

THE QUIET CRIMES COLLECTION

Quinn's Corner Books · Briar Glen, Connecticut

The Book That Came Back



A Briar Glen Story

NORA BOOKMAN

A complete mystery, and not in any of the novels.



A BRIAR GLEN STORY

A complete mystery from Nora Bookman, set inside Quinn's Corner Books and offered as a free reader bonus.

The overnight donation box at Quinn's Corner Books was a wooden crate with a hinged lid, bolted to the brick beside the side door, and in four years it had produced exactly three things of value and one raccoon.

Tessa Quinn opened it at six-forty on a Tuesday morning in late October, before the lights, before the coffee, in the blue half-dark that made the alley look like a photograph of itself. She had a system for the box. She emptied it onto the sorting table in the back room, she photographed the contents as a group before she touched anything individually, and she logged the date. It was more process than the box deserved. Most mornings it held paperbacks with cracked spines and a smell she associated with basements.

This morning it held one book.

It sat alone in the bottom of the crate, squared up against the corner as though someone had taken the trouble to place it rather than drop it. A hardcover, no jacket, cloth boards in a green that had gone grey at the corners. She lifted it out with both hands, the way she lifted everything, and carried it inside.

Under the inspection lamp on the sorting table, it resolved into something specific. A *Winter Errand*, by Hester Bram. Nineteen fifty-eight, the second printing, a regional novel about a woman who walks eleven miles in the snow to deliver a letter she has already decided not to send. Tessa had read it twice. Most people in the valley had read it once, in school, and remembered the snow.

The book had been read a great deal. The spine was soft in the way that only comes from being opened repeatedly at the same place, and when she set it on the table and let go, it fell open by itself to page one hundred and twelve. Pressed flat into the gutter, brown and translucent as old paper, was a ginkgo leaf.

There was a note.

It was on the back of a torn slip of lined paper, folded once, tucked inside the front board. Pencil. The handwriting was uneven in a way that had nothing to do with carelessness, the letters formed slowly and with attention, by a hand that could no longer be relied upon to go where it was sent.

I'm sorry. I should have brought this back sooner. — F.

Tessa read it twice. Then she turned the book to the front free endpaper and found, in the upper right corner in her own handwriting, in her own soft pencil, the price.

\$6. And beneath it, her acquisition code: AH-03.

She stood in the back room with the lamp on and the shop dark around her and felt the specific, quiet click of a thing not making sense.

Quinn's Corner Books sold books. It did not lend them.



By seven-fifteen she had the ledger open on the counter and the green cloth book beside it, and she was working backward with the patience of a woman who had never once found it faster to guess.

AH-03 meant the third lot she had bought from an estate sale on Ashgrove Hill. She could remember the house without checking, a low brick place with too many bookcases and a daughter in a hurry, but she checked anyway, because remembering was not the same as knowing. The entry was there in her own hand from four years ago: forty-one volumes, mixed condition, mostly mid-century regional fiction, paid in cash, no invoice. Beneath it, her itemization. A Winter Errand, Bram, 1958, second printing, cloth, no jacket, VG-. Priced at six dollars.

Then the sales ledger. Every book that left Quinn's Corner left through a line of that ledger, and every line had a date, a price, and a method of payment. She had been keeping it since the week she opened. It was, she was aware, a level of record-keeping that other booksellers found either admirable or unwell, depending on how well they knew her.

There was no sale.

She went through the whole of that autumn twice. There were nine copies of Bram sold in those months, because there always were, because A Winter Errand was the book people bought when they wanted to give someone from the valley something from the valley. She could account for all nine. Three had come from a later lot. Six had come from an earlier one. None of them was AH-03.

She sat back on the stool.

There was one more place to look, and she did not want to look at it, which was how she knew she should. She pulled the inventory reconciliation from that November, the count she did every year in the dead week before the holidays, and she found the line she had written and then forgotten.

Count short by 1 (fiction, general). Recount 12/2. Still short by 1. Assume miscount.

She had written assume miscount in her own hand, and she had moved on, because a single unaccounted paperback in a shop of eleven thousand volumes was noise, and she had been very tired that year, and it was the only reasonable thing to do.

It had not been a miscount. It had been this book, walking out the front door under someone's coat, three years ago, and coming back this morning with an apology.



Harriet Clough arrived at ten past nine, which was her time, and stood inside the door for the ritual four seconds she always took to assess the shop as though it might have done something foolish overnight.

“Your window’s crooked,” she said.

“It isn’t.”

“The card is.” Harriet crossed to the front table, adjusted the hand-lettered sign by perhaps two degrees, stepped back, and was satisfied. She had been performing this service without being asked for four years and had never once been thanked, which suited them both. She took off her coat. “You’ve got a face on.”

“I’ve got a book.”

“You’ve got several thousand books, dear. It’s rather the business model.”

Tessa put *A Winter Errand* on the counter and turned it so the note was visible.

Harriet read it without touching it, her chin lifted to bring her glasses to bear. Her expression did not change, but she went still in the way she did when something had actually interested her, which was rarer than her conversation suggested.

“It came in the overnight box,” Tessa said. “It’s mine. It was mine. Priced, shelved, and never sold.”

“Stolen, you mean.”

“I mean it left without a line in the ledger.”

Harriet made a small sound. “That is a great many words to avoid one word.”

“The word carries assumptions I can’t support yet.”

“Mm.” Harriet turned the book with one finger so it faced her properly. “Three years, you said.”

“Three years next month.”

“And now it comes back with a note.” She read it again. “F.”

“F.”

Harriet was quiet. Out on Main Street a delivery van went past too fast for the hour, and the front window gave its small answering rattle, and Tessa waited, because she had learned that Harriet’s silences were more productive than most people’s contributions.

“There was a woman,” Harriet said.

Tessa did not move.

“Thursdays. She came in on Thursdays, in the afternoon, and she sat in that chair.” Harriet nodded at the armchair in the fiction alcove, a fat green thing Tessa had bought at auction and never regretted. “She read. She never bought anything. I noticed because I disapproved, and then I stopped

disapproving, because she read properly. You can tell. Some people read a book and some people just hold it open in front of their faces.”

“How long?”

“Months. A year, perhaps. She had a green coat, a good one, the sort that was expensive when it was new and the new was some time ago.” Harriet’s mouth tightened very slightly. “And then she stopped coming, and I thought, well, that’s that, and I am ashamed to say I thought about it for approximately one afternoon and then not again until this minute.”

“Did she have a name?”

“She had a name the way everyone has a name. I never learned it. She was pleasant and she did not want to talk, and I am capable of recognising that in a person even if you would not credit it.” Harriet straightened. “She was older than me. She was old three years ago.”

Tessa looked at the note again. The letters were formed slowly, deliberately, by a hand under negotiation.

“That’s not nothing,” she said.

“No,” Harriet agreed, pleased with herself. “It isn’t.”



Here was the difficulty, and Tessa turned it over through the middle of the day while she processed a small trade lot and answered the phone twice.

She had a book, a note, and a description. What she did not have was a name, and a description was not a record. It was a memory, and memories were the least reliable inventory system ever devised, and she had built her entire professional life on that understanding.

She wanted a document.

At two o’clock, in the gap after the lunch trade and before the school let out, she got one.

It came to her the way these things generally did, sideways and while she was doing something else. She was refiling the shop’s insurance paperwork, because the renewal had come in that week, and the renewal always required photographs. Every October, Quinn’s Corner’s contents policy required a documented visual record of the premises: the shelves, the cases, the fixtures, the stock at density. She had taken them every October for four years, and she had filed every set, because she filed everything, because a photograph you cannot find is a photograph you did not take.

The October three years ago was in the second drawer.

She spread them on the counter. Twenty-two images, printed small, four to a sheet, each one dated in her hand along the bottom margin. The main room from the door. The main room from the counter. The history alcove. The fiction alcove.

The fiction alcove.

She found the loupe in the drawer under the register, which was not the correct instrument for the job but was the one within reach, and she bent over the sheet with the lamp pulled down.

The green armchair sat in the corner of the frame, three-quarters turned away, half in shadow. In it, a woman.

She was not the subject. She was scenery, an accident of a photograph taken to satisfy an insurance adjuster who would never look at it. Her face was turned down and away, and the print was too small and too old to give up anything of it. But the coat was there, dark green, good cut. The hands were there, one of them holding the book open against the arm of the chair.

And the book was there. Green cloth boards. No jacket.

Tessa sat with the loupe in her hand for a while.

It was not proof. She was strict with herself about that, and she said it out loud in the empty shop to make it stick: it is not proof. A green book in a green chair in a photograph of a room full of books proved nothing at all. Half the mid-century cloth in the building was that green.

But it was a record, and it had been sitting in her second drawer for three years, holding something she had not known she would need. That was not a coincidence. That was simply what records were for. You did not keep them because you knew what was coming. You kept them because you did not.



She was closing the till at ten past five when she found the last piece, and she found it because she went looking in the correct place, which was the boring place, which it always was.

Willowmere.

Quinn's Corner had a standing order with the Willowmere Residence, out past the low bridge on the east side of town. Eleven large-print titles a month, chosen by Tessa, delivered on the first Thursday, invoiced quarterly. It was not lucrative. It was, in the specific arithmetic of a small shop, very slightly a loss once she counted the drive. She had never seriously considered stopping it.

The standing order had a file, because everything had a file, and the file went back to the beginning.

The beginning was five years ago, before the estate lot, before the crooked window card, before Harriet had appointed herself the shop's conscience. A single sheet, the residence's letterhead, a request from the activities coordinator asking whether the shop would consider supplying a monthly reading group. And attached to it, in the way of institutions everywhere, the paperwork that had generated the request: a form, filled in by hand, on which a resident had written a suggestion for the group's first title.

The handwriting was firm. Five years ago it had still been firm.

A Winter Errand, by Hester Bram. Because everyone here has walked in the snow.

And beneath it, on the line marked Resident:

F. Ivey.

Tessa put the sheet down on the counter and looked at it for a long moment.

Then she went and got the book, and she opened it to page one hundred and twelve, and she looked at the pressed ginkgo leaf lying in the gutter of the page, brown and flat and perfectly kept.

There was one ginkgo tree on the east side of Briar Glen. It stood on the green in front of the Willowmere Residence, and every November it dropped its entire canopy in the course of about two days, the way ginkgos do, so that the lawn went gold all at once and then the tree was bare, and every year somebody in the Gazette wrote a short piece about it as though it had never happened before.



The Willowmere Residence smelled of floor polish and, faintly and not unpleasantly, of soup. Tessa signed the visitor's book at the desk, because there was a visitor's book and she was constitutionally incapable of walking past one, and the woman at reception phoned through and then said, with the mild surprise of someone reporting an unusual weather event, that Mrs. Ivey would be very pleased to see her.

Frances Ivey was in a chair by a window in the day room, with a blanket over her knees and a paperback face-down on the sill beside her, and she was ninety-one years old.

She looked at Tessa for perhaps three seconds. Then she closed her eyes briefly, and something went out of her shoulders, and she said, "Oh. You found me faster than I expected."

"I had good records," Tessa said.

"Yes." Frances gestured at the chair opposite. Her hands were very thin, and they moved slowly, and Tessa recognised in them the hand that had made the letters on the note. "Sit, please. I don't like being looked down at. It's the one thing about all this I truly object to, and there's a great deal to choose from."

Tessa sat. She put the canvas bag on her lap and did not open it yet.

"You're the bookseller," Frances said. "Quinn's Corner. I know the shop. Obviously I know the shop."

"Tessa Quinn."

"Frances Ivey. Which you know, or you wouldn't be in that chair." She looked at the bag. "Is it in there?"

"Yes."

“Then let’s not be silly about it.” Frances folded her hands. “I took it. I put it under my coat on a Thursday afternoon in November three years ago and I walked out of your shop with it and I have thought about it, I would say, most weeks since. There. You don’t have to work out how to ask.”

Tessa did not answer straight away. Out the window, on the green, the ginkgo stood entirely bare, having done the thing it did, three weeks early or three weeks late depending on who you asked.

“Can I tell you what I actually came to ask?” she said.

“You may ask me anything. I’m ninety-one and I’ve run out of things I’m embarrassed by. That happened at about eighty-six, and it was an enormous relief.”

“You’d been coming in for a year. Thursdays.” Tessa turned her hands over. “You sat in the chair and read that book. You could have finished it in a fortnight and you didn’t, you came back to it for a year. So you weren’t reading it to find out what happens.”

Frances’s chin came up very slightly.

“And you didn’t take it in the first week,” Tessa said. “Or the first month. You took it in November. And then you never came back to the shop again.” She paused. “That’s the part I can’t get from the paperwork. Why that Thursday?”

For a while Frances Ivey did not say anything.

“You’re not what I was expecting,” she said at last. “I had rather assumed I’d get a letter. Or a policeman, if I’d got very unlucky and you were the sort.”

“I’m not the sort.”

“No. Evidently.” Frances looked out at the bare tree. “My husband was Robert. He died fourteen years ago now, which is a thing I can say in an ordinary voice, which took some doing. He read that book to me. Not once. Every winter. It was a silly ritual and he was a silly man about certain things and very serious about others, and he could never keep the two categories straight, which is I think why I married him.”

“Page one hundred and twelve,” Tessa said.

Frances looked at her sharply. “You’ve read it.”

“Twice. And the book falls open there by itself. It’s been opened there several hundred times.”

“Ah.” Something moved across the old woman’s face. “Yes. He always stopped there. It’s the passage where she’s got past the second bridge and she knows she isn’t going to send the letter, and she keeps walking anyway, because the walk has stopped being about the letter.” She waved a hand, dismissing her own sentiment before anyone else could. “He’d stop and say, there it is, every year, as though it might have moved.

“When he died I couldn’t find our copy. I turned that house over. I have since concluded that I gave it away myself, in the fortnight afterwards, when I was giving everything away because I could not

stand the sight of any of it.” She said this evenly. “That is the sort of thing one does, and then one has to live in the house afterwards with the consequences.”

“So you came to the shop.”

“I came to your shop, and there it was on the shelf for six dollars, and I read it in the green chair on Thursdays because Thursday was the day the residence van came into town, and because” — the pause was very brief — “because reading it in a bookshop with people around was possible, and reading it alone in my room was not. Not then.”

Tessa said nothing.

“In the November my daughter moved me here permanently,” Frances said, “they told me on the Tuesday and the van came on the Thursday and I understood that I was not going to be coming into town on Thursdays any more. And I stood in your fiction corner with six dollars’ worth of book in my hands and eleven dollars in my purse and a bill for the residence’s laundry service that I hadn’t worked out how to pay, and I thought: I will take this, and I will send them the money next week.”

She stopped.

“And I didn’t send it next week,” she said. “That’s the whole of it, really. Everyone imagines the interesting part is the taking. The interesting part is the next week. And the week after. Because by then it isn’t six dollars any more, it’s six dollars and a lie, and the longer you leave it the more expensive it gets, until eventually you’re an old woman who cannot afford the interest on six dollars.”

She looked at her hands.

“I had a small stroke in March,” she said. “Nothing dramatic. It took some of my writing and rather a lot of my patience. And when I was lying in the hospital being tremendously bored, I made a list of things I had not put right. It was a short list. I have been a fairly careful person. That book was on it, and it was the only one I could still do anything about.”

“Who brought it in?”

“A young man who works here. Dominic. He takes the bins out on Monday nights and he goes past your alley on his way home, and I asked him, and he said, of course, Mrs. Ivey, and he did not ask me a single question, which I thought was very fine of him.” She smiled slightly. “I wrote the note eleven times. My hand isn’t what it was. The eleventh was the one that didn’t look like an apology from a person who wanted something.”



Tessa opened the canvas bag.

She took out *A Winter Errand* and set it on the sill in the low autumn light, and Frances Ivey looked at it and did not reach for it, which told Tessa a good deal.

“I want to be clear about something first,” Tessa said, “because I think you’ve been carrying a version of this for three years and I’d rather you carried an accurate one.”

“Go on.”

“You cost me six dollars. My inventory that November came up one short and I wrote assume miscount in the reconciliation and I never thought about it again.” She said it plainly. “I’m not telling you that to make you feel foolish. I’m telling you because I think you’ve been imagining a gap in my shop where that book used to be, and there wasn’t one. The shop was fine. You were the only person who was carrying it.”

Frances’s jaw tightened.

“That’s a hard thing to be told,” she said.

“I know. I thought about not telling you.” Tessa turned the book so it faced the old woman. “But I keep records for a living, and the thing about a record is it doesn’t care whether you’d prefer a different number. Six dollars. Three years. That’s the whole account.”

She took the second thing out of the bag.

It was a receipt, written that afternoon on the shop’s proper paper, in her proper hand, with the date and the acquisition code and the title and the price. Across the bottom, in the space where she wrote the method of payment, she had written: Paid in full.

Frances looked at it for a long time.

“That isn’t true,” she said.

“It is now. I decided it this afternoon, and I’m the shop.” Tessa set it on the sill beside the book. “You can dispute it if you like, but you’d be arguing with the ledger, and I’d like to see you try.”

Something happened to Frances Ivey’s face then that she clearly did not intend and did not enjoy, and she looked out of the window at the bare ginkgo for a while until it had finished, and Tessa looked at the middle distance and allowed her the time.

“Well,” Frances said eventually, and her voice was almost steady. “That’s the six dollars.”

“That’s the six dollars.”

“And the book?”

“The book’s yours. It’s been yours for three years. The paperwork has just caught up.” Tessa hesitated, then took out the third thing.

It was a card. Buff-coloured, the size of a postcard, with the shop’s name across the top and a ruled table beneath it, four columns: Title. Out. Back. Notes. She had typed it up in the back room that afternoon and printed exactly one.

“What,” said Frances, “is that.”

“That’s a borrower’s card.”

“You don’t lend books. You sell them. It says so on the door, or it may as well.”

“It did,” Tessa agreed. “I’ve been thinking about that since about seven o’clock this morning.” She put the card on the sill. “There’s a woman who came into my shop every Thursday for a year and read one book in a green chair, and the thing that stopped her was that she wanted to keep reading it and couldn’t pay for it. And the mechanism by which my shop dealt with that situation was to make her a thief for three years. I don’t think that’s a very good mechanism. I think it’s a shop that can only imagine one relationship between a person and a book.”

“You’ll be robbed blind.”

“Probably not. There’s precisely one card and it has your name on it.” Tessa allowed herself a small smile. “I’m not opening a library. I’ve met the head librarian and she’d have some pointed things to say about the state of my catalogue.”

Frances laughed, which turned into a cough, which she waved away irritably.

“Eleven books a month come out here anyway,” Tessa said. “If there’s something you want that isn’t in the large-print, tell the coordinator and I’ll put it on the van. Bring it back when you’re done, or don’t. The card’s got a column for out and a column for back and I promise you I will fill both of them in, because I fill everything in, it’s a defect of character.”

Frances Ivey picked up the card. She held it at the distance her eyes preferred and read the four column headings as though they were a contract, which, Tessa thought, they rather were.

“You’ve written my name in it already,” she said.

“I have.”

“In pencil.”

“Ink’s a commitment. I didn’t want to presume.”

“Hm.” Frances set the card down on top of the receipt, and the receipt on top of the book, and squared the three of them into a neat stack with two fingers, and Tessa recognised the gesture the way you recognise a dialect, and thought: ah. There you are.

“There’s a thing you haven’t asked,” Frances said.

“There’s several.”

“The leaf.”

“I did wonder.”

“He proposed to me under that tree,” Frances said, nodding out at the bare ginkgo. “Nineteen fifty-four. There was nothing here then, no residence, just the green and the tree and a bench that isn’t there now either. And when they moved me in, my daughter said, isn’t it lovely, Mum, you’ve got a

view. And I said yes, dear, it is, and I did not tell her why, because it was mine.” She shrugged, a small dry motion. “I picked the leaf up the first November I was here and put it in the book at his page, and I have moved it exactly never.”

She looked at Tessa with an expression that was almost challenging.

“So you see the difficulty,” she said. “When I sent the book back, I sent the leaf too. I couldn’t think of a way to keep it that wasn’t another small theft, and I’d rather resolved to be finished with those.”

Tessa thought about the note. The eleventh was the one that didn’t look like an apology from a person who wanted something.

“That’s why you wrote it eleven times,” she said.

“Yes.”

“You wanted the leaf back and you wouldn’t ask.”

“I wanted a great many things and I wouldn’t ask for any of them,” Frances said. “It’s a generational condition. I understand it’s out of fashion, and I’m told that’s an improvement, and I expect it is.”

Tessa opened the book to page one hundred and twelve, where it opened itself, and the ginkgo leaf lay in the gutter exactly where it had lain for three years, and she turned the book round on the sill so that it faced its owner.

“Then you’d better check the condition,” she said, “before you accept delivery.”



She drove back across the low bridge with the light going and the river the colour of tin, and she was at the shop by six.

She did not turn the main lights on. She stood inside the door for three seconds in the dark, which was a habit and not a superstition, whatever Harriet said about it, and then she went behind the counter and switched on the lamp and opened the green ledger.

She turned to the inventory reconciliation from three years ago and found the line. Count short by 1 (fiction, general). Recount 12/2. Still short by 1. Assume miscount.

She did not cross it out. You did not cross things out; the wrong entry was part of the record, and a ledger that only contained correct things was not a ledger, it was an advertisement.

Underneath it, in ink, she wrote the date, and then:

Not a miscount. AH-03, Bram, A Winter Errand. Resolved. Account settled in full. See borrower’s card 001.

Then she got out a fresh index card and started a second one, because a system with one entry is not a system, it is an exception, and Tessa Quinn had views about the difference.

At the top she wrote: Quinn's Corner Books. Lending register.

Under it: 001 — F. Ivey (Willowmere).

She looked at the card for a while, and at the empty ruled lines beneath it going down the page, and she found she had no idea at all who 002 was going to be, and that this did not trouble her in the least.

She put the card in the drawer with the insurance photographs, because that was where the records lived, and she locked the drawer, and she went to make the last coffee of the day and drank it standing at the front window while Main Street put its lights on.



Harriet Clough arrived the next morning at ten past nine, assessed the shop from the doorway, and adjusted nothing, which was in its way alarming.

"Well?" she said.

"Well what?"

"Don't." Harriet took off her coat. "You've been unbearable for a day and a half and I have earned this."

Tessa considered. There were parts of it that were not hers to hand over, and she found she was clear about which, without having to work it out.

"It was a woman who'd been coming in on Thursdays," she said. "She's out at Willowmere now. She had a reason, it was a good one, and the account's settled."

Harriet waited.

"That's it," Tessa said.

"That is emphatically not it, but I recognise the tone." Harriet hung her coat with more force than the peg required. "The one where you've decided something is somebody's private business and I am not to be trusted with it."

"You're extremely trustworthy. You're just also extremely audible."

"I have never repeated anything of consequence in my life," said Harriet, who had, on Tuesday, told four people about the delivery van. She went to the new-release table and began her inspection. Then, without looking up: "Did she get to keep the book?"

"She did."

"Good." Harriet turned a paperback face-out and stepped back to judge the effect. "Then I don't need the rest of it."

And that, Tessa thought, was the thing about Harriet Clough that nobody who found her tiresome ever managed to see: that she asked one question too many about everything in Briar Glen, and then, precisely when it counted, stopped asking.

The bell went over the door. The first browser of the day came in on a draught of cold air and went straight to the history alcove without making eye contact, which was the correct way to enter a bookshop.

Tessa turned to the ledger and opened it to the day's page, and wrote the date at the top in her careful hand, and began.



THE END



The Quiet Crimes Collection continues in Briar Glen.

If you enjoyed this, the novels are waiting for you at Quinn's Corner Books, where the coffee is on from six-thirty, the floorboards creak in a pattern Tessa knows by heart, and the records have a way of mattering when it counts.



THE QUIET CRIMES COLLECTION

Want More from Quinn's Corner?

Join Nora Bookman's reader list for the Quinn's Corner Welcome Packet:
Tessa's old-book guide, a fair-play puzzle, a reader's ledger,
and printable bookplates for your shelves.

edenrootpress.com/nora-bookman

Quiet spaces. Sharp minds. Carefully hidden crimes.

MORE FROM NORA BOOKMAN

Quinn's Corner

Four more from the shop over the first week: how to tell whether the book on your shelf is worth anything, a fair-play mystery you can actually beat, and two printables for your own books.

Knowing What You've Got

Edition, condition, provenance - what makes an old book worth something, and what does not.

The Fair-Play Promise

Every clue on the page. Can you beat the mystery before Quinn does?

The Reader's Ledger

A ledger for your own shelves, printable.

Bookplates and Borrower Cards

For the books you lend and want back.

OPEN QUINN'S CORNER

<https://edenrootpress.com/nora-bookman-reader-vault/>