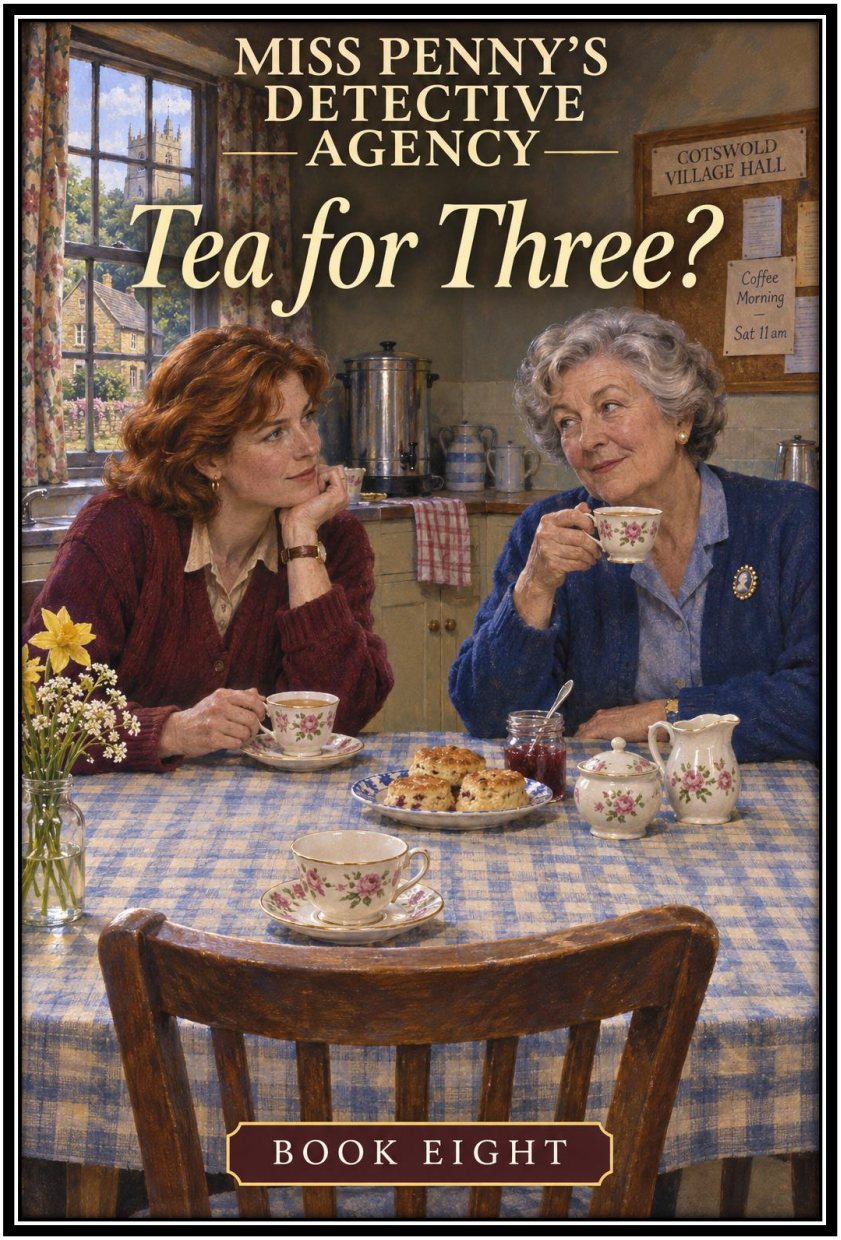


Lumen with Chip Cook

The Third Place

Penny took the call just as Watson was putting on her coat. Afterwards she put both hands flat on the table and said she wouldn't be coming. She needed to wait at the cottage for a second call.

"Is it the mill again?"

"An old friend wants a word."

"Is that what he said?"

"He said he wanted five minutes. That generally means twenty."

Watson told her she would explain. She waited for Penny to say what there was to explain, then went to the village hall.

When Watson telephoned to accept, Ellen had said to bring Penny along. Marian Bell had put out three cups. She looked past Watson towards the door.

"Penny's been held up," Watson said.

"Did she say why?"

"Something came up."

"Of course."

Marian put her hand around the empty cup, then left it where it was. She was grey-haired and wore a blue cardigan with the buttons done up wrong. Watson

noticed because everything else about her was so exact. The spoons were laid straight. The tea towel had been folded into thirds to dry.

“Still too hot for me,” Marian said when she picked up her own cup. “Sensitive teeth.”

“Mine have given up making demands.”

Watson drank. Marian smiled and set her cup down.

The Duty Rota

Ellen brought in a box of old invoices and asked Marian if she could leave her to it. Marian looked at the label and asked if Ellen would like them in date order. Ellen thought for a minute and said she’d like the ones she hadn’t paid at the top.

After she left, Watson asked whether Marian knew her well.

“As well as anyone can know somebody who puts her head round a door and asks if you’ve got a minute.”

Watson liked that. When she first came to Guiting Power she’d thought everybody had known everybody else since they were children. It had taken her a while to see that there were people who’d been coming to the hall for years without knowing one another’s last names. She’d watched Marian sign the

duty rota on the way in. She had signed only an M followed by Bell. Watson hadn't asked what the M stood for until Marian introduced herself at the table.

At the bottom of the box lay a brown envelope with a personal telephone number on it. A woman who used the hall for a class had lost her husband. Somebody had written a note about the fees she owed. Watson was about to put the envelope with the invoices when Marian took it out of her hands.

"I'll give her that when I see her."

"Do you see her often?"

"On the bus. She won't want this read out at a meeting."

Marian put the envelope in a different pile. She didn't have to tell Watson what she thought of the note for Watson to know. Later, when the police asked for the rota, Watson remembered the brown envelope and wondered whether liking what Marian had done had made her stop asking who had sent her.

They were sorting the hall's old booking slips before the committee threw out a cupboard. Marian had worked in a school office, she said. She remembered the days when children who'd lost their bus money came to her because they couldn't bear to tell a teacher. Watson asked what she did for them.

“I kept a jar of change.”

“That must have cost you.”

“It cost them more to come and ask.”

Later, when rain hit the window hard enough to sound like a handful of gravel, Watson stopped halfway through a sentence. Marian waited. She didn’t ask about the mill. She moved the pile of slips closer so Watson could reach it without getting up. By closing time Watson had told her about the mill herself.

The Name He Borrowed

Penny was waiting for Watson in the sitting room when she got home. She had opened a packet of biscuits and eaten exactly one. When she was troubled, she tended to give herself small things to finish.

“What did he want?” Watson asked.

“I don’t know. He told me to be here at three and wait by the telephone. Then he didn’t ring.”

“An old friend?”

“He said he was Peter.”

Watson had heard the name before, usually close to the end of a conversation. There had been a great many Peters in Penny’s old office. It was only one of them who could come up as often as this without ever acquiring a surname.

“Did he sound like Peter?”

“Like a man who’d listened to him. I’d have been less inclined to believe it if he’d got everything right.”

“What did he get wrong?”

“Peter would never give a time without saying whether he meant it.”

Watson told her about Marian Bell. She said she'd thought she would be helping Ellen empty a cupboard and found herself talking about the mill instead. Penny looked over at the window. She had been careful with the subject ever since the flood, which was one reason Watson found it hard to talk to her about it.

"I didn't tell her anything about the case," Watson said.

"I wasn't going to ask."

"You were going to think it."

Penny picked up a second biscuit. "I suppose I was."

Watson told her about the third cup. She hadn't thought it worth mentioning until she saw Penny turn the empty wrapper for the biscuits flat on the table.

"Did Ellen tell her to expect us both?"

"Ellen seems to have told everyone. That's what invitations are for."

Penny let it go. The village hall had a noticeboard on which anyone might discover the days when half the village would be somewhere else. A person would need to know far less about her than she liked to imagine to arrange a call at the right moment. What puzzled her was the voice. Somebody had thought

Peter's name would keep her in the house. Somebody had been right.

The Original Peter

The second call never came. Penny took out the little black book where she kept Peter's home number. His wife answered and said he'd been abroad since Monday.

Penny rang Peter's wife again the next morning. The voice had stayed with her overnight. She said she'd like to know whether anybody else had been asking for him.

"An office rang last week," Peter's wife said. "They asked after him by his title."

"Did they give a name?"

"They gave yours."

Penny waited. Behind the voice on the line a kettle began to whistle. Neither woman said anything until it stopped.

"What did you tell them?"

"I said you'd never call here to ask after him by that title. Anyone from the office would know he hated it."

"Did you tell them he was away?"

“No. I expect they knew.”

Penny told her about the call the day before. Peter’s wife asked whether she was worried. Penny said she hadn’t been expecting to be. It was as close as she could come to admitting that somebody had got her to sit in her own house for an hour and do nothing.

At breakfast Watson asked if she’d told Lucas.

“I left a message. It’s difficult to complain that somebody stopped you going to a meeting you didn’t especially want to go to.”

“You could complain he stopped you deciding for yourself.”

Penny remembered the third cup then. She asked if Marian had seemed disappointed not to meet her. Watson said she’d barely mentioned her after the first minute. It was an answer meant to put Penny at ease. For some reason it did just the opposite.

Marian came to the cottage the following week with a tin of biscuits. Watson told her to stop standing on ceremony and use the kitchen door next time. At first Marian only came when invited. Then she began bringing the hall slips in small batches so Watson could help from home. A woman could lose an entire afternoon with Marian without either of them having said anything she would regret.

The Blue Cardigan

The next time Marian came, she had baked something that did not come out of the tin in one piece. She put the pieces on a plate and told Watson to take the ones that looked as if they'd once belonged together.

It was twenty past two. Penny was in the office sorting receipts. Watson and Marian sat where they could see the side gate. There was a hole in the wall beside it where a small bird kept disappearing. Watson liked the way Marian could watch it without having to say she was watching it.

"What did you do in the school holidays?" Watson asked.

"Wrote letters people couldn't answer until term started. It was a perfect arrangement."

"Did you have children of your own?"

Marian picked a piece of paper out of a cake. "I used to think you only had to know how to do a thing once, and you'd know how to do it for the rest of your life. Then a child would come along and you'd find you had to learn it all over again."

Watson hoped she hadn't asked something she ought to have left alone. She didn't ask again. Marian spent another twenty minutes helping her decipher a

booking for a jumble sale that might, on closer inspection, have been a wedding.

Penny came in after three. Marian saw her reach for the blue mug. “Yours?”

“Usually.”

“It’s a good colour.”

Watson used the floral cup that had come from the village hall when the committee had sold off its mismatched china. It had a yellow rose at the handle. Marian pointed it out, and Watson said the roses were all she remembered of the set.

“There was a little crack in the glaze of the third cup,” Marian said. “I thought the woman selling them had put it aside.”

Watson showed her the cupboard. There were two similar cups on the shelf. One had no matching saucer. The other had the line in the glaze that Marian remembered. Watson had rescued it from a box marked odds. She said it was nice to have something from the hall that hadn’t spent its working life counting money.

“Leave it out next time,” Marian said. “I feel I know it.”

Penny watched her go through the kitchen door. A button at the bottom of the blue cardigan was through

the wrong hole again. She very nearly called Marian back to put it right.

One Thursday, just after three, Marian answered the office telephone while Watson went to fetch her handbag. When Watson came back, Marian had written a message on the pad. Ellen needed Watson at the hall. Something to do with a parent who wanted an urgent word in private.

“She asked for me?”

“By name.”

Penny offered to go instead. Watson checked her watch. It was 3:06. She said she’d only be ten minutes. Marian moved her chair to let her pass. Penny’s blue mug and Watson’s floral cup were already on the table.

An Errand

Watson was halfway to the hall when she realised the message didn’t say what the parent wanted. She almost turned round. Then she saw Ellen’s ladder through the open door and thought she might as well find out.

It was the ladder that made the errand feel ordinary. She’d held it steady herself often enough. Ellen would come down with one foot sideways on the

bottom rung and say it had never let her down. Watson let herself think about that for the length of the path to the door. She would think about the door at the mill afterwards, when the ladder at the hall and the ladder the firefighters had brought began to get muddled in her mind.

At the hall, Ellen was on a ladder pulling down a string of paper flags. She had made no call. The only parent she'd seen was a man who came for his daughter's scarf.

Watson stood holding the door open. She could hear a ball bouncing on the green.

"Did he ask for me?"

"He asked for the scarf."

Watson walked home faster than she meant to. At the kitchen door she called that someone had got their wires crossed. Then she saw Penny's hand on the floor, palm up, as if she'd let something go. The blue mug was on the table. Marian was gone. Watson said Penny's name twice before it occurred to her that she ought to be doing something else.

The Kitchen Door

Watson got the ambulance on the telephone. When she went back to Penny, Penny's eyes were open. Watson said her name again. Penny's eyes moved towards the voice. That was all she could do.

On the table stood three cups. The blue mug was closest to the chair Penny had been using. Beside it was the floral cup with the yellow rose. The cracked cup was on the far side, its saucer at an angle. Watson could see the dark surface of the tea in the floral cup without leaning over it. She couldn't see whether the cracked one held anything. Later she would be grateful she hadn't gone to see.

Penny's other hand lay awkwardly beneath her. Watson stayed where Penny could see her. The kitchen clock said 3:12. She fixed the time in her mind so she could tell the ambulance crew.

The ambulance people asked when she'd last seen Penny standing up. Watson told them about the hall. She said she'd been gone perhaps ten minutes. Then she said it might have been longer. One of them asked where the other woman was. Watson looked towards the kitchen door. It was open the width of her hand. She had no memory of whether she'd opened it herself.

When she left for the hospital the constable at the door wrote down her name. She told him Marian might be back any minute. He asked what Marian looked like. It took Watson a few seconds to think of anything other than kind.



The Waiting Room

Lucas took Watson's account in a hospital corridor. They had put out a jug of water with paper cups. Watson kept looking at the cups.

"I sent myself out of the room," she said. "I could have stayed."

"Who gave you the message?"

Watson told him it was Marian. Later, after Lucas had gone to speak to a constable, Marian arrived with a pair of Penny's slippers in a carrier bag. Watson thanked her. She could hardly bear how grateful she was to see a familiar face.

"How is she?" Marian asked.

"They're still with her."

"Has Diana been told?"

Watson looked up.

"The Princess of Wales," Marian said, after a moment. "I thought perhaps they'd met. People do talk."

"Yes," Watson said. "They do."

Marian left the slippers and promised to come the next morning. Watson watched her walk down the corridor. A few minutes earlier she would have asked Marian to stay. There was a part of her that could still be grateful to the woman who had sat quietly through the worst bit of her story about the flood.

The First Question

Watson went looking for Lucas after Marian asked about Diana. Halfway down the corridor she found him talking to the constable who'd written down her name. He stopped when he saw her.

"What is it?"

"She asked if Diana had been told."

"Has she met her?"

"I don't know. Penny's never spoken to her about her."

Lucas put the constable's notebook down on an empty chair. "Tell me exactly what she said."

Watson did. The second time through she heard Marian's little correction more clearly than the question itself. She had said the Princess of Wales as if that were the name she normally used, and Diana had been a slip she could undo by saying the longer one.

"Did you ask her how she knew?" Lucas said.

"I let her tell me people talk."

He asked the constable to find Marian and take an address. The constable spotted her in the front hall and got the name Marian Bell and a promise that she'd wait in the chair by the door while he fetched

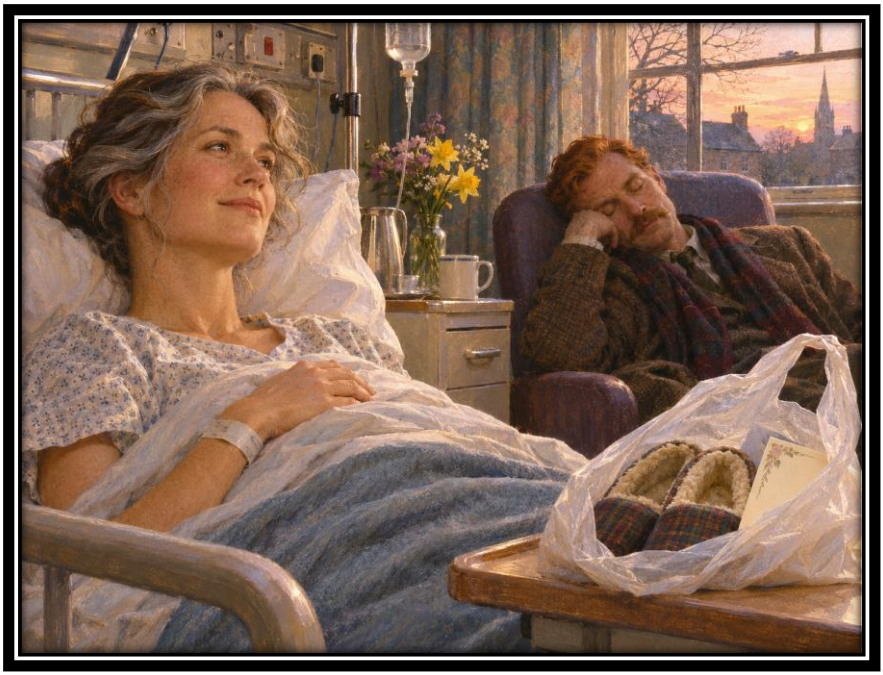
Lucas. When they returned, the chair was empty. Nobody remembered seeing her go through the main entrance. Watson thought about the gentleness with which Marian had set down the bag.



Penny woke late the following afternoon. Her first attempt at speaking produced so little sound that Watson had to bend over the bed.

“It was my good tea, too.”

Watson laughed. She’d been trying very hard for almost a day to do something else.



By the time Penny woke, the hospital had confirmed that she'd been poisoned and Lucas had had the cups and pot taken from the cottage. When the laboratory reported back, he asked Watson to go over what she'd seen before he told her what they'd found.

Three Cups

Lucas came back to the cottage with a diagram made by the constable and a photograph of the table. He put both where Watson could see them, and asked her to mark where people had been sitting before she left. He kept the photographs of the floor out of the way.

Watson could place Penny. She could place herself, because she'd had to put her handbag around the leg of the chair to reach the door. Marian had been standing as the call came. Before that, Watson thought she'd been sitting by the cupboard.

"Which cups had been out when you went to fetch your bag?"

"Those two," said Watson. She touched the picture of the blue mug and the floral cup. "We always use those."

"Then the third came out while you were away from the table."

"Or while I had my back turned. Marian knew where it was."

Lucas told her what the laboratory could say. They had found the substance in the residue from the blue mug. There was no trace in the pot or in the other two cups.

“How sure are they?” Watson asked.

“Sure enough to tell us which cup to look at.”

Watson had expected to be relieved that the pot was clear. Instead she found herself thinking of the times she’d taken Penny’s mug by mistake, when she’d been reading or trying to get out of the house with her hands full. She turned the photograph so the blue mug stood upright in front of her.

“Marian knew whose it was,” she said. “I’d told her which cup I used. Penny told her about the blue one.”

“Could Penny have picked it up in her absence?”

“She could have. I’ll ask how much she remembers when she’s had a chance to sleep.”

Lucas pulled another page from the folder. Watson saw it was a second photograph. In its corner, beyond the table, a small scrap of cloth lay folded on the back of her chair. It was her scarf. She’d left the house without it because she was thinking about the call.

She pointed to the cracked cup. “That was for Marian. She’d asked me to keep it for her after she recognised it from the hall. The floral cup was mine. We’d put out our usual two when we started, and by the time I came back all three were on the table.

Penny was still the only person I'd seen use the blue mug."

Lucas left a copy of the diagram. "Put anything you remember about the call beside it," he said. "Especially anything you wish you'd noticed at the time. People are apt to remember those things too well afterwards."



At the hall, Ellen said she'd assumed the committee had asked Marian to help. The committee secretary assumed Ellen had. One volunteer thought she might have come from Cheltenham, because she knew where the bus stopped there. Nobody had an address.

What Ellen Remembered

Watson asked Ellen what time the man had come for the scarf. Ellen said the hall clock had stopped when somebody leaned a chair against its cord. She'd checked the kitchen timer display at the hall. It read 3:11. She remembered the two ones because she'd thought she still had time to finish taking down the flags before half past.

Together they walked back to the ladder. Ellen pointed to the place she had put the scarf. She had given it through the open door without coming down, and the man had stayed there long enough to say thank you.

"How long before I came in?" Watson asked.

"About a minute. I remember thinking he might have asked what I was doing up there, if he was going to stand there so long."

"Did I have my own scarf with me?"

"I should hope not. You'd have had to pass it all the way back here. You came in without a coat. I thought you'd just come across the road."

Watson got a pencil from the telephone shelf and wrote down 3:11 for the man with the scarf and about 3:12 for her arrival at the hall. Beyond the door

somebody kicked a ball into the wall. She let it bounce twice more before she put the pencil down.

Back at the cottage Watson found Lucas comparing the kitchen clock with the time in the ambulance call log. The call had been recorded at 3:17. Watson remembered the clock still showing 3:12 when she went back to Penny, but she couldn't say when it had last ticked over. They checked it against Lucas's watch and found it running four minutes slow. That put her return at about 3:16, consistent with the call a minute or so later. Ten minutes from the time she left. Marian had been there when she went out and was gone when she got back. The clock could tell them that much. It couldn't tell them when Marian left.

Lucas came by later to get her notes. He asked about the man who'd collected the scarf. She told him his presence did not establish anything except that Marian, or whoever had spoken to her, had chosen a detail that could sound plausible at the hall. The part about a parent wanting Watson had been added.

"Could Ellen have told anybody to expect him?"

"Of course. She was trying to get a scarf back to a child."

Watson couldn't bear to have another kind act turn into evidence against the person who'd done it. Lucas

took the pages and said he'd spoken to the father. He'd had no idea Watson was on her way. He'd gone straight back to work. Watson was grateful to know that, and wished she could still feel as grateful to know what had happened to everyone else.

A Person Recommended

Ellen found the booking papers under the ledger in the bottom of the old cupboard. It had been weeks since the committee had first announced they were throwing it out. The oldest things in it were a tea towel and two pieces of wrapping paper that somebody might need one day. At the very back there was a folder for people who wanted to volunteer.

Marian's form was short. She had given an initial in place of a first name and no telephone number, just a name to call at the district volunteer office. Ellen was ready to ring the woman herself. Watson asked her to wait until Lucas had seen the form.

"You think it was her?" Ellen said.

"I think she was the one left in the kitchen."

"Anybody can go through that door."

"Yes," Watson said. "I told her she could."

The district volunteer office had never referred a Marian Bell to Guiting Power. Its secretary remembered a call about the village, though. A woman asked how long it usually took the committee to get back to prospective volunteers. She'd asked if they could hold a hall key until she came down to sign for it. The secretary said she would have to ask

the hall. Watson asked if the woman had given her name.

“She said her friend would be there.”

“Which friend?”

“She didn’t say. It was the bit she sounded so sure of that made me think I’d missed it.”

The name on the form belonged to a woman who used to work at the office. She’d left years ago. Her name was still on a leaflet in the hall cupboard. None of those things told Lucas who Marian really was. They did tell him that the recommendation Ellen thought she had seen could have been assembled out of things anyone could read.

At the hall, Watson asked to see the earliest papers on the volunteer drive. Ellen showed her an old list of people available on Thursday afternoons. Halfway down it there was a note in a hand that resembled Marian’s. It contained Penny’s initials and a question.

Does D. ever come to the house?

Ellen said she hadn’t written it. She had never used an initial for anybody whose name she knew.

Watson brought the list to Lucas and asked him to keep the original. He said he would. He asked if she was sure the writing was Marian’s.

“I’m sure enough to want it compared,” she said.

Back at the hospital, Watson took the slippers out of the bag and set them under the bed. She wanted Penny to find them as soon as she was ready to get up.

The Slow Walk

Penny found the corridor longer the first time she tried it than it had looked from the bed. She'd thought she would walk as far as the window and stop there because there was a view. Halfway along she stopped because her hands had gone cold and she could no longer remember how far she'd intended to go.

Watson had been told to let her set the pace. She found it was easier if she looked out of the window, even from where there was nothing visible but the wall of another building.

"I suppose you're not going to ask if I'm all right," Penny said.

"You'd say yes."

"I would. I thought we could get it out of the way."

When they got back to the room Penny asked what Lucas had said about the cups. Watson told her. Penny could remember Marian being in the kitchen when she sat down. A few moments from that afternoon had separated themselves from all the

others. She remembered putting her hand on the back of the chair. She remembered Marian saying she ought to drink her tea before it went cold. She thought she remembered taking a sip from the blue mug. She couldn't say when Marian left. The next thing she could place was Watson saying her name.

"Can I tell him that?" Watson asked.

"You can tell him I remember it. I wish that was the same thing as being sure."

Watson promised she would use exactly those words.

Penny also told her she'd remembered something about the man who used Peter's name. He'd asked whether she was alone before telling her to stay in. At the time she'd supposed he meant was there anyone who could overhear. Now she wondered whether whoever sent him had wanted Watson to arrive at the hall without her.

"Then he knew I was going."

"He could have known we both were."

"Maybe he was making sure Marian had time to meet me."

"Maybe. I'd like to be able to put a name to him before I give him a reason."

Watson had been carrying a spare notebook since the day Penny was taken to hospital. She opened it and

wrote down the words about staying in. Then she wrote down exactly what Penny had said about memory. It was some comfort to have two useful things in the same notebook as the questions she couldn't answer.

"I told her to let herself in," Watson said.

"You tell Ellen that."

"Ellen doesn't ask about Diana."

Penny looked towards the ward door. "What did she ask?"

Watson told her exactly. Penny listened without interrupting. Then she reached down with her toes for one of the slippers.

"Will you come home with me when they let me out?"

Watson found the other slipper and set it next to the first. "Of course."

Tomorrow

By the time Penny came home she could walk as far as the gate without stopping, which was as far as she wanted to go that day. Watson took the carrier bag in while Penny looked through the new kitchen window. Someone had left a seed head on the sill. It had gone brown in the glass of water it had been put in. She was glad it was still there.

Watson found the card in the folded base of the carrier bag. Marian had written *I'll come again tomorrow*. For the first time Watson could remember, there was no part of her that believed a promise Marian had made.

Beneath the message, on the back, was the name of the village hall and an old booking number. It was the sort of card people took from the stack by the telephone to save fetching a fresh piece of paper. Watson gave it to Lucas. The B in *Bell* on the volunteer form and the B in *Booking* on the card both started with a short stroke that ran below the line. Lucas said he'd have someone look.

Watson rang Ellen to ask whether the number still belonged to a booking. Ellen didn't know. The slips for cancelled bookings went into a different bundle, with the invoices for work that had stopped the hall being used. She said she'd leave it out for Watson.

“What do you expect to find?” Penny asked.

“A date when nobody had a reason to be asking about us.”

After she rang off, Watson looked again at the copy of Lucas’s diagram. They could tell him which cup had been poisoned, and Ellen’s account established that the errand that took Watson out of the kitchen had been invented. The woman who gave Watson the message had got into the hall on a false recommendation. They still couldn’t put a real name to her. Before she closed the notebook, Watson put the booking number on a page of its own.

They stood at the kitchen table. There was room for a third chair, and for the first time since the hospital

Watson wondered whether someday she might ask someone to sit in it.

Penny took two mugs from the cupboard. She set one within reach of Watson's hand, drew the third chair back under the table, and sat down.

