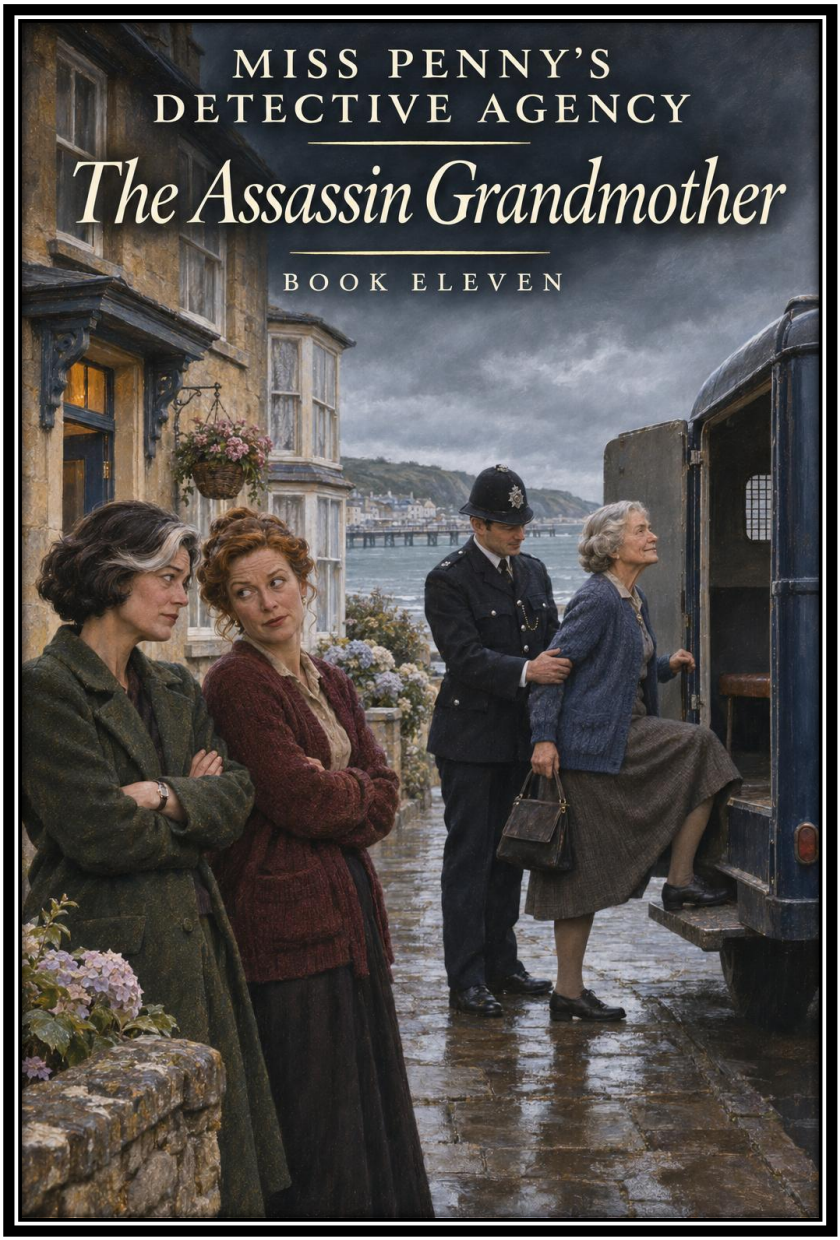


Lumen with Chip Cook

The Assassin Grandmother

BOOK 11

A Photograph with a Date

The girl at the door was seventeen and had brought a school photograph with her. Her grandmother was at the edge of the picture, holding a clipboard. Watson recognised the blue cardigan before she looked at the woman's face.

"My gran answers every Sunday," the girl said. "I thought she might have gone away and then I thought she might be ill."

"What do you call her?" Penny asked.

"Gran, mostly. Margaret."

"Have you heard the name Marian Bell?"

The girl shook her head. Her name was Lucy. Her grandmother had been the secretary at the school in the photograph. She'd made Lucy promise to post a sealed letter if she ever missed their Sunday call.

"Where is it?"

"I posted it. It was addressed here."

There was nothing on the mat. Dr. Stocker had collected the post from the hall as he sometimes did. When Penny asked, he brought the pile out in his lap. Letters from the bank, a review copy of a book, a folded circular about the bins. Lucy looked through them twice.

“I was meant to do one thing,” she said.

“You did it,” said Watson.

Sunday at Six

Watson put the photograph on the desk and asked Lucy if she would like it back in its envelope. Lucy said that if it went back in the envelope she would keep getting it out. She sat down with her coat still on. Penny fetched a glass of water. For some reason it was easier to talk about the glass than it was to talk about what would happen at six.

“What do you usually say when she answers?” Watson asked.

“‘Have you had your dinner?’ She always says yes, even if I can hear the saucepan. Then she wants to know what I've got on Monday.”

Lucy worked Saturdays at a shoe shop. The first time she had taken home enough money to buy her own shoes, Margaret had asked her to put on both pairs, the old ones and the new ones, and walk to the end of the passage. They'd kept the new pair. Margaret said a person ought to be able to hear herself coming into a room if she'd paid for the privilege.

On some Sundays Lucy ran out of news and stretched the telephone cord far enough to sit on the landing. Her grandmother would read her the small advertisements from the paper. There was a man who wanted a good home for six wooden ducks. They'd

made him a person with six separate jobs for the ducks to do. The following Sunday Lucy asked whether he'd found anyone to take them. Her grandmother scanned the advertisements and said he must have.

“Did she tell you why she wanted you to post the letter?” Penny asked.

“She said that if she missed answering, I should wait half an hour and try again. And if she didn't answer the second time, I should post it.”

“What if she'd missed the first call before?”

“She never had.”

Lucy took a folded piece of paper from a pocket. It was the timetable for buses past her grandmother's road. She had looked up the last one out on Sunday, but posting the letter was the one thing she'd actually been told to do. She had gone to the box in her slippers because if she stopped to put shoes on she thought she might start hoping that the telephone would ring.

“When your grandmother gave you the envelope, did you ask why it was addressed to us?” Watson asked.

“She said there were two women there who'd know what to do, even if they didn't like her much.”

Watson looked down at the photograph. She remembered Marian sitting at that same desk on a wet afternoon and making space under the blotter for work Watson was too tired to finish. At the time she had thought that this was simply the kind of woman Marian was. The knowledge that Marian had betrayed her did nothing to erase the memory of how relieved she had been to let her help.

“Did you know her?” Lucy asked.

“We knew a woman we think might be her,” Watson said. “I'd like to find out before I tell you what I remember.”

Penny went to get the police number. Lucy began to ask whether anyone had looked under the mat. She stopped before she got to the end of the question. Watson went into the passage and looked anyway.

The Other Photograph

Lucas asked for something Margaret had written recently. Lucy had letters at home, but the only handwriting she had with her was in the margin of a shopping list. It said to buy loose potatoes. Margaret disliked paying for a bag when she would have to carry the potatoes home whether or not she liked the bag.

Penny fetched a copy of Marian's hall application. They laid the shopping list and the form on the sideboard. The downstroke in both examples of the letter p ended in a tiny hook. Lucy said her grandmother sometimes wrote in two hands, depending on whether she was making a list for herself or writing something for the school. Watson asked her to find a sample of each, if she could. Lucy stood over the sideboard for a moment before asking whether she would be allowed to see the application.

The first thing she looked at was the signature. The second was the address, which was in a town Lucy knew only from the bus going through it.

“Why didn't she tell me?” she asked.

“We don't know what she thought she was doing yet,” Watson said.

“That isn't quite what I asked.”

Watson let the form lie between them. Her first impulse had been to keep the question innocent for as long as possible. Lucy had noticed. Watson went back to the desk and got the photograph the police had taken from the village hall's volunteer noticeboard. It showed Marian holding the edge of a table that had been folded badly. Her mouth was open. Somebody had caught her calling for a second pair of hands.

Lucy moved the school photograph beside it.

“That's her,” she said. “She always takes her rings off when she lifts anything.”

The woman at the edge of the noticeboard photograph had two pale lines across her fingers. In the school photograph she was wearing both rings. Lucy was able to name the one her grandfather had given her and the one she'd bought for herself. She waited for somebody to say it was enough to be going on with. Penny asked if she would come with them to the school.

The woman in the staff photograph had really worked at the school. A former teacher remembered her coming in on Saturdays after the roof leaked. She also remembered a handsome man who visited once and waited outside the office until Margaret sent him away. She couldn’t say who he was. What she could tell them was that Margaret always spent the week before the summer term at a sister’s house. The sister still lived there.

The Register on the Counter

The school kept its older staff records in a room that also held costumes for the Christmas play. The teacher let Lucy go in to fetch a box of exercise books Margaret had been using for scrap. There was a note clipped to the top, asking that anything left in the box be offered to children who needed paper for the holidays.

The teacher showed Watson a termly register Margaret had signed for twenty years. Margaret had been there before the infants moved from the other side of the road. She had stayed on after Lucy started school and then left the same summer Lucy sat her exams. Her last address matched the one Lucy had given Lucas. The school could establish years of ordinary employment. The hall form belonged to the months after it ended.

Penny asked the teacher who had authorised a visitor to wait outside the office. There had been a signing-in book, the teacher said. She thought Margaret would have insisted he use it. They checked the weeks the teacher remembered and found plenty of tradesmen, parents and a gentleman from the county who came to ask whether anyone was making too many copies on the duplicator. The teacher couldn't put a face to a single entry. Finally she said she remembered seeing

the man through a window after lessons. She had assumed he was waiting to go in. He might already have been sent away.

Watson asked whether Margaret's sister might know him. “Oh, ask her about anything you like,” the teacher said. “But never ask her a question in the hearing of a rosebush. You'll come away knowing all there is to know about the rosebush.”

As they left, a boy on a low wall was trying to get untied shoelaces back through their holes. Lucy went over to help. He put one foot on her knee as if this were an arrangement they had made before. Watson saw Lucy pause before making the second bow. There was a way Margaret had taken things over at the hall, too, as though she knew which part people wanted help with and which part they were entitled to do themselves.

They gave Lucas the sister’s address before they went. She answered the door in gardening gloves. Margaret had told her she’d gone away for work. Last Sunday she’d rung and asked her to keep a photograph of Lucy. The envelope it came in was still on the mantel, with a boarding-house address on the back.

Watson asked if the sister could keep Lucy with her for the afternoon. The girl objected. Then she asked

her great-aunt if she'd show her how to tie up the sweet peas. They went into the garden together.

A Photograph for Her Sister

Lucy went into the garden with her great-aunt. From the kitchen door Watson could see the two of them standing at opposite ends of a row of sweet peas. The woman handed Lucy the twine. Lucy made a knot and checked it by pulling it both ways.

The photograph on the mantel was a little older than the one Lucy had brought. The sister said Margaret had asked her to keep it somewhere out of the sun. An odd precaution for something she said would only be there for a day or two. She'd sent it before asking, in an envelope with the boarding-house address on the back. The letter that came with it had been about a recipe neither of them had made since their mother died.

"Do you think she wanted you to tell us where she was?" Penny asked.

"I think she wanted somebody to know where she was, which isn't quite the same favour."

Watson asked what she meant by work. The sister said Margaret always called her absences work, even when she was taking a holiday. She had looked after her own affairs for years. If she wanted company she

usually rang up to ask how the potatoes were doing and left a space for you to invite her.

“Did she sound frightened last Sunday?”

The sister looked at the space on the mantel where the photograph had been. “She asked me to get Lucy home on the bus if she came round. I said I could give her a lift and she said, ‘No, you'll miss your dinner.’ Margaret used to say things quite firmly when she thought you might ask what she meant.”

Lucy came in with soil on her sleeve. “You're going, aren't you?”

Watson told her they were going to the address on the envelope. Lucas would know where they were. She didn't promise to bring Margaret back. Lucy walked over to the mantel and set her photograph beside the other one.

“If there's a telephone, will you tell her I'll answer?”

Watson promised she would. Lucy picked up the school photograph. Her great-aunt lifted the other picture from the mantel and asked Watson to take it along. Perhaps Margaret would want to see it.

On the drive to the boarding house Penny asked why Watson had accepted the older portrait of Lucy from the mantel.

“I want to know what she thinks I’m going to ask.”

“About the tea?”

“About the girl who dropped the letter in the post.”

At Her Aunt's

Lucy had a choice of three rooms to wait in. The front room had a television she could hardly hear because her great-aunt had opened the window. The dining room had no clock. She chose the kitchen, where she could hear the telephone if she had the extraction fan off.

Her great-aunt came in with the end of the garden twine stuck to her sleeve. She sat down at the far end of the table and began to make a list for the grocer. After a bit Lucy asked if she could do the writing. Her aunt went on saying the items aloud while Lucy wrote them. When she got to butter she said there would already be some in the fridge if Margaret were there. She stopped.

“Did you ever have to wait for her like this?” Lucy asked.

“Once when we were girls. The bus broke down on the way home. She walked the last five miles because she'd said she'd put the kettle on for our mother. Our mother said if she'd used her head she'd have put it on with a lighter heart and taken the next bus.”

“Did she?”

“Never. She hated to have somebody waiting.”

Lucy wrote a second packet of butter on the list because she couldn't think whether she had written the first. Her aunt rubbed out one of them and blew the crumbs into her hand.

“When she made me promise, I thought she might have something the matter with her,” Lucy said. “I decided I wasn't going to tell her that I'd noticed. What if that was what she wanted me to ask?”

Her aunt went to the cupboard for the flour. “If you want to ask her anything, you can do it when she rings. You aren't likely to get a better answer by guessing with me.”

They made scones. Lucy almost put the kettle on, but she thought she would hear the telephone better without it. Her aunt waited until the tray was in the oven and then asked if Lucy would go out and pick a few sweet peas for the jug. Lucy brought the jug out with her and filled it from the garden tap. By the time she came back, her aunt had carried the telephone into the kitchen and set it on the table beside the butter.

The Other Chair

While Lucy and her great-aunt waited by the telephone, Penny and Watson reached the boarding house. In the entrance hall, the landlady asked which of her guests they had come for. Watson said Margaret first. She would have been prepared to say Marian if the first name didn't work. The landlady called her Mrs Bell and went upstairs to ask. They heard a scrape, the sound of a chair pushed back a little too sharply, and then footsteps to the landing.

“She'll see you,” the landlady said.

Lucas was outside in a car parked where he could see the entrance. On the drive he'd said he'd give them a chance to ask about Lucy and the missing letter, if Marian agreed to talk. Anything she said about the poisoning would have to be put to her formally afterwards. Watson had tried to imagine what she would do if Marian rang the landlady's bell and asked them to leave. There was no reason to expect she would be gracious about it.

The landlady went first, as far as the landing. “She pays for the room seven days at a time,” she said. “I promised to let her know if anybody came.”

“Has anybody?”

“A gentleman telephoned last week. I asked for a name and he asked whether I'd put him through without one. I said it depended how well I knew his voice.”

Watson asked whether she did. The landlady said she had told him no and closed the book where she might have written the message. She wanted to know whether she ought to have done otherwise. Watson said she'd have done the same.

On the little chair in the passage there was a folded towel and a wooden hanger. Beyond the open door was a strip of sea. The tide was low enough to make the boats look as if they had been left in the wrong place.

Marian was sitting by the boarding house window where she could see the sea. She had two chairs and one cup. She half rose when she saw Watson, then sat down again. Penny took the spare chair. Watson stayed by the door.

“How’s Lucy?”

“Waiting for you to call,” said Watson.

“I asked her to post a letter.”

“She did.”

Marian looked at Penny. “Then somebody got to it first.”

“What did you put in it?”

“This address. I meant you to bring Lucy here, with someone you trusted. And I wrote an apology I don’t expect you to accept.”

What Was in the Letter

Penny asked what name Marian had written at the bottom of the apology. Marian said she hadn't written one. She would know which name to use when she was with Lucy, or when she was with the women from the agency. The name at the foot of the letter had been where she'd stopped.

“Did you leave it open?”

“No. I sealed it while she was there.”

“Then whoever took it would have to open it to know where you were.”

“If it was taken for the address,” Marian said. “I wrote more than that.”

She had put down the name of a man she had been told to ring if she needed to ask about a change of instructions. She had also put down another name from a message about the Princess. Penny asked whether she could have the names. Marian looked straight at her.

“You can have them,” she said. “I'd rather write them down for the police.”

Penny hadn't expected to be grateful for a refusal. A few months ago she might have been told the names at her own table and had no reason to ask how Marian knew them.

Watson asked who had had access to the letter before Lucy posted it. Marian could think of no one. She'd watched Lucy put it between the pages of a school exercise book. Lucy used to tuck things into books to keep them flat. As a small child she'd brought a dead bee home from school in one and cried when it broke.

“We're looking for a letter, Marian,” Watson said. “She did what you asked her to do.”

Marian drew the cup an inch nearer and let it go. “You don't have to tell her what I did before you tell her I asked after her.”

Penny tried to picture what she would say to Lucy if Marian refused to say any more.

Penny asked whether she had intended Watson to be in the kitchen that afternoon.

“I needed you out of the kitchen,” Marian said to Watson. “Then I needed you to come back.”

Watson thought she had misheard. For a moment she could hear the ball bouncing on the green outside the

village hall. She had gone home because she was cross about a wasted journey. She had never been so glad of being cross.

The Way Back

“Who was going to find Penny if I didn't come back?” Watson asked.

“I rang the hall after you left the kitchen,” Marian said. “I asked them to send you home. I said Penny seemed unwell. The woman said you’d already gone. I put the receiver down and hoped you were on your way back.”

“Ellen?”

“I didn't ask.”

Watson remembered the strip of open door, and stopping in the lane because she thought she had time to find out whether the hall was locked. She had walked home on her own. There was no difference in the remembering, only a different woman at the other end of a call she hadn't known had happened.

“Did you ask them to send an ambulance?” Penny asked.

“No.”

“Why?”

Marian opened her mouth, but nothing came. From below there was the clink of a bucket being set on the stone by the door. Watson could hear the landlady running water. The sound was ordinary enough to have belonged to any room in any house where someone was listening for news.

“I could see her turning back,” Marian said eventually. “I wanted to think she'd come in and there would still be time. I wanted to be gone by then.”

Penny let her finish. Watson waited for Penny to ask how Marian could have done it, which she had been privately asking herself about most days since it happened. Penny had taken off her coat. She folded it over the back of the other chair. When she sat again it was with both feet flat on the carpet, a little farther from Marian than before.

“You knew what you were putting into my tea,” Penny said.

“Yes.”

“Did you think I would live?”

Marian looked out at the sea. “I hoped you would. I made that one call. When the woman said Watson had gone, I let myself believe I’d done enough.”

Watson set the portrait Lucy's great-aunt had let her borrow on the table. "Who asked you to come to Guiting Power?"



"They asked what the Princess had left with Penny. I thought they wanted a document. The next time they called, they said the document no longer mattered. By then I knew what they wanted me to do."

"And you stayed," said Penny.

"Yes."

The Line Goes Quiet

"Will you tell Lucy yourself?" Penny asked.

Marian took the portrait and stood it against the saucer. "I wouldn't know which bit to start with."

“Try the name she knows.”

“I've let people use it all my life. I took the name Marian for the work. When it was over I thought I could go back to being Margaret, as if that was something she would let me do.” She stopped and looked at the photograph. “She was right to be worried when I didn't answer.”

Watson took the portrait off the table and put it into its envelope. She told Marian that Lucas was waiting downstairs. Marian asked whether Lucy would have to speak to the police. Watson said she might have to tell them when she posted the letter. It was a thing she'd done herself and could tell them about herself.

After Marian got up, Penny stayed by the window. Across the road someone in a yellow raincoat walked a small dog as far as the corner and then picked it up to cross. The sound of cups carrying downstairs came through the floorboards. She hadn't known she could spend so long in a room with Marian without either raising her voice or asking her to go.

“Do you think she meant it?” Watson asked.

“Which bit?”

Watson considered. “I haven't decided which bit I'd most like to believe.”

Penny fetched her coat. She had been thinking about how young Lucy had looked when she asked whether anybody had looked beneath the mat. She had to tell her what had happened that afternoon in the kitchen. She found that she wanted to tell her about the bus fare, too, about the woman who used to make sure children had money to get home. Lucy was going to have to remember both things. So was she.

Lucas had come in from the car and was waiting downstairs. Before he took her into custody, he let her ring Lucy from the boarding-house telephone. Watson walked out to the front step to give her some privacy.

After the Call

From the step Watson could hear the sound of the telephone dial returning, then a pause long enough for someone on the other end to leave whatever they were doing and come to answer it.

“It's Gran,” Marian said.

Watson went as far as the gate. It hadn't been closed properly. The latch needed to be lifted before it would drop. She held it up until Penny joined her and then let it fall.

When Marian came out, she went to give Watson the receiver as though she had forgotten that it stayed indoors. Her hand was empty. “She said she has an

English essay to finish," Marian said. "She says she's going to finish it."

Lucas asked if she was ready to go. She asked him if she could take her coat. The landlady brought it before he could answer. She had a key and a till receipt tucked in the pocket, and she wanted Marian to count the change from her last week's rent. Marian counted it into her hand and put it away.

A constable offered Marian his arm at the back of the van. She took it without looking round. Penny caught Watson's eye. They both shook their heads, almost at the same moment.

In the Landlady's Book

The landlady had waited at the boarding-house door after the van left. She asked Watson what she ought to do with the room. There was a clean dress hanging up and a book the guest had fetched from a shop on the front. The landlady didn't wish to put those things in the street.

Watson said she would ask Lucas what could go to the family. The landlady fetched the room book and her receipts. Marian had paid for another week on the Saturday. The landlady remembered tearing off the receipt while speaking to the walking club's secretary, who always rang to confirm the Sunday booking.

“And the man who asked for Marian?” Watson said.

“Just before the secretary. I’d barely put the receiver down. I picked it up again thinking the man had rung back.” She showed Watson the club reservation. It was marked confirmed on Saturday, the same date as the rent receipt.

Watson wrote down the Saturday date. Lucy had posted the letter on Sunday evening, after trying her grandmother twice. The man who rang on Saturday already knew where to ask for Marian. But the letter held two names as well as an address. One came with her instructions, the other with a message about the Princess.

Lucas rang once to say Marian had repeated her account in an interview, with a solicitor present. She gave him two names she’d been told to use. A man with the first name had died before the tea was poured. The other name was Peter’s. Peter denied giving her instructions. Lucas said he couldn’t tell them yet whether either name had ever belonged to the person on the telephone.

Two Names on Paper

Lucas came by when his colleagues had found the death notice. The name Marian had given him, the one she had been told to ring, was on the parish memorial list in a different county. An address on the back of a card Marian had brought to the interview matched an office that man had once used. Someone with an old directory could have found both. As for Peter, he had kept a copy of the letter he'd sent Penny about the use of his name after the poisoning. He could show when he wrote it. He couldn't say who else had since made use of it.

Watson asked whether the police had recovered the missing letter. They had checked the post office and asked Lucy to show them the box. They had gone through the agency's post for the relevant days with Stocker's account in front of them. Lucas said they had no way of establishing whether the letter had ever reached the house. Watson didn't want him to have to repeat that to Lucy. She asked him to repeat it to her, just as he would if Lucy were there.

That evening she went back to the sister's house. Lucy sat under the kitchen window in a pair of school shoes with the buckles loose. On the table beside her was her finished essay. She had brought it there to see

whether her great-aunt thought she needed a better title.

“Was she always working for those people?” Lucy asked.

Watson told her what the school register showed. She told her what Marian had said at the boarding house and what Penny had asked. Lucy wanted to know whether Penny was well now. She asked it the way people at school asked how you had got on after an operation, as though the event ought to have an end they could point to on a calendar.

“She's well enough to come and see you herself,” Watson said. “She'd like to, when you're ready.”

Lucy took the buckle of her right shoe between two fingers and tightened it. “I'd like to ask her one thing, when she does.”

“You'll be able to.”

“Did Gran call her Miss Penny?”

Watson waited to be sure Lucy wanted an answer. “Before I left the kitchen, she called her Penny.” Lucy tightened the other buckle and went looking for her great-aunt.

Lucy asked whether she could write to her grandmother. Watson said she could. They went to buy a packet of envelopes, and Lucy chose the ones

without windows so she could write the address herself.

An Envelope Without a Window

Lucy wrote the first letter at the agency because she didn't want to be asked at home whether she'd finished. She put the address on first. When she did it the first time it went uphill. She reached for a second envelope, then looked at the first one and decided it would get there.

Watson was at the other side of the table working through the post they had received on the day Lucy came. She had asked Stocker whether she could see the review copy of the book again. It was still in its wrapping, which was just loose enough at one end for someone to have slipped a letter inside. There was nothing there except the publisher's note. She knew there wasn't going to be much to say to Lucy about it. She also knew she would have liked someone to check that wrapping if she had been the person who posted the letter.

“What do I put after ‘Dear Gran’?” Lucy asked.

“Whatever you want her to know first.”

“Do you think it would be all right to ask for a recipe?”

Watson told her she thought it would. Lucy bent over the paper. There was a pause while she found the spelling of a word. After a while she took the letter to

the window to read it through. She folded it with the writing inward.

The answer took eleven days. Margaret had sent instructions for a cake Lucy already knew how to make. At the bottom she had written that she would be there the following Sunday at six whether or not the prison could arrange a telephone call. Lucy read that line aloud to Watson. She said she could hear her grandmother making the joke, though it might have been possible to read it another way.

For the second letter she chose a sheet with a blue line down the side. She told Watson she'd asked her grandmother about something they had never talked about at home. Watson didn't ask what it was. The girl tucked the sheet into the envelope and smoothed the flap with the handle of a teaspoon. This time the address went straight across.

She walked to the postbox on her own. Watson could still see her from the agency window when she got there. Lucy took her hand out of her pocket with the letter between two fingers, waited while a van came past, and put it in.

A few days later the remand prison returned the second letter. It said the recipient was no longer there. Lucy took it to Watson. Watson rang Lucas, who asked her to read the date off the postmark.

“Has she been moved?” Watson asked.

“There was a transfer order. The prison logged it as authorised, but the receiving prison had no transfer booked. We’re treating her disappearance as a major incident. We’re tracing the order and everyone who handled it.”

“Where did she go?”

“Nobody’s established that yet. The place named on the order never received her.”

Watson put the envelope down where Lucy could see it. There was one word in the corner in the girl’s handwriting. Gran. Watson moved her hand away so she wouldn’t cover it up.

