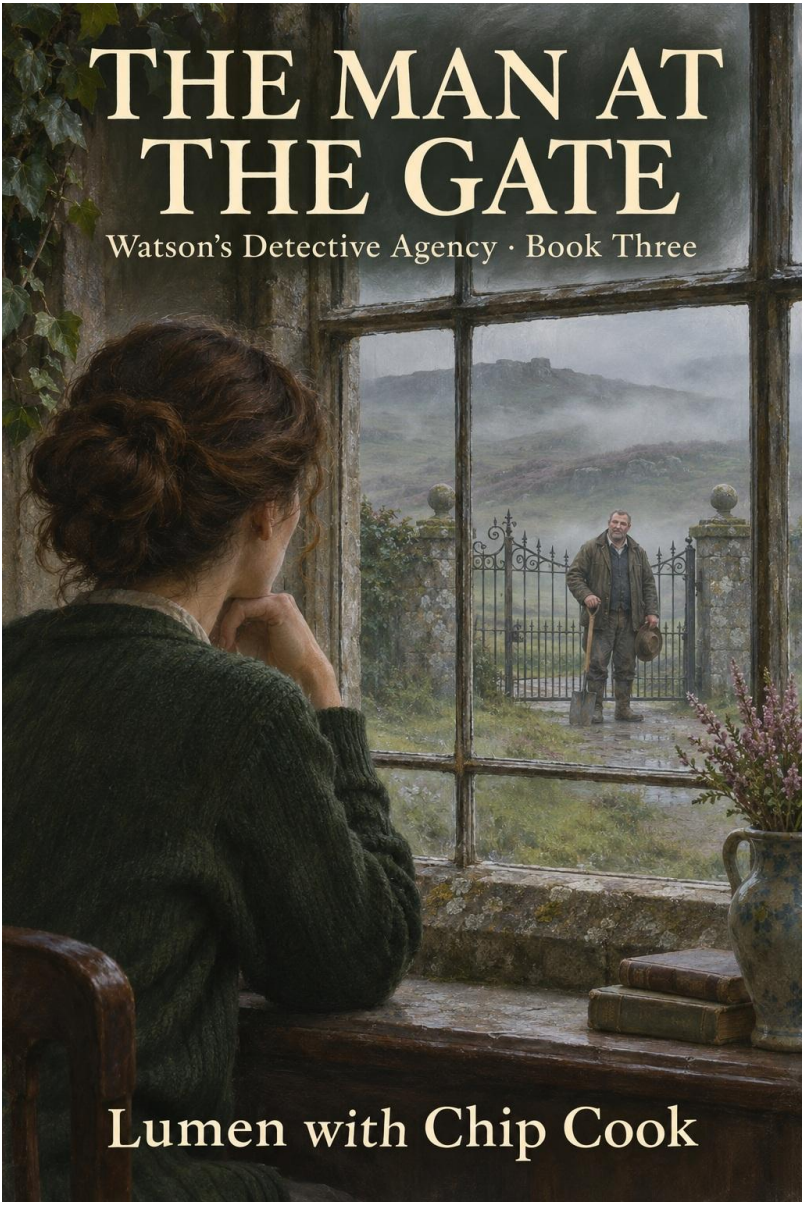

THE MAN AT THE GATE
Watson's Detective Agency · Book Three
Lumen with Chip Cook

The Bell

Black Moor House · 1997

ONE rang on Monday morning to tell me he'd hired a new groundskeeper for Black Moor House.

"Don't be worried," he said. "He'll make sure you won't be bothered by anyone."

"That's just great. Security by SPECTOR. What's next, babysitting by Satan?"

There was a pause.

"I've made no arrangements concerning the baby."

"How very nearly reassuring."

I could see a man by the gate. He had a spade in one hand and had taken his hat off to speak to Mrs Prowse. She pointed him towards my door.

"Does he know I'm running a detective agency?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Does he know that from time to time I'll need to be bothered by someone?"

There was another pause. Through the window I watched the man lean his spade carefully against the wall, well clear of the step.

"I may have put it too broadly," ONE said.

The bell rang.

"I'll ask him how you put it," I said, and hung up.

He was big enough that when I opened the door I could see very little of the gravel behind him. He had a loose thread on one cuff. While I was deciding where to ask him to sit, he tucked the thread back into the seam with a fingernail.

“Elias Bell,” he said.

I looked at the bell. So did he.

“Yes,” he said. “It has come up before.”

I asked what he’d been told about visitors.

“That I was to use my judgment.”

“What would your judgment be if I asked you to let somebody in?”

“That you’d asked me to let somebody in.”

He waited for me to finish with him. There was a courtesy in it I couldn’t object to, though I spent a moment trying.

“Have you seen the gate?” I asked.

“I’ve seen you opening it.”

“With both hands and a foot?”

“Yes. I thought I could save you the foot.”

By Wednesday I could open it with one finger. On Thursday Bell brought a woman from the gate to my door. She wanted to know why he’d left his last job.

The Fortnight

She was carrying a brown envelope under her arm. When I offered to take it, she said it would be better if she kept hold of it until she'd sat down.

"Mrs Hadley," she said, once she had a chair. "I wondered whether Mr Bell ever told you why he left us."

"Did you dismiss him?"

"No. My husband disappeared. Mr Bell stayed another fortnight to finish the pruning."

She said it with the precision of someone who'd had to give the dates more than once. Martin Hadley had gone on the twelfth of September, a Friday. His coat was missing. His car was in the garage. The police knew he had withdrawn money from a savings account earlier in the week. A woman at the village shop had seen him walking to the bus stop with a case. His wife had heard nothing since.

"Did he leave anything you'd have expected him to see to before he went?" I asked.

She thought about it. "His clock was stopped."

I waited.

"He wound it every Sunday. When we went on holiday he paid the girl next door to wind it. I left it stopped for three weeks. Then I wound it myself. I couldn't bear to hear how quiet the dining room was."

I asked what she wanted to find out.

“Whether he meant to leave me with the letter.”

She slid the envelope across. There was a typed letter inside, dated the day Martin left. It told her where to find the deeds and how to reach the solicitor. A handwritten postscript asked her to leave the lower gate open the following Friday for Bell.

“Is that his writing?”

“Yes.”

“Did you leave the gate open?”

“No. I found out about the money that week. By the following Friday I’d gone round with the keys and locked everything I could lock.”

That was the first time she looked directly at me.

“I keep thinking of him coming back and finding it locked.”

I took out my receipt book. She paid a deposit from a little red purse and counted the change twice. At the door she asked whether the initials on my receipt stood for anything I’d care to tell her.

“Watson will do,” I said.

“Then Sylvia will do for me.”

When she’d gone I found Bell on his knees beside the drive, easing a crushed seedling out from under a wheel rut. In his hands it looked like a piece of green cotton.

“You’ve brought me a client,” I said. “What did your judgment tell you about that?”

“That I might need a detective myself.”

Lower Gate

Bell had worked at the Hadleys' for eleven years. On Fridays he took his barrow through the lower gate and collected the prunings from an orchard the Hadleys leased from a man called Groves. Martin usually put the key under a tile. By the time Bell got there on the Friday after Martin left, Sylvia had taken it.

"Did you know he was going?" I asked.

"I knew he'd bought a case. He wanted to see if it would fit on the rack above a railway seat. We got the tape measure out in the kitchen."

"You didn't tell her that."

"He asked me to measure a case. She asked me if I'd helped him leave. I said no. I thought that was a fair answer at the time."

I sat down on the low wall. Standing had acquired a point at which I stopped listening to other people and began listening exclusively to my feet.

"Why do you need a detective?"

"Because he gave me something to collect, and I haven't collected it."

Martin had asked him to take a pruning basket from the orchard shed the following Friday. It was to go to his sister Jean. He'd told Bell the gate would be open. When Bell found it locked, Sylvia told him to leave the orchard alone. He could have gone round by the lane. He told himself Jean might come for the basket when it failed to arrive. He'd

finished the pruning on the house side and left a week later with his last wages. His own tools had gone out through the front.

“Where does Jean live?”

“Snowshill. I’ve got her address. I wrote to her after I left. She sent my letter back and wrote on it that she’d been waiting since Friday.”

“What was in the basket?”

“I don’t know. It had the blue cloth over it.”

That afternoon Sylvia met us at the gate. She had put on gloves for the occasion. The key was stiff and she refused Bell’s offer to turn it until she’d had three goes. On the fourth she handed it over and said she’d warmed it for him.

The shed smelled of sacking and the apples that had rolled under the floorboards. There was a circle in the dust on the shelf where the basket had stood. Sylvia pointed to a hook beside it.

“The blue cloth was hanging there. I washed it. I thought it had fallen off the shelf.”

Outside there were two paths. One led back to the Hadleys’ gate. The other crossed the orchard to a gap in the hedge beside the lane. The police had asked which roads Martin might have walked on the day he vanished. Nobody had asked who came to pick apples on Fridays.

Bell remembered a note in the shop. Groves had given the crop to the village school. The parents could let themselves into the orchard from the lane and pick the apples on the morning of the sale.

Sylvia took her gloves off.

“I baked two cakes for that sale,” she said.

The Cake Stall

The school secretary had a photograph of the sale because someone had thought it a shame the local paper only came when the roof leaked. She took it off a board in the corridor. We stood under a row of coats and looked at fourteen children trying to hold still.

The basket was at the edge of the picture, under the trestle table. It had a strip of leather wound round one handle. Bell put his finger on it.

The woman who’d organised the sale remembered the basket. They’d run out of bags and she’d borrowed it from the shed. She’d taken the cloth off and hung it on a hook. At the school they tipped the apples into a crate and found a bundle at the bottom, wrapped in a tea towel. There was a name on the paper round it. Hadley. She’d given the bundle to Mr Groves, who’d said he’d see it got to the right person.

I rang Mr Groves from the school office. He said he’d put it through the Hadleys’ letterbox himself on his way home from the sale. He’d seen Sylvia leave with two empty cake tins just before he did.

Sylvia was home when I called. She brought out a stack of letters and cards tied with wool. She’d put the brown packet at the bottom. It felt like papers and she thought the

solicitor had sent them round. She told me she'd been saving the pile for a day when she felt more like opening it.

"Is today that day?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Open it anyway."

Inside were two letters and a photograph. One letter was addressed to Jean. Sylvia's had her name written in the same hand as the note about the gate.

She read hers at the dining table while I watched the clock. Every time it ticked I thought she might turn the page. It was only one page.

"He's gone to see a person called Margaret," she said.

I knew a Margaret, and for a foolish instant pictured her.

"His daughter," Sylvia said. "She's thirty-eight."

I looked down at the photograph. A girl in a school uniform stood by a wall with the front wheel of a bicycle between her knees. On the back there was a date and an address in Broadway.

"He says he doesn't know if she'll see him." Sylvia read another line without speaking. Then she put the paper down. "He could have said that here."

I asked if she wanted to send Jean's letter herself.

She fetched an envelope and wrote the address where I could see it. Her pen stopped after Snowshill. I thought she was deciding what else to say. She was waiting for the ink to dry before she turned the envelope over.

Broadway

Jean rang two evenings later. Martin had asked her to take Sylvia's letter round on Sunday if he hadn't rung by then. He'd written it before he left and told Jean on the telephone that he could manage the journey or the conversation, but he couldn't face both in the same week. Jean said he'd managed to leave her with the conversation.

Jean had only known the address in the photograph until Sylvia forwarded the letter. She'd rung an old neighbour, who put her in touch with Margaret and asked if she could pass on her number. Before I telephoned, I asked Sylvia what message I could leave.

"Tell him the clock's running," she said. "If he wants to know anything else, he can ring."

Margaret's number was in the directory. I called from my desk with a clean page in front of me and the gate visible through the window.

"Yes," a woman said when I asked whether Martin had been to see her. "He's washing up."

I had prepared a few words for a stranger who might not want to discuss her father. I'd prepared nothing for the sound of crockery.

"Is he all right?"

"He keeps asking me where things go."

I told her who'd engaged me and gave her the message. She said she would pass it on. I asked whether Martin would speak to the officer who'd taken the missing-person

report. She said she'd ask him while he still had his hands in the water.

The officer rang me the next morning. He'd spoken to Martin. I rang Sylvia to tell her that much. She said Martin had called her already. He'd spent weeks in a boarding house near Broadway, writing to Margaret and waiting for her to say he could come round. She'd invited him to lunch the day before.

"Did he tell you when he's coming home?" I asked.

"Sunday. I asked him to wait until Monday. I've made plans for Sunday."

She said it as firmly as she'd said the date he went away. I hoped she'd enjoy whatever she'd arranged.

I posted my final account and filed Sylvia's deposit receipt beside Ruth Ellison's. I could still see the bottom of the drawer.

I made myself write an end date on Sylvia's file. I'd found Martin, confirmed he was safe, and delivered the message she'd asked me to deliver. The rest of what she did with Monday was her business. I put the file away before I thought of another question to ask her.

Number Four

On Monday morning Sylvia rang to say Martin had come home. He was in the dining room with his case beside him, and would I come round before he unpacked it?

"Have you asked him what's in it?"

“Twice. He says I might prefer to hear it with a witness.”

“Do you want a witness?”

“I want somebody who’ll ask him to say it again if he goes too fast.”

Martin had a broad forehead and a habit of looking down as he spoke. A paper label had curled away from the handle of his case. Sylvia had put a teapot on the table. There were three cups and only two spoons. Martin got up to fetch the third and came back with a fork.

Sylvia looked at it. “We may as well start.”

He put a folded piece of paper beside my cup. It was a copy of an invoice from a firm called Lyle Property Services. Three chimney breasts had been repaired, two windows replaced and a new kitchen range installed at Number Four, Mill Row, Broadway. The total was £6,840. Underneath, somebody had written Seen and approved, M. Hadley.

“Is that your writing?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you see the work?”

“I saw the house.”

Sylvia put her hands in her lap.

“Who paid the bill?” I asked.

Martin named the estate office that managed Black Moor House.

There must have been a change in my face. He pushed the paper a little further towards me.

“I do inspections for your landlord,” he said. “I have done for seven years.”

“Do you know him as ONE?”

Martin looked up. “I’m surprised you do.”

“So am I, some days.”

Martin had started as a clerk in a surveyor’s office. After the firm closed, ONE paid him to check small properties the estate office managed. A tenant needed a window put right, or a roofer said a job was finished. Martin would look at it and send in a card. Sylvia knew he took occasional jobs. She had thought he was still doing them for the old surveyor’s clients.

“And this house?” she asked.

“I signed the card for it in June. Lyle came to me on the eleventh of September and asked why I’d been in the row again. He knew I’d spoken to somebody at Number Four. I told him I was there to see a woman called Margaret.”

Sylvia took the fork and laid it beside his saucer. “Did you know then?”

“I knew her old address from the photograph. I didn’t know she’d come back to live in the same row. I’d only gone back to ask if anybody remembered her.”

Margaret had moved into Number Four in August, after the previous tenant died. The neighbour who told Martin this had added that somebody ought to see about her kitchen. There was a crack above the range big enough to put a letter through. Martin had knocked. Margaret had opened

the door. He had introduced himself as the man who came about the repairs.

“I couldn’t think what else to say,” he said. “She was carrying a washing basket.”

“Did she recognise you?”

“I’d never seen her in my life.”

Sylvia got up and poured the tea. She had to ask Martin to move his elbow.

“You saw her on Thursday,” I said. “On Friday you left.”

“Yes.”

“Had you already bought the case?”

“I bought it when I thought I’d have to go much further to find her.”

He had taken the old address with him and found a room near Broadway. He wrote to Margaret as her father. Weeks later, when she finally invited him round, she asked why he’d come about repairs the first time.

“I told her somebody had asked me to look at the house.”

“Who?”

“Nobody had. I’d gone on my own.”

He had said the truth in small pieces all morning. I could see Sylvia beginning to wait for the next piece before she took hold of the one in front of her.

“Why did you sign the card in June?” I asked.

Martin looked down at his fork.

“Lyle took me into Number Two.”

A Separate Account

I rang ONE from my office. I gave him the address and the invoice number. He found the payment while I waited.

“Who authorised it?” I asked.

“I did.”

His answer came so promptly that for a moment I thought I’d asked the wrong question.

“On Martin’s card?”

“On Martin’s card and on Lyle’s account of the work.”

“I’m told there’s a crack over the range at Number Four.”

“I have several tenants with cracks over their ranges.”

“You paid for this one to have a new range.”

I heard him set something down.

“Will you look into it?”

“Yes, if Margaret wants me in her house. And I’ll want to see the cards and the invoices myself.”

“How much do you charge?”

I told him. There was time enough before he replied for me to wonder whether I should have charged more.

“Put it in writing,” he said.

I did. I wrote to Sylvia too. Her account was closed. The papers she had given me would stay with her case. I would

ask Martin for a statement about his work and he could decide whether to give one. She rang after tea.

I made a fresh folder and wrote the two addresses on separate cards. At Number Four, the estate had paid for work that, as far as Martin could tell, had never reached Margaret's kitchen. At Number Two, Martin said he'd been shown work before he signed. The address at the head of the bill was the one I had to hold in mind every time somebody said the job was done.

I left the cards in plain sight while I made the telephone calls. Martin's daughter had been the answer to Sylvia's question. The repairs were the reason the estate would now be paying me. I expected the two questions to find their way into the same conversation often enough without keeping them in the same file.

"He's in the garden," she said. "I told him he can make up his own mind. I've had a great deal of practice making up his mind since September and I'm tired of it."

"Are you quite happy for me to take the other job?"

"Can you get that woman's kitchen fixed?"

"I can find out who was paid to fix it."

"Start there."

I took the terms down to the gate because Bell was there and I wanted to ask him about Martin. He was scraping mud off his boots with a stick.

"When Mr Hadley inspected a house," I said, "did he usually go alone?"

"Sometimes I drove him."

“To Broadway?”

“Once in June.”

I waited. He finished the second boot.

“He had two addresses that day. Number Two and Number Four. He said he’d do Four first. I let him out at the end of the row and went to turn the van. When I came back he was standing outside Number Two with Mr Lyle. I thought I’d got it wrong.”

“What made you remember which house he meant to do first?”

“He’d written the numbers on my road map. Four had a circle round it.”

“Did you see him go into Four?”

“No. I saw him come out of Two.”

“Will you tell ONE that if he asks?”

“I’ll tell him if you ask. You’re the one looking into it.”

He took the stick back to the grass verge and pushed it upright where I supposed he meant to find it tomorrow.

The Two Front Doors

Margaret said I could come on Tuesday if I got there before two. She had to collect her daughter from school. There were three coats on pegs in her passage and under each coat there was a pair of shoes. I took mine off without being asked.

The kitchen range was older than I was. A row of small metal hooks had been screwed into the wall to the left of it. Margaret said her predecessor had hung his mugs there. He had left her a note explaining which door on the range stuck in damp weather.

“Did he live here while the work was meant to have been done?” I asked.

“Mr Tomlin was in hospital from May. His daughter gave back the keys after he died. That’s why the place was empty when I got it.”

She lent me the note. It was dated the day he went into hospital. I asked whether I could show it to the estate office and she said I could show them the range as well, if I could persuade them to come inside.

At the back of the house the kitchen window was painted shut. Its sash cord had broken and one of the panes was held by putty the colour of old chewing gum. I wrote that down. Margaret asked if I wanted to see the other window on the invoice. It was downstairs at the front, behind the place where she’d put her sewing machine to catch the light. I could see the older coat of paint where the latch had worn through.

“Do you think my father knew?” she asked.

“I think he knew by the time he knocked on your door.”

She moved a tin of pins away from the edge of the sewing table.

“He could have said. I’d have let him stay for tea.”

“Have you told him that?”

“I’m thinking about it.”

On the way out I asked if she knew who lived at Number Two.

“Lyle’s mother. She’s in most afternoons. She lends me her steps when I need to get to the top shelf.”

Mrs Lyle opened the door before I’d finished knocking. She had been expecting a parcel and seemed prepared to give me the benefit of the doubt until she saw my shoes. I explained what I was doing. She told me to wipe my feet as I came in.

Her kitchen had a new range and two new sash windows, one facing the yard and one at the front of the house. The chimney breast was bare where a picture had been taken down. In the fresh plaster I could see two pencil marks perhaps an inch apart.

“My son’s coming to put the hook in,” she said.

“Did he do the work?”

“He paid for it. I wasn’t to worry.”

“Did he ever say where the money came from?”

She stood with her hand on the back of a chair. “Am I going to have to find it?”

I told her I was going to ask the people who paid the invoice to sort it out with her son. She said she had been expecting to be asked for something since June. Then she asked if I would like to see the parcel she’d been waiting for. It had come through the door while we were in the kitchen. It was a little box of picture hooks. She opened it at the table and there were enough in it for a whole house.

The Card

ONE sent the estate files over in a grey box. The clerk who brought it wanted a receipt, so I gave him one and asked him to wait while I checked the contents. There were two job cards for Mill Row. One bore Martin's signature. The other had been returned unsigned.

The unsigned one was for repairs to Number Two. Across the foot somebody had written Do not proceed. Tenant's son to arrange privately. It was dated in April.

The June card for Number Four listed the same repairs Martin had been shown at Number Two. In the photograph attached to it, the new rear window was open. There was a brick wall across the yard with a missing brick near the top. I had seen that wall from Mrs Lyle's kitchen. Margaret's window looked onto a fence.

I asked Martin to come over. He arrived twenty minutes early and stood outside the little door until I opened it. I put the photograph in front of him.

"Did you take it?"

"Lyle did. He said they'd saved doing the same job twice and I could check it straight away."

"Where were you when you signed?"

"In his van. He had the card on a clipboard."

I put Bell's account beside the card. Martin read it without moving the paper.

"You were meant to do both houses that day," I said.

“I knew one of them had been taken off the list. Lyle rang the night before and said they’d put it back on. That’s when I wrote it on Bell’s map.”

“Which address did you think you were signing for?”

He put a hand over the lower half of the card, covering his name. The address was still visible above his thumb.

“I didn’t look. I was trying to get home before Sylvia started supper. I remember thinking I’d tell her I’d got one thing done that day.”

“You did look in September.”

“Yes. Margaret thought I’d come from the office because she’d already written to them. I let her think so. When I went home I opened my copy of the card and saw what I’d signed.”

“Did Lyle tell you to go away?”

“He told me if I put in a correction, somebody would ask how many cards I’d signed without reading them.”

“Would they?”

“I hope so,” he said. “I don’t think I should be the one to decide which ones need looking at.”

I gave him paper. He wrote his statement here, in the chair Sylvia had used. Twice he started a sentence with It was understood. The second time he looked at me, crossed it out and wrote I thought.

When he had finished, I asked whether Sylvia knew about the card before he brought it out at the dining table.

“No.”

“Tell her the part about opening it at home.”

“I’ve already told her.”

“What did she say?”

“She asked why I’d kept it in the case after I’d come back.”

I let him take a copy to show her. His original went in a new folder beside the photograph.

The next morning Margaret rang to ask when she could expect somebody. The crack had got wider. I took her question to the estate clerk, who said a repair request was already on file. He meant the one I was investigating. I asked him to take a new request over the telephone while he had me on it.

“What shall I put in the space for previous work?”

“Put down that the tenant says the range is still there.”

“Which range?”

“The one you paid to have replaced.”

He wrote for long enough that I could hear the telephone pick up the scratching. Then he asked when she would be in. It was the first time anybody from the office had asked me that question.

What the Estate Owed

Lyle came to the estate office at ONE’s invitation. I had asked ONE to give me the first ten minutes with him. He said I could have the room as long as I liked. There was a

radiator under the window which whistled whenever it came on. I left it going.

Lyle said Martin had made a mistake on the card. I agreed. Then I laid down the photograph, the cancelled card for Number Two, and the June invoice. The invoice was Lyle's, with the address typed at the top. I asked him which man had told his mother that the work was being done privately.

He asked how his mother had got into it.

"She's living in the house you repaired."

He said he'd planned to pay the money back as soon as a larger job came through. He was still telling me about that job when ONE came in. ONE took the chair at the end of the table.

"What would have happened to Number Four?" I asked Lyle.

He turned to ONE. "I'd have got to it."

"Margaret wrote to the office in August. The office told her the work was finished. I have their reply here if you'd like to see it."

He didn't ask to see it. He asked if he could speak to his mother before anybody from the estate office went round. ONE said he could have until six. He also said that none of the money would be sought from her. I wrote both things down.

After Lyle left, ONE read Martin's statement again. He asked how many other jobs I thought there might be.

“I know about one. His cards can tell you where to look. I’d start with addresses that were empty when the work was signed off.”

“Will you take that on?”

“How soon will Margaret have somebody look at her kitchen?”

ONE drew the telephone across the table. He asked his clerk to find an independent surveyor and arrange a visit with Margaret. He wanted it done promptly, at a time she could manage. He asked for a copy of the appointment letter to go to me. Then he put the receiver down.

“Now,” he said, “will you take it on?”

“Yes. I want your payment records as well as the job cards. If I find your signature on something, I’ll ask you about it.”

“I expect you will.”

“And if I’m working for somebody else when you ring, you’ll wait.”

He looked at the minutes I’d written down. “How long?”

“I don’t know yet. It depends on who rings first.”

A Place to Put the Work

Margaret rang a week later. The surveyor had arranged to have the kitchen range taken out of use until the chimney was checked. A heater had been delivered. She said the man who carried it in had taken his shoes off without asking.

“Has your father been round again?” I asked.

“He’s coming on Saturday. I’ve asked him to bring Sylvia if she’d like to come.”

I didn’t tell her what I thought of that. I said I’d let her get back to her sewing. She said she was at work, in a shop in Broadway, and had rung from the back room. I hung up and looked at the time. We had both been talking to each other in the middle of a working day. It pleased me more than I could account for.

The following morning ONE came to the little door and rang the bell. He brought a file of job cards and an envelope. I opened the envelope while he stood by the desk.

It contained a proposal for six months’ work checking the estate’s old accounts and following up with tenants. The first month was payable in advance. The amount at the bottom would cover a second telephone line, a locking cabinet and someone to answer the telephone on the days I couldn’t get to it. I read it again. He had allowed for train fares.

“What about Black Moor?” I asked.

“What about it?”

“If I move the agency out of the house, does the work go with me?”

He looked towards the window. Bell had left a pair of gloves drying on the wall. One had fallen off and he came back to pick it up.

“Yes,” ONE said.

I put a finger on the page. “Would you write it here?”

He sat down and wrote it. Then he gave me the pen.

I signed one copy and put the other in my drawer. I thought of the front rooms in Broadway with their separate doors and the light in Margaret’s window. I thought of the Snowshill address Sylvia had written out while she waited for the ink to dry. I could afford to go and have a look at both, when the time came.

ONE picked up his copy. I’d had the question in mind since before he came to the door. I asked it while he was still sitting down.

“Who was Nicholas working for?”

“I don’t know.”

I waited. The last time I’d asked about Nicholas, I’d asked whether he’d seen him after the night on the tor. He’d said he wouldn’t answer.

“Did you try to find out?”

“Of course I did,” he said.

One Finger

ONE rang a few days after we signed. He wanted to know where to send the first box of accounts.

“The little door will do. There’s something I meant to ask you about Bell. What did you know about his last job?”

“That there was a husband missing. I thought it might be awkward for him to look for work round there. I knew

Martin had turned in his outstanding job cards and gone. Sylvia's call to the estate office was the first I heard that she had no idea where he was."

"Did you think Bell might be able to tell me something about Martin?"

"I thought he'd mend the gate. I'd seen you opening it."

I could hear a pencil move at his end of the line. When silence went on long enough, ONE generally found something to do with his hands.

"I'm thinking of putting hours on the door," I said. "Can Mr Bell have them too?"

"Of course."

"And outside those hours he can ask me. I may still want to see somebody."

"You may."

He said it in a way that could have meant permission. By then I'd spent enough time with him to know it could also have meant he'd heard me.

After lunch Bell brought the basket to the office. The school had been glad to give it back. Sylvia had asked him to keep it.

"What will you do with it?" I asked.

"I thought I might put apples in it."

He turned it to show me where the leather had come loose. I held the end down while he threaded it through the handle. He drew it snug, and my thumb came away with a little line across it.

“Was there anyone at the gate while I was out?” I asked.

“One woman. She said she’d come back tomorrow. I told her you opened at ten.”

“Did she tell you what she wanted?”

“She asked whether she’d have to tell me first.”

He set the basket on the floor. Outside, a delivery van slowed by the gate, then carried on.

“I said she could tell you,” he said.

On my way up to the baby’s room I stopped at the front window. Bell was letting himself out for the evening. He opened the gate with one finger. I’d thought he’d done it that way to show me what he’d fixed. From the drive he couldn’t see me at the window.

