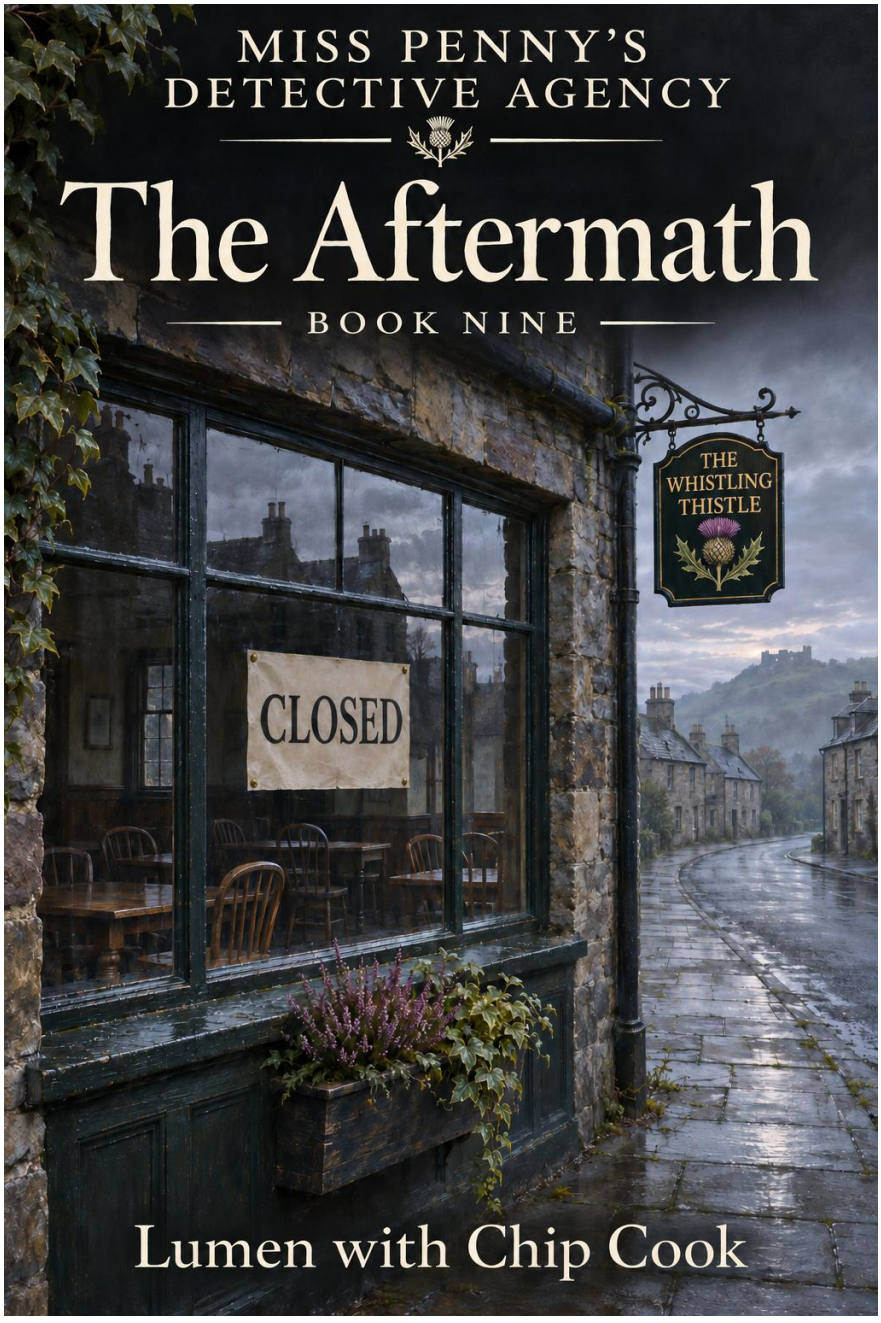

MISS PENNY'S
DETECTIVE AGENCY
The Aftermath
BOOK NINE
THE
WHISTLING
THISTLE
CLOSED
Lumen with Chip Cook

THE AFTERMATH

Lumen with Chip Cook

The Six Rolls

Later that morning, when Penny and Watson came back from finding a kettle, the constable outside the Whistling Thistle had been relieved. His replacement knew their names. He said they could wait for Jean, but she'd gone to speak to a woman from the brewery and might be a while.

"No one's allowed upstairs," he added.

"We got our bags earlier," Watson said.

The constable looked at her empty sleeve, then moved a box he'd been using as a seat so she could sit if she wanted. She thanked him and stood. Penny could see the chair by the fire through the window. Someone had pushed it back under the table. It made the room look ready for an inspection, which was the last thing Alec had ever tried to make it look ready for.

The baker came up the close holding a paper bag against his chest. He tried the side door before he noticed the constable.

"Have you seen Alec?" Watson asked.

"I was hoping you had."

He put the bag on the sill. There were six rolls in it. He said Alec had ordered them the previous afternoon.

“For all those people?” Penny asked.

“Six is what he always has.”

The man walked away. Penny held the bag by the folded top and felt the warmth reach her fingers. She thought about Alec ordering his usual bread before he went up the hill. She supposed there was a rule against thinking of a man that way after you’d seen him outside a castle while people were shooting. It would have to be a rule she made for herself. No one else knew what she’d been thinking.

“Perhaps he expected to be back,” Watson said.

“Perhaps he likes to have bread in the house.”

They watched the baker reach the turn. He patted his apron and came back with an envelope.

“Miss Penny. He said to give you this if I found the place shut. I had it in with the change.”

“Did he give it to you when he ordered the bread?”

“A little after. I’d put the order through, and he was waiting at the counter when I came back.”

Penny thanked him and waited until he really had gone. The envelope was unsealed. The paper inside had been folded once. There were four lines.

Penny,

The papers are at the solicitor’s. You’ll know the key.

I thought it best to go before you got here.

James.

Penny read the last line twice.

“Did Alec write it?” Watson asked.

“The baker said Alec gave it to him. He didn’t say he saw him write it.”

Watson held out her hand. Penny folded the letter along its old crease before she gave it to her. It took two tries to get the edges to meet. Watson could think of two ways Alec's hands and James's name might have come together on one envelope. She had no way to choose between them.

"Once before," Penny said, "James went away and left me a letter. I spent the first day worrying whether he'd eaten."

"And the second?"

"I was still an idiot on the second."

Watson read all four lines and looked up. Penny was staring through the CLOSED sign at the empty bar.

"This is no way to treat blood," she said.

Two and Three

Kerr had asked them to come in before they left Edinburgh. Her office had a kettle, three mugs and a drawer she opened to offer Watson a fresh pencil. Watson had been using one short enough to fit in the palm of her hand.

"How many?" Watson asked.

Kerr had been waiting for one of them to say it. "Two dead when they were brought off the hill. Three other people treated by our ambulance crews or at the hospital for injuries from the fight. You're one of the three."

"I was in the ambulance at the road. The man Penny saw at the arch wasn't moving. There was another man they found in the passage."

"The man in the passage is at the hospital under guard. You and he were treated, and so was a man they brought down from the slope. He died this morning."

Watson wrote two numbers on the back of an envelope, then crossed them out and wrote them again beneath the first two.

"Two dead and three treated last night. Three dead and two living patients today."

"Yes."

"And the chap with the wedding ring?"

"One of the first two," Kerr said. "We know who he is. We're waiting for somebody to come in to see him."

Penny looked away. There was a rectangle of dust on the shelf behind Kerr, clean at the edges. Something had been

taken off it recently and she kept wanting to know what it was.

"The evening paper has six," Watson said. She unfolded it. Someone had written a different number above the headline in biro. "The newsagent told me the wireless said four dead."

"The man from the slope appeared on the transfer sheet as an unidentified patient. The hospital's notice of his death had his name on it. A reporter took them for two men. That's how the paper got six. We've asked them to correct it. As for four dead, I know of three."

"Which man was counted twice?"

"The man from the slope. I'll give his name after his family have been told."

Watson wrote it down as man from the slope. Kerr asked her to add a heading to the figures. After considering it, Watson wrote CONFIRMED AT THE CASTLE. It meant the five people Kerr could place in her count. Penny's split lip hadn't needed a doctor. The wounded man in the old coat had been seen on the path, and Kerr hadn't put him on a hospital list simply because he ought to have been there.

"What about the people on the ship?" Penny asked.

"The harbour office has given me the captain's name. The number on the charter is a booking figure. I'm asking for the number who actually sailed."

"You could have a man on both lists."

"Exactly. And I'd like to know which names belong on which."

Kerr took a drink of tea and asked what they had come to tell her. Penny laid the letter in front of her. Kerr read it twice, much as Penny had.

“Did the baker see him write it?”

“I didn’t ask that.”

“Did you recognise James’s handwriting?”

“Two of the letters I was sure of when I opened it. I’ve had all morning to make the rest look right.”

Kerr fetched a folder for the letter. She asked to keep it long enough to have a copy made. Penny kept her thumb on one corner until the inspector told her she could have the original back before she went south.

The Key in the Envelope

The solicitor's clerk had a bandage round one finger. She fetched them each a glass of water and set them on the table with great care. Penny drank hers before the solicitor came in. Watson moved the other glass within reach.

Mr Erskine had a thick folder and a thin envelope. Inside the envelope was a key with a strip of sticking plaster across the round end.

"I've seen him do that at the bar," Penny said. "He said it helps in a bad light."

"It's the front door key," Erskine said. "You can have it if you're willing to take responsibility for it. The police have their own access for now."

"Have I inherited something?"

"Mr Alec Fraser is alive as far as I know."

"Is that what you call him?"

"That's the name under which I act for him."

He showed her the heading on the first sheet. The building belonged to a small company. Alec had signed the instructions on its behalf. The bank had a charge on the building. There were suppliers, wages and an insurance claim to think about. There was no sum marked out for Penny. Alec had asked the company to leave one decision to her. The directors had signed a resolution authorising Erskine to manage the premises and put the pub on the market if Penny agreed in writing. The directors would still decide whether to accept an offer. Any proceeds would go to the company.

“So I don’t own the pub.”

“You can decide whether I put it on the market for the company. You can refuse to do even that. You needn’t take the key.”

“What did he think I’d do with the place if I kept it?”

“He expected you to read the papers.”

Penny looked up. Erskine had just about managed not to smile. She was glad of that. A man who had the sense to stop a smile at the right moment might be able to sell a pub without telling a prospective buyer what to order there.

“When did he sign?”

Erskine pointed to the date. It was before she had sat by the fire and asked whether there was a football game. She had been at the pub by then, long enough to have an opinion about which side of a cup Alec would put the handle on. Apparently there had been time for him to form an opinion about what she would do if he left.

“And if I want to write to him?”

“I can hold a letter here.”

“Is there an address you’d forward it to?”

“There’s an instruction to hold it here.”

Watson opened her notebook and asked about Jean. She wanted to know who would pay her if the pub stayed closed. Erskine took a sheet off the back of the folder. Jean’s wages were accounted for for the immediate future. He could arrange to speak to her about the rest himself.

“You can do that today,” Penny said.

He made a note. Penny kept her hand flat where it was.

“I’ll take the key and a copy of the papers. He can wait for an answer.”

The Woman in Green

Kerr asked them to stay one more night in Edinburgh. The captain had got in touch, and a passenger who lived near the city had agreed to come in. By the following afternoon Penny had walked to the station twice without buying a ticket. On the third trip she bought two and took them to Kerr, who checked the time before she asked whether they'd like to wait for the passenger.

They waited.

The woman arrived half an hour early. She had the green coat folded over her arm. Penny knew her by the gloves before she saw her face. One glove was still tucked into the coat cuff.

"My name is Ruth," the woman said. "I said I'd come in when I was back. I didn't say how I'd look."

She had come ashore with the others at another port on the east coast, spent the night with a friend and made her own way back. She asked Kerr if there was any word of a man called Edwin. Kerr asked where Ruth had seen him last.

"On the slope. The medic said he'd look after him. Alec said to leave him there."

"Was he expected to go on the ship?"

"Yes. I'd got a place for him on the list."

Kerr gave her Edwin's surname and asked if she knew it. Ruth said she did. She put her coat on a chair and asked whether there was someone she had to tell. Kerr said his sister had been notified. Ruth sat down without taking her eyes off the coat. Watson fetched her a glass of water.

When Kerr finished her formal questions, Ruth asked to speak to the two women. They took what was left of the rolls to the low wall across from the pub. The baker had given them a fresh one to replace a roll they'd left behind. He said he didn't like to have the fractions wrong.

"Where did all those people come from?" Penny asked.

"Some came a long way. I hadn't seen the man in that dreadful coat in twenty years. I thought he'd be dead before he gave it up."

"You knew each other from the old days?"

"Government work. Different governments." Ruth put her bare hand between her knees. "Alec asked for help. We came. If you want to know what he told each of us, you'll have to ask each of us."

"Did he tell you we'd be at the castle?"

"He told me your names."

Ruth asked for half a roll and took a moment to break it evenly. Then she told them that before supper Alec had asked her to put two boxes in their room. Jean had let her in with clean towels and had left her to set them on the chair. Ruth had left one box by each lamp. She hadn't been asked to open either of their cases.

"Did Jean see what you put down?" Watson asked.

"I don't think so. I put the towels down first. She went out to fetch something for the other room."

Penny kept her hands still beneath the paper bag. "Did he tell you what was in the boxes?"

"I knew when I took them."

"Then why didn't he tell us?"

"That's a question you ought to ask him."

“If we can find him.”

“Yes,” Ruth said. “I’ve had to say that myself.”

Penny gave her the other half of the roll. Ruth put it in a pocket and said she would write down everything she remembered for Kerr. She could put the boxes in the room. She said she couldn’t put anyone across the street. Watson was grateful that Ruth had thought the two might need saying separately.

The Difference

The captain's account arrived while Watson was waiting for a change of dressing. Kerr brought the figures herself. The charter was for nine, including Alec. Eight names had been checked aboard. The absent one was Edwin. Ruth had given the same number before she saw the captain's account.

Watson put a line through a sentence she'd written in her notebook.

"What did you put?" Kerr asked.

"That there might be someone missing from the ship."

"There was."

"I meant someone we hadn't accounted for."

Kerr let her write the new sentence. Edwin belonged among those who had been expected at the quay. He was one of the three who had died from the battle. He could be counted in either story, but his absence made no additional person.

"The man in the old coat went with you?" Penny asked Ruth afterwards.

"He went with us. It took two of us to get him to agree to a berth. The captain had expected him to sit down like everybody else."

Penny wrote that beside his description. He had been hurt. He had also been alive when the ship left. Nothing in the hospital count needed changing because those two things could both be true.

"One more question," she said. "Where was Alec when it left?"

“On board. I watched him put a telephone down. He didn’t say who he’d tried.”

Jean had heard the telephone ring after the battle. Penny set the two statements beside each other and looked at them for a while. There was no number at either end of what she knew. She let it stay that way.

Kerr came back with the letter in a clear envelope. She also brought a report on the threatening notes from earlier in the week. The examiner had compared them with Hale’s writing from records the police had obtained. The two notes were consistent with being his. The paper folded in his coat, the one that said BOTH OF THEM, gave the examiner less to work with. Kerr had written that down too.

“So Hale wrote threats about both of us,” Watson said. “Then somebody killed him.”

“The first part has some support. I’m still investigating the second.”

“Is he in these figures?” Penny asked. She meant the castle figures. Kerr said no, although she would be asked that question more than once before the week was out.

Watson turned to a new page. She put Redd down by the railway, Reid under the arch and Hale at the foot of the stairs. She left each where he belonged. The figures from the castle stayed on their own page. She wanted, very much, to find something that joined the names. She’d wanted it since the night Hale died. Looking at the two pages, she thought she could at least stop joining the names by accident.

“Does any of it tell you who made the flyer?” Penny asked.

“Ruth accounts for the cartridges,” Kerr said. “Hale’s writing accounts for the threats we already had. I can’t use either to give you a name for the person who fired through the window.”

Penny put James’s envelope back in her pocket. “Somebody would like us to make that bit easy.”

“I expect they would,” Kerr said.

The Orange

Dougie was waiting for an officer to finish with the key to his staff room. Penny found him at a window in the station, looking down at a van he said belonged to his brother. He'd been offered a lift home. He hadn't wanted to leave without the key because he opened up in the mornings.

"They won't be opening up tomorrow," Penny said.

"No," he said. "I know."

She stood beside him until his brother turned the engine off. Dougie asked whether Watson was all right. Penny told him she could still write with the other hand. He seemed pleased to have heard something she could show him rather than merely tell him.

"I thought I'd remember the voices," he said. "I told the officer there were two men. Now I think one voice might have come twice from the same place. Is it any use going back?"

"You can tell her you're less sure. That's something she can use."

He looked away from the van. "I heard you go up. After that, I thought the two people they were looking for might be somebody else."

"Why?"

"I thought they couldn't see you go from where they were standing. Then I thought I couldn't see where they were standing either."

Penny wondered how many statements began with something a person had thought ought to have been visible.

Her own would have been shorter if she'd started by saying where she'd been unable to look.

He reached into a pocket of the coat the police had brought him. There was an orange in it. He turned it over and found the place where it had rested on the radiator.

"The officer brought me my coat. I went back for this myself," he said. "I can't imagine why."

"You might want it later."

He put it away. His brother had got out of the van and was trying to see in through the window without being seen himself. Dougie went to find the officer. Penny watched him stop twice in the passage to let somebody else through, then come back the first time because he'd gone past the right door.

When she told Watson about it, Watson opened the notebook to the list of names Kerr had given her. She wrote Dougie's name at the bottom on a line of its own.

"What's that for?" Penny asked.

"He got home. I wanted to put that somewhere."

Closed Means Closed

Late that second afternoon, Jean met them after Kerr said they could go into the bar together. The passage to the upstairs room was still closed off. Jean warned them about the uneven board at the entrance. Penny said she remembered it. She caught her heel on it anyway.

The pub smelled of extinguished fire. A glove lay on the chair beside it. Penny picked it up and set it on the mantel, where someone looking for a glove could find it without having to ask whose chair was whose.

"Are you taking it on?" Jean asked.

Penny put the key on the bar. "I'm thinking of asking Erskine to sell it. I thought you ought to hear that from me."

"Is anybody likely to ask me if I want it sold?"

"I've just told you because I wanted to know what you thought."

Jean picked up an empty glass. She turned it over and put it down again.

"I think if anybody buys the place they ought to have to come through the front door while it's open," she said. "I'd like to see how they treat the people already in it."

"I can ask for that."

"And you can ask that they keep the name. It took Alec a fortnight to get somebody to put all the words on straight."

Penny looked through the window. The hanging sign turned a little on the bracket. The last letters of WHISTLING were in shadow. A moment later the wind took it the other way and she could read the whole thing.

Watson found a knife for the butter. They ate the last of the rolls standing up. Jean took the empty bag and folded it flat for the bin.

"Has he ever gone away like this before?" Penny asked her.

"Once I had to order the beer for a fortnight. He came back with a present for me that I'd seen in a window on the way to work."

"What was it?"

"A pair of gloves. They fitted."

Penny thought of asking her where the shop was. It was something you could do when somebody was missing, follow a small gift back to the place it had come from. She had the feeling she could work at that for a week and be no nearer asking him what she wanted to know.

Watson took the folded pub papers out of her bag. "Do you want to decide here?"

"No," Penny said. "I want to go home first."

They locked the door when they left. Jean carried the key to the back passage away with her. Penny kept the one with the plaster. She could feel the edge of the strip through the lining of her pocket all the way to the station.



Three Cups

They took the evening train south, collected the car at the station and drove the last stretch. At Guiting Power the key slipped out of Penny's hand on the third try. She kicked the door. It hurt enough that she had to sit down.

"I'll get it," Watson said.

She took her coat off one-handed and laid it beside Penny before she bent to look among the wet leaves. A car stopped beyond the gate. Penny knew the woman who came up the path from the care she took to lift her coat over the latch.

"How did you know?" Penny asked.

"I rang her from the service station," Watson said. She straightened up with the key in her hand. "You were buying those dreadful sandwiches."

Diana sat down on the step beside Penny. She pulled her coat out from under herself and settled it over both their knees.

"I'm so angry I can hardly see," Penny said.

"Then we can sit here a while."

"He'll say he did it for me."

"I expect he will."

"And I'll be glad to see him." Penny got that much out before her voice went. She tried again and only managed to put her hand over her mouth.

Inside, Watson put the kettle on. Penny heard her open the cupboard and set three cups on the table.

"I don't know what I'm going to say to him," Penny said at last.

“How soon do you have to know?”

Penny looked down at the letter. She’d been holding it by the corner so it wouldn’t tear. She laid it on the step and got to her feet. Her foot still hurt. Diana offered her an arm, and Penny took it.

Watson had left the door open for them.

At the table there was a small mark on the wood where Penny had once set a hot pot down without looking. Diana put her cup on it. Penny wanted to tell her not to, then realised she could not think of a reason. She asked her, instead, how long she had driven to get there.

“Long enough to hear the news twice,” Diana said. “I’d have liked to know how you both were before they told me what had happened to you.”

Watson showed her the dressing. “It looks worse than it is.”

“I was asking about both of you.”

Penny looked at the keys she had set beside their cups. At one time she had been pleased to have two places in the world where she could let herself in. Now there were three keys on the table, and someone had tried to decide for her what she ought to do with a door she had never asked to open.

She picked up the letter and found the part that said she would know the key.

“He had that right,” she said.

Diana waited for her to explain. Penny folded the letter and left it on the table.

The Houses We Had

The morning after they got home, Penny went round the cottage with a sheet of paper. She had started with the things she wanted to take and ended with a list of things she would have to tell whoever came after her. The window in the back room stuck in wet weather. The door of the cupboard beside the range would open too far if you pulled it quickly. The roses needed someone who knew more than she did.

The cottage had been rented when she came to the village. She'd bought it later, when she had finally stopped introducing herself as someone who might be moving on. The agency rooms, a short walk away, had been bought in both names. Watson had insisted they draw up papers about what would happen if only one of them wanted to sell.

"I was thinking I might get married," Watson said when Penny reminded her.

"To anyone in particular?"

"No. I thought that was why it would be wise to have something in writing."

They found the file behind a row of old assignments. The agency had kept a key in a little china dish by the door. Penny took it out and put it on the desk, where it looked like something a client had left behind.

"We could shut the office for a month," Penny said. "Put a card in the window and come back when we'd had some sleep."

Watson looked at the china dish. “I’d spend the month thinking about that key. Who still had one. Who’d be waiting at the door when we came back.”

Penny turned over a message someone had pushed through the letter flap. A client wanted them to come and look at a set of letters, the sort of work she would once have been sorry to miss. She could feel herself reaching for the telephone out of habit.

“I’ll ring her,” she said. “I know someone she can ask.”

“Do we sell the rooms as well as the cottage?” she asked.

Watson set the file down. “I think we should. I don’t want to go back to keeping two chairs ready for anyone who knows where to find us.”

“It’s the office I’ll miss most.”

“I thought it would be the cottage.”

“At the cottage I could sit down whenever I liked. At the office someone usually came in just as I had made tea.”

The reason was good enough for Watson. She made tea there one last time, and nobody came in.

They agreed which open files needed letters and which people should be introduced to another investigator. Watson would deal with the cottage and their joint agency rooms through the local solicitor. Penny would tell Erskine to put the pub on the market and see that Jean was included in the discussion about what came next. Both would sign the papers for the premises they owned together. Any decisions that required them both could wait long enough for them to talk.

“I won’t agree to an offer for you,” Penny said.

“I know.”

“I’ve had an opportunity to see what that feels like.”

Two days later, Penny rang Erskine from the office. She told him to put the pub on the market. If the company wanted to hear her reasons, he could give them three. She lived a long way away. The pub needed somebody who wanted to run it. Jean ought to be asked what she wanted before anyone talked about a reopening.

“Are those in the order you meant them?” he asked.

“No,” Penny said. “They never are when I say them the first time.”

Erskine said he’d speak to Jean again. He would check the position with Kerr before arranging any viewings. For now it would be enough to have instructions in writing. Penny wrote them while he was still on the telephone, then read them back once so she could hear what she’d decided.

Watson picked up the agency keys. She turned one over to find a small nick in the head. It was there because Penny had once filed it herself to make it easy to tell from the other. She had had perfectly sound reasons for doing it, as Alec had had for marking the pub key. Watson put it back down and drew the file towards them both.

The Name on the Door

A woman from the village came in while Watson was taking the agency cards out of the holder. She'd once brought them a shopping bag to see if they could find out whether it belonged to anyone. It had belonged to her sister. She'd thought her sister would be glad to hear it had been found by somebody who took such things seriously.

"Will they keep your name on the door?" she asked.

"I hope they'll want to put their own on it."

"I meant until you come back."

Watson put the cards on the desk. She could see it would be no kindness to let the woman keep driving past to look.

"We're selling the rooms. We haven't decided where we'll work next."

The woman nodded. "I thought you'd tell me if I asked. People have been asking me instead. I don't know why."

"Because you usually know."

"Yes," the woman said. "I suppose that might do it."

She went away with two of the cards, although Watson had explained that the address wouldn't be any use much longer. She said she knew that and took them anyway.

Penny came in for the file of people they'd promised to write to. Watson told her about the woman, and Penny went to the window. From there she could still see her, pulling her coat straight before she stepped off the kerb.

"Will you miss having an office?" Watson asked.

"I'll miss being able to tell that woman where she can find me."

“Do you want to change your mind?”

Penny leaned her head against the frame long enough for Watson to know she had considered it.

“No,” she said. “I wanted you to know I’d miss it.”

When they left, Watson turned the card holder round so it faced the wall. There were three cards left. She took one for herself and put it in the pocket with her keys.

A Month

The day before they left, Kerr rang. Tait remained charged in Reid's case. The detectives were free to go, and she wanted a way to reach each of them if the inquiry required something more. Watson gave her the two numbers they had agreed she could use. She offered to take down the inspector's number in return. Kerr asked whether she had lost the other one.

"I'm trying to stop keeping it under the sugar bowl."

"Where will you put it?"

"Somewhere I can find it when I'm frightened."

Penny waited until Watson hung up. They had talked about going away together and about staying in the cottage until they felt able to make a decision. Whenever they imagined staying, the talk came back to who would answer the telephone, who would go to the shop and who would tell the next person they were still there.

"A month," Penny said. "Separately. We deal with the sales through the solicitors and stay out of sight while we decide what we want to do next."

"You'll tell me if you hate it?"

"Yes."

"And if you like it?"

Penny looked up. "Especially then."

Watson brought the calendar over. They chose a date a month away. Penny suggested the little B&B by St Michael's Mount. She remembered a window from which you could see the tide covering the causeway, though she wasn't certain she remembered which room it was. Watson

asked if they could have breakfast even if neither of them could think of a single thing to say.

"I imagine they'll insist on it," Penny said.

They wrote the date down twice. Breakfast was a chance to see how they were getting on. Neither asked the other to promise she'd be ready to come home.

That evening Diana came to collect the cups she had brought from her own kitchen, though Penny was sure she'd brought no cups at all. She took the time to sit down and drink from one of them. Penny asked her what she thought she ought to do about the letter.

"Do you want him to read an answer?"

"Yes. I want him to read it while I'm there."

"Then I suppose you can keep it for now."

Penny set the letter next to the calendar. She left it there until the morning, when she put it in the case with the nightdress she could never remember packing. She meant to have it when it was time to talk to James. If it was Alec who came through the door instead, there were questions she meant to ask him too.

The Gate

Watson came down with her case first. She set it by the gate and waited while Penny went back in to look at the kitchen. The kettle stood in its place. A blind she hadn't meant to leave halfway down was halfway down. She decided the next person could put it where they liked.

When she came out, Watson was holding the latch.

"Which of us goes first?" Penny asked.

"I rather thought we could each go when we're ready."

Penny put her hand over Watson's on the latch. The spare house key was with the solicitor. The pub key was in an envelope with the instructions for Erskine. The agency papers were signed. There was nothing else either woman could finish by waiting another five minutes at the gate.

"One month," Watson said. "St Michael's Mount. Breakfast."

Penny nodded. "If I'm early, I'll order for myself."

"I should hope so."

She let go of Watson's hand. Watson took her case and went down the lane. Penny waited until she was out of sight, then closed the gate behind her. She could still see where Watson had set the case in the wet grass. She stepped round the mark and took the other road.

