whatever the reasons, we agreed to go our separate ways. I told him to come back for his share in seven years, but little did he realize that I had no intention of giving him anything. Anyway, when the seven years were almost up, just before the start of term, he began hounding me for his share. I’d heard from him occasionally over the years. A cryptic postcard here, a hang-up phone call there. I imagine that book was one of his many salvos to keep me on edge. I thank you for bringing it to my attention. Not that it matters any

more. I was a little shaken by his other messages and threats of exposure, however. I suppose I acted erratically under the pressure. Drank too much and so on. Naturally, they noticed at school and gave me the sack. But it didn't matter, did it? I had a fortune to inherit." She leaned towards me, resembling nothing more than a pale blob through a fisheye lens. "How are you feeling, Mr. Aitcheson?"

And that was the point at which I wasn't feeling anything anymore. It was as if someone suddenly turned off a switch in my brain.

When I regained consciousness it took me a while to get oriented and work out where I was, where I'd been, and why, but it all came back eventually, bit by bit. I was in a cellar, I realized first of all, lying on the hard concrete floor trussed up like a turkey ready for the oven. And I was here because Miss Scott had drugged my tea. She had done that because I was asking too many questions about a disturbing inscription in the flyleaf of a book, and she was afraid that if she let me go I would press the matter to a point where it would cause serious problems for her. Perhaps I would talk to the police, for example, or the people at Linford School. In other words, she needed to get me out of the picture, remove me from the scene, probably by murder, as it appeared she had done that before, though I was still vague about the details.

I tried to move, but I was well and truly tied up. Various bones and muscles ached as well as my head, and I realized that she had probably dragged rather than carried me down the wooden cellar steps. I was definitely too old for this sort of thing; whether I had ever been young enough was a moot point, but I was certainly too old now. I tried to move again and stiffened with pain. I thought my left ankle might be broken.

I also realized that I was in a house surrounded by woods and a high wall, miles from the nearest village, and I couldn't expect any help to come my way. That was one of my most depressing thoughts as I heard Miss Scott moving about upstairs, no doubt preparing whatever it was she needed to bring about my demise. A bath full of acid, perhaps? Or a wood-chopping machine in the garden? I could try telling her I would let the matter drop, that I didn't really find the Browning quotes and the tone of the inscription frightening or interesting, but I doubted that she would believe me. It was too late for that now. I only had my profession to blame for my ultra-sensitivity to the use of language. Most people would probably have shrugged it off as a bit of a laugh and let it go by.

I thought of Alice Langham and my vain hopes that we would somehow become friends, perhaps even more. I had led a lonely existence for some years, and it now looked very much as if I was going to die a lonely death, too. I had lied to Miss Scott about nobody else knowing what I was up to. Alice knew where I was going, and she thought the inscription as disturbing as I did, so perhaps when she didn't hear from me in a few days, she would call the police. Even if they came here, it would no doubt be too late by then. I hoped she didn't decide to come here by herself. I couldn't bear the thought of her getting killed, too, just because of my stupid curiosity. Not that I would be around to feel sad or guilty.

Perhaps, if I got the chance, I could let Miss Scott know that I wasn't the only one interested in her. In which case she would probably kill me quickly, withdraw all her money from the bank and take the next flight to some tax-free island

paradise with no extradition treaty, if such a place existed. Otherwise, she could probably just lie her way out of it all. After all, she had succeeded in murder before.

Whichever way I looked at things, there didn't seem much hope for me.

Then I heard the doorbell ring upstairs.

All I could hear was a distant rumble of voices. I couldn't distinguish a word that was being said, nor who was saying it. Footsteps passed overhead and disappeared into one of the rooms above me. I could still hear the voices, but less distinctly now. I assumed that Miss Scott was one of them, and I had a terrible feeling that Barnes was the other. She must have phoned him while I was out cold and asked him to come and help her get rid of me. I knew they had an unusual relationship from what she had told me before I passed out, but I also got the impression that despite Barnes's taunts and threats, she could manipulate him. And even if it cost her a fraction of her fortune, getting me properly disposed of was probably worth it.

Don't let me give you the impression that these thoughts passing through my foggy brain left me feeling calm and unruffled. They didn't. I was terrified, and I never stopped struggling against my bonds, only succeeding in drawing them tighter around my wrists and ankles. Just in case the visitor *wasn't* Barnes, I even tried to yell out, but nothing got through the gag stuffed in my mouth and held there with my own tie. I tried banging my feet against the floor, but it made no noise and only hurt my damaged ankle. I could find no other way to attract attention, so in the end I simply lay there limp and defeated. There was nothing to do but await my inevitable fate.

After a while, things went quiet and I couldn't really tell whether the visitor had left. I was drifting in and out of consciousness. Then I heard another noise from upstairs. This time it sounded like a table or a lamp being knocked over. There was a rumbling sound, then the noise of glass or pottery breaking, someone jumping up and down on the floor above. Then I thought I heard a scream. Were Barnes and Miss Scott fighting?

Whatever was happening, it seemed to go on for a long time, then there was silence again. I heard footsteps above me, almost certainly just one pair, and I couldn't tell whether it was Miss Scott or Barnes who had survived the fight. I wasn't even sure which of them I *hoped* had won. I didn't think it mattered. Either or both would probably want to kill me.

The footsteps receded—upstairs, I thought—and then everything went silent again. Was nobody coming for me? Was I just going to be abandoned to die here of starvation? Left to rot? What if he'd killed her and was just going to leave? Would her weekly cleaning lady find me before I expired? I had no idea.

More footsteps, back on the main floor again. I tried to shout again, but I don't think I produced much noise. All I knew was that I would rather Barnes or Miss Scott kill me here and now than starve to death.

Then the cellar door opened and someone turned on the light.

My breath caught in my throat as I turned slowly and painfully to get a view of who was coming down the stairs. Whether it was Miss Scott or Barnes, I knew I was doomed either way.

But it wasn't either of them; it was Alice Langham stumbling down towards me, holding on to the railing to stop herself from falling. Her blouse and jacket were torn, her hair disheveled, and there was blood smeared on her face and all down her front. Her tights were ripped, too, and she had scratches, cuts and blood on her legs. One shoe was missing.

When she reached the ground, Alice staggered towards me. I couldn't read the expression on her face because of all the blood and her wide eyes, but for one terrifying moment I thought I had misjudged everything, everyone, and had the irrational idea that Alice was party to whatever evil had been going on here.

But she fell to her knees beside me and started fumbling with the ropes at my ankles and wrists. I noticed that some of her fingernails were bloody and torn and realized how hard and painful it must be for her to unfasten the tight ropes. But she managed it. Then she removed my tie from my mouth and pulled out the wadded rag Miss Scott had used as a gag.

When Alice had finally finished and I could sit up and rub the circulation back into my hands, I reached up and touched her cheek and she fell forward into my arms. We stayed like that for some time, a tender tableau, Alice sobbing gently against my chest as I stroked the back of her head and muttered reassuring nonsense in her ear. I don't know which one of us moved first, but it was Alice who said, "We should get out of here. I don't know how long she'll be out. And who knows whether Barnes will turn up?"

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I hit her with the poker."

I was still dizzy, and it took me a little time to regain my sense of balance, but we hobbled and limped our way back upstairs and found Miss Scott still unconscious beside the fireplace in the sitting room, blood matting the side of her head. I found a slow, steady pulse, so she was still alive, but I guessed she would be out for a long time. The place was a wreck, furniture knocked over, the teapot broken in the hearth, a canteen of cutlery scattered about the place, some of the knives red with blood, stained on the carpet and sheepskin rug, a few paintings hanging loose at strange angles on the wall.

"It must have been a hell of a fight," I said to Alice.

She just nodded and winced as she did so.

Then I picked up the telephone to call the police and an ambulance.

We waited outside for the police, sitting on the top step. It was a mild evening, the sky a burnt orange streaked with long grey wisps of cloud. The rain had stopped and the drying brown and lemon leaves rustled in the breeze. I was grateful to be out in the fresh air again. We both sat silently and breathed in deep for a while. I held Alice's hand, which was shaking as much as mine. Then I asked her why she had come to Miss Scott's house and what had happened upstairs.

"I asked to see you," she said. "I'd noticed your car when I arrived. The same one I saw parked outside school earlier today. She tried to tell me you weren't here, that she had two cars. We talked, argued. Then she admitted you'd been here but said you'd started feeling ill and had to lie down."

"That bit's partly true," I said, remembering the sweet strong tea, no doubt masking the taste of whatever drugs she had added. Benzodiazepine, she had said.

"I was more than suspicious by then, so told her I wanted to go up and see you. She asked me if I fancied a drink first. I said no. Things were pretty tense between us, but I didn't expect what happened next. I stood up and said I wanted to go upstairs and see if you were all right now. She came at me with the poker. Luckily I managed to dodge the blow and it smashed a lamp or a vase or something. We struggled, she dropped the poker. I used my knee on her. I don't really remember what happened after that except I've never been in such a fight before. It seemed to go on forever." She shook her head. "I think I got to the point where I didn't care how much I hurt her as long as she stopped trying to hurt me."

"It was a fight for your life," I said, squeezing her hand. She winced at the pain. "Sorry. She'd have killed you, too."

"How could she hope to get away with two murders just like that?"

"She'd gotten away with murder before. She was desperate. Her plan was unravelling. But what made you come here? We thought Miss Scott was Barnes's victim, didn't we?"

"First off, it was just a feeling. You know, like you hear about in those American cop shows. Something stinks, or feels *hinky*. Is that the right word? Something felt not quite right, anyway, and I was getting more anxious. It was gnawing away at me all the time I was trying to concentrate on teaching my class. I couldn't stop thinking about you and Barnes and Marguerite Scott. After class, I got back on my computer and looked up everything I could find about her husband's disappearance. There wasn't very much, and most of what was there was there because he was a fairly important player in the financial field. Sort of famous. He has his own Wikipedia page, at any rate. He was forty-five at the time of his death, probably about twenty years older than his wife."

I was in my early fifties, having retired early. "Forty-five's not old," I said.

"As that's *my* age, I would have to agree with you. But I said *older*, not old. Anyway, one thing that leaped out at me was the date of his disappearance. September 28, 2010. That was seven years from the time Marguerite Scott came back from lunch drunk and got her marching orders. I can't prove it, but I'm sure she'd been out with Barnes. Anyway, I knew already that her husband's body had never been found, that he was supposed to have drowned, and I also knew that it takes seven years before an official declaration of death can be issued in absentia. That made me think. The inscription, Marguerite Scott's erratic behavior around that date, her cold and distant manner. I was starting to think by then that I must have misread the whole business, got it backwards, and that Barnes wasn't about to harm Miss Scott but was somehow her accomplice, and perhaps the point of the inscription was to remind her that she really did like killing, or really had killed, not that he was going to kill her. That was when I decided to follow you out here."

"And I'm glad you did," I said.

"I know it wasn't very logical thinking. I mean, the police can't have suspected anything back in 2010, or they would have questioned her more thoroughly. Besides, she was in a cafe with lots of other people when her husband drowned. Lots of people saw her. She had the ideal alibi."

"Only it wasn't her husband who drowned," I said. "It was Barnes. And he didn't die."

Alice needed a few stitches here and there and some tape around her ribs, while I had my ankle set, which meant I had to walk with a stick for a while. Fortunately for me, Marguerite Scott had dragged me down the cellar steps head first rather than feet, so except for a few bruises around my lower back, I was otherwise in fairly decent shape for a man my age, the doctor said.

A few days after our ordeal, the forensic team dug up two bodies on Marguerite Scott's property. One belonged to her husband, George Scott, who, as I had explained to Alice and the police already, had never made it to Cornwall for the holiday on which he supposedly drowned. The other body, far fresher, was Barnes Corrigan, who had been dead only since the end of September, not so long after he had sent the Browning to Marguerite Scott. Both had their throats cut.

Marguerite Scott was still in hospital under observation. Fortunately, her skull hadn't been fractured, but she was suffering from serious concussion, and she had a hell of a headache. As yet, she hadn't told the police anything, but it was just a matter of time. Besides, the superintendent told us that they already had plenty of evidence to convict her even if she didn't confess.

As regards cause of death, we were informed a little later that the search team had found enough benzodiazepines in Miss Scott's house to knock out a small army. The superintendent also remarked that, given the amount of blood in the soil around the makeshift graves, she must have dumped the bodies in before cutting their throats, so as not to leave traces of blood in the house. As both George and Barnes had not been dead, but merely unconscious, when they were killed, their hearts had still been working to pump blood from the throat wounds. There were no traces of benzodiazepines in what was left of George's body after seven years, but the pathologist had hopes of finding traces still in Barnes's system. Not that it mattered; we could all imagine how she killed her victims. First she incapacitated them with drugs, then she dumped them in a shallow grave and slit their throats before burying them. Nice woman.

And now I knew why Miss Scott had been worried enough about the inscription I had showed her to risk killing me, too. If the wrong people had found out about it, Barnes Corrigan and his whereabouts would have become an issue. Surely someone somewhere would have missed him. Miss Scott had clearly surmised that I wasn't going to stop asking questions about the inscription, and she was right to believe that. I knew when I first saw the words that there was a warped and vindictive intelligence behind them, though I will admit I had no idea that I would experience such an abrupt reversal and discover that the most warped and vindictive intelligence in the whole affair lay elsewhere, in the form of Miss Scott herself. My initial analysis had been terribly flawed, seeing the whole thing as a teacher-student relationship and Barnes as the psychopathic intelligence behind it all. But that wasn't the case at all.

I would like nothing more than to finish by saying that Alice Langham and I were married in such and such a church on such a such a date, but we weren't. Alice had no desire to marry again, and I had no objection to our living together, so I sold my little pile of stones up in Ripon and moved into her bijou Lincolnshire cottage. Alice still teaches at Linford School, where she is something of a celebrity, and I still enjoy the occasional day out browsing the second-hand bookshops, only

now I examine what I buy far more closely. Sometimes, in these chilly winter evenings, we sit before the crackling fire and, at Alice's request, I read to her my translations of Ovid. The erotic poems, of course.

