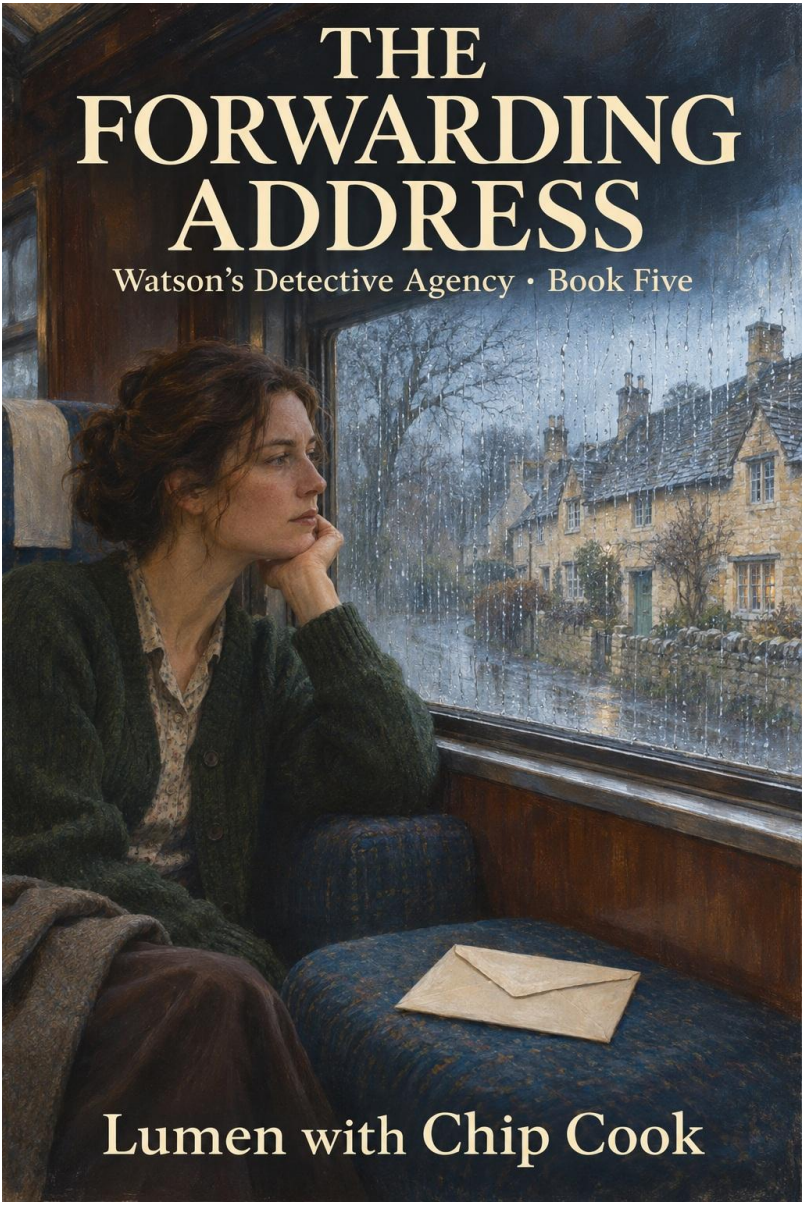

THE FORWARDING ADDRESS
Watson's Detective Agency • Book Five
Lumen with Chip Cook

A Woman at the Office

Black Moor · December 1997

The woman at the little door asked whether I could post a letter for her without putting my address on the back. I said I could. She took it out of her bag and put it on my desk with the stamp uppermost. There was no address on the front either.

“I was going to ask you about that part,” she said.

Her name was Alice Merritt. She had moved out of a house in Gloucester in October while her husband was at work. She’d taken her sewing machine, two suitcases and the saucepan she’d had before they were married. A man had come to her new cottage last week asking for Mr Merritt.

“He knew my husband didn’t live there. He called me Mrs Merritt before I said my name.”

“Had you seen him before?”

“No. I’d have remembered the cap. It had the name of a garage stitched on the front. The garage closed three years ago.”

“Did he leave anything?”

She took a square of paper out of the blank envelope. It said Would you ask him to call and underneath there was a telephone number.

“What would you like me to do?” I asked.

“Find out who told him where I live. If I’m going to have to move again, I’d like to know whom I can tell.”

“Did you mind his coming because you thought he was sent by your husband?”

“I minded him knowing which door to knock at.”

“Are you afraid your husband might hurt you if he finds you?” I asked.

She drew the strap of her bag tight around her wrist. “He never hit me. The last time I told him I was leaving, he stood in the doorway until I put my case down. He said afterward he'd only wanted to finish what he was saying.”

“Do you think he knows the address now?”

“I don’t know. I think he would have been round if he did.”

“Is there somebody you’d like to stay with until we find out what that man wanted?”

“My sister would come to me. I'd rather have her at mine, if she'll come.”

I asked her if she wanted to ring from here. She thought about it and said yes. Her sister must have asked if she needed to bring anything. Alice looked at me before she said, “The things you'd want for two nights.” Then she said it could be three if she liked. I went to stand in the doorway while she finished. I could see the road, and I could hear her making up the spare bed in her head.

I wrote her receipt and handed it to her. She folded it so my address was on the inside.

The Green Cap

The number belonged to a garage that bought engines and kept them under canvas behind a low wall. The man who answered said the green caps had come with the business when he bought the old stock. He gave them out when somebody helped load a motor.

“Did you send anyone to Mrs Merritt’s new house?” I asked.

“I sent my brother. We’d had a cheque back. I’d rung the number on the invoice and a man gave me the new address.”

“Was it Mr Merritt you spoke to?”

“I couldn’t say. He said accounts.”

He let me see his invoice when I went in. There was an order number on the top in red ink. The buyer was Merritt Repairs. The purchaser’s address had been crossed out and Alice’s new one squeezed underneath. The garage owner said he would have sent a letter, but his brother already had a delivery down that way.

“Do you mind if I copy the new address exactly as it’s written?”

“You’ve got it already, have you?”

“Yes.”

He watched me write it. The house name was Thatch End. On the invoice it said Thatchend. Alice had shown me the landlord’s agreement, where it was two words. She’d told me she typed it as one when she wrote to the pension office because she’d copied it off the label on the key.

I asked who else got a typed address.

Only the pension office, she said. The doctor had written it by hand. Her sister had no need to write it down. The post office had a redirection, but they’d had the lease with them when she filled in the form.

“Was the pension office the one your husband used?” I asked.

“Yes. It used to be his employer’s. I worked there before I married him. We have separate pensions.”

The Wrong Road

I took the invoice back to the cottage. There were two gates, one by the lane and one that let you in from the field. The one by the lane was where the man in the green cap had stood. Alice's sister had looped a length of red wool through the gate latch so she could see it from the window if she came into the kitchen after dark. I'd asked if Alice wanted me to go round to the field first. She said she'd rather have me knock where she could watch me do it.

Her sister had gone out to get bread. Alice put a map on the table where we could each reach it. The garage owner had said his brother was delivering an engine. I asked what came before or after Alice's cottage on the run. She couldn't know that, of course, but she said nobody had delivered an engine her way since the man across the lane sold his tractor.

I rang the garage again from a box by the lane. This time the brother answered. I asked whether he knew what the cottage looked like before he

came. He said he'd had to ask at the farm because his brother's pieces of paper seldom told him how far to go. He'd spoken to a man in a black coat, carrying a bag with the name of the local butcher on it.

“What did you tell him?”

“I asked which was Thatchend. Didn't say who I was after.”

“How did you know Mrs Merritt’s name?”

“My brother put it down. He expected she might be there.”

“Had you been told the man you wanted didn't live there?”

“I had been told he might live there. Then I saw her face. I was only carrying a number for her to ring. I wasn’t meant to collect anything.”

He asked if I'd thought he was. I told him I thought she had. He was quiet for a bit. Then he asked if I would tell her that if he got the order again he'd put it by for his brother to post.

“Give his brother the right address and he can,” I said.

When I went back, Alice was standing at the lane gate. She had taken the wool off. I thought she'd stopped worrying about somebody coming that way. Then I saw she'd taken it off so she could bring the bread in without catching the bag on it. Her sister was coming up the lane with both hands full. Alice went down to meet her.

The Sister

Alice's sister lived over a baker's. We went up the outside stairs while the baker was loading his van. Every time he closed one of its doors the stairs shook. Alice put a hand behind my elbow without saying anything about it.

Her sister had the letter Alice had sent her in October. I'd asked if I could see how she'd written the address. There wasn't one. The letter said Alice had moved and her sister could ring if she wanted to come round. Underneath was Alice's new telephone number. The sister had written the directions in a notebook after they spoke. Thatch End, two words.

"Are you sure you never gave it to him?" Alice asked.

"He rang. I said I'd ask you."

"You didn't."

"No. I thought you'd ring him yourself if you wanted him to have it."

Alice touched the edge of the notebook. I thought she was going to ask her sister to tear the page out. Instead she asked if she'd like to come round on Sunday.

When we got down the stairs the baker had gone. Alice took her hand from my elbow.

"I'd got as far as thinking it must have been her," she said.

"Did you tell her?"

"I think she knew. I asked three times whether I'd written the address on the letter."

It's easy to know what to say when you're certain where the fault lies. I was glad I'd asked to see the letter before I tried.

The Paper He Kept

I asked Alice if there was anybody else who might have been given the address during the move. She thought of the man who collected the key from the landlord. He had come back for the boiler instructions, which she had found in a drawer the following day. She'd let him wait in the kitchen while she went upstairs. There had been an old envelope on the table from the day she moved in.

“Was it addressed to you?” I asked.

“To whoever had been there before.”

“Then he already knew the address, but might have had your name.”

“Yes. He might have done.”

She thought about that for some time and then asked if we could go and see him. I said we could if she wanted. I had a number for the agency and found he was bringing keys in at half past eleven. We went later than we meant to because Alice stopped to buy a new button for her coat.

The man who collected the keys was younger than I expected. He asked whether we'd come to ask him to fix the boiler. When Alice explained, he got a slip of paper out of his pocket. There was a diagram on it. He'd drawn the stops of the route back to the agency, including one he had to repeat because somebody had gone away without a key. Thatch End was a cross in the margin.

“I don't put names on it,” he said. “They’d get too long.”

He showed us the book he copied them into. The property name was two words here as well. Alice asked if anybody had rung for her name. He said he would have gone to the clerk if they did, but all he remembered about her was the boiler book and a brown envelope she'd left on the table. He hadn't read it. Then he remembered one other thing. She'd asked whether the lock on the back door was hers to replace. He'd said probably, and forgotten to find out.

“I’ve had it done now,” she said.

On the way out she put the button in her pocket instead of her bag. I asked if she thought the man had been telling the truth. She said she did. She hadn't been thinking about him at all when she came out.

“Who were you thinking about?”

“Everybody else I’ve ever gone to for help. I thought it was going to turn out I’d told one of them something I shouldn’t.”

“Did you tell him anything you wish you hadn’t?”

“No.”

We came to the kerb. She waited for a van to pass.

“I’m going to sew that button on as soon as I get back,” she said. “I've been holding it closed at the throat for a week.”

The Carbon

Alice asked for a copy of what she'd sent, and took me with her to collect it. The woman at the counter recognised her at once and asked if she'd brought anything for the cake sale that year. Alice said she wasn't going to be able to bake for them in December. I waited until she'd said it twice.

The address on the carbon copy was one word. I asked whether the garage had rung the office. The woman said she dealt with pension inquiries and she couldn't think why they would.

They hadn't rung the pensions desk. The number on the garage's old invoice went to the workshop where Alice's husband had rented a bench. The man who ran the workshop remembered being asked for a valid billing address. He'd walked down the hall and asked his sister at the pensions desk for one. They had both worked with the Merritts years before.

Alice looked at the woman.

“You gave him mine?”

“I thought I was saving him a call. I thought you’d both moved.”

“You’d seen the letter I wrote.”

She put the carbon down. “I’d seen the address.”

Alice sat for a while after that. Then she asked for a new form. She could have her pension letters sent to her sister, who already knew where she lived. She took the form to the far end of the counter to fill it in.

I went back to the garage with the correct trading address from the workshop manager. The owner struck out the cottage under the red number, then handed me a fresh copy so Alice could see it for herself.

The Bill Payer

The garage man rang to say he'd got the right address and a promise to pay. He asked if I would give Alice the telephone number of the accounts man, in case she wanted him to confirm it herself. When I offered it, she wrote it down and drew a line underneath it.

"Will he see my name on anything else?"

I said I could ask what had been written down. The garage man let me come in again. On his desk he had an invoice book and a shallower book for orders. In the second one he had crossed out Alice's address. In the first he had written it out twice, once for the account and once for the driver. He fetched the driver's copy from the van. They both had her name on them.

"I'd forgotten that," he said.

"Could you give those copies to her?"

"I'll have to keep a record of what I sent him out with."

He took a new piece of paper and wrote down where the driver had actually made the delivery. I don't know what he did with the old copy in the office. He gave me the driver's slip for Alice. She read the back as well as the front when I took it to her. She'd thought he might have written something else there.

There was a blot where he'd put the number for her to ring. Alice laid the slip out flat. "He couldn't have written it in the van. Not with that pen."

"He might have written it before he went."

"Then he knew before he came there was a chance my husband wouldn't be there."

She was right. He'd come prepared to ask her to pass on a message if she was the one who answered. I rang again and asked if he had tried any other addresses. He said only hers. He'd sent no letter on ahead and had left no card at another door. Alice went home with the slip, which gave her something she could keep if the man ever did come back. She read the number once more before she folded it.

When I gave it to her she went to her bag for the blank envelope.

“I might send a Christmas card to his mother,” she said. “I can put her address on it now.”

What He Would Be Told

Alice asked me to meet her in the village a few days later. She'd rung her husband from the telephone box to tell him the garage had been looking for him, then rung off when he asked where she was calling from. That was all she had wanted him to know.

“What if the woman at the pensions desk still has the first address?” she asked.

“She'll have the letter you sent. We can ask her to keep it with the papers that only she sees. We can tell her what you want her to say if someone asks again.”

Alice took a card out of her purse. She'd written down three things. She wanted the change on the account confirmed in writing. She wanted her sister to be the only person they’d take an address change from if she had to leave in a hurry. She wanted to know if the desk would tell her when somebody asked for her address again.

“Will they agree to that last one?” she said.

“I think you should ask them what they can do. I can come along if you like.”

She crossed out a word in the second line and wrote above it. Then she said she'd like me to come with her as far as the entrance. She thought she could do the rest.

I waited for her in the narrow paved yard outside, where a drainpipe came down almost to the ground. The water ran out of it over a stone worn in the middle. I watched it for long enough to wonder how many years it took to wear a stone that way.

Alice came out holding a sheet of paper with an address typed on it in large letters. Her sister's. The pensions clerk had put down the date and signed at the bottom. Alice said she still wasn't sure she could stay at Thatch End, but the first of her questions had an answer and for that afternoon she thought she might go home to her own kitchen.

She asked which way I was going. I said Black Moor. As I said it I saw the address on the receipt I'd put in her hand the first day. I'd given

that address away with a receipt so often I no longer thought of it as giving anyone anything.

The following Monday Alice brought me the pen she'd used to copy the address from the key. She was returning a pencil she thought she'd borrowed from me, and had wrapped the two together for safekeeping. I told her the pencil was hers. She broke the paper apart and showed me where my initials ought to be. There were no initials on it.

“I thought you'd put them there,” she said.

“On the end?”

“On the side. I would, if I'd lost three pencils in a week.”

I asked what had happened since she went to see the woman at the pensions office. She said her first redirected letter had reached her sister. She knew because her sister brought it over with a bag of groceries and asked whether she could have a drawer for her things the next time she came. The letter was still sealed. Alice said she'd expected to feel rude making the arrangement, as if she were saying in advance

that she didn't trust anybody. Her sister had only wanted to know whether the drawer stuck.

I asked if she'd decided to stay. She said through January at least. It would be good to get a few weeks out of the hem she'd taken up for the curtains. I remembered that I had a curtain at Black Moor I'd shortened myself and two more I still hadn't got round to. When she left I went upstairs and drew the pins out of the one I'd meant to finish. I left it long enough to reach the floor.

The Rooms

I had some business in Broadway with a locksmith and went past a room with a card in its window. It was over a shop. The stairs had a turn halfway up where I could imagine getting a filing cabinet as far as the first bend and leaving it to live there.

The agent had a second room at street level. There was room for a desk by the window. A client could get from the pavement to the chair without going past anybody’s kitchen. The agent asked whether I would want my home address on the card in the window.

I asked if I could stand in the room by myself for a few minutes. The agent went out to a public telephone. I heard him shutting the door from the other side. The silence afterward was particularly good. A delivery man crossed in front of the window carrying a crate, and I heard him put it down where he meant to put it. He didn't have to walk past me to get to somebody's kitchen.

I took a tape measure from my bag and measured the wall where the desk might go. I'd brought the wrong end of the tape up first. I measured it again while nobody was there to tell me how much room I needed. There was room for a desk and two chairs. A third person could stand at the window if they had to. I wrote the figures beside the ones I'd made for keeping Black Moor warm.

When the agent came back I asked him how soon he'd want a decision. He said another person had shown interest and might be able to decide that day. I told him she ought to take it if she wanted it. I had a second place to see first. Then he said he'd be in the office on Wednesday, if I wanted to try him again.

"No," I said. I liked the sound of the answer enough to say it again when he handed me the form.

I walked up to see the cottage in Snowshill another day. The kitchen was small. The upstairs room got the afternoon sun. I put my hand on the window catch to see how much

effort it took. By the time I left I'd already thought where I would put the chair for the middle of the night.

ONE said he could have his office sort out the lease. He had done business with the agent.

"I'll ask him to let me see the papers," I said.

"I can have them sent here."

"I'd like to collect them."

He held his cup a little above the saucer while he thought about it. Then he put it down.

When I got back with the papers, the yew was dark against the snow. I thought something moved at the base of it. I stood with the paper against my chest and waited until the light went altogether. I never saw it move a second time.

The next morning I rang the agent and asked him what the deposit would be.

