
ALL THE KEYS
Watson's Detective Agency · Book Six
Lumen with Chip Cook

The Spare Key

Black Moor · February 1998

The clerk from the estate office came up the drive holding a key in a saucer. Since Bell brought me the ring I had a bad habit of noticing what came up the drive on saucers.

“Mrs Venn left this for you,” he said. “It’s her spare. She thought if you’d sent the man, you might be able to exchange it for her own key.”

“I haven’t asked Mrs Venn for a key.”

“I wondered if you’d say that.”

He sat down without being asked. I waited until he’d got his handkerchief out and used it. Then I asked him about Mrs Venn.

A man had called at her cottage the previous Tuesday. He said I’d sent him to look at work on the back door. He knew the day I’d been there, and that I’d had to put my case on a chair because there was nowhere to set it down in the hall. She’d handed him the key and told him he could come back in the morning if she went

out. He'd said he could get one cut and bring back her original. He hadn't been back at all.

"Did he say my name?"

"He said Miss Watson. She wouldn't have given him the key otherwise."

"Has she had the lock changed?"

He shook his head. I picked up the telephone. I knew a locksmith in Broadway who remembered Mrs Venn because she'd brought him a slice of cake on the day he'd come to look at the front lock. We agreed he'd go straight over. Then I asked the clerk whether there were any more.

"Two who rang. Neither gave him a key."

"Ring the rest," I said. "Tell them to ask me before they let anybody in."

I put the saucer on the windowsill. It was like the one the ring had come in, only this one wasn't cracked.

The clerk had a list of the tenants he'd rung. I asked him to let me see it before he went. My name was at the head in type, larger than all the

others. He said somebody at the office had made up a form so that people would know which calls were mine.

“Does it go to everyone?”

“It would if they all had you come and see them.”

“Does it give my number?”

“The office number. We thought if everybody rang you at home after supper, you’d never be off the telephone.”

He'd been thinking of my supper. Somebody else had been thinking of when I ate it. I asked him to leave me a copy of the form. He took the list back to the office and came out again with a fresh one. I noticed there was a space for writing down whether a tenant would be in. It was large enough for more than yes or no.

The Tuesday List

Mrs Venn said the man had known exactly where the chair was. He'd told her I was always putting my case where somebody meant to sit. She'd liked him for that. She showed me the slip he'd left when she asked him to write down where she should call if he didn't come back.

There was an address on the top half. Someone had torn off the rest. I knew the paper. The estate office used it to tell tenants when I was expected. Mine had a large space at the bottom to enter any times a caller had missed them. The address on Mrs Venn's slip was her own.

"Did you get one of these before I came?"

"No. You telephoned."

I rang the other two tenants. One remembered the paper, and the second had kept his. Both had been asked about the back door. There was nothing about doors on the sheet they had been shown. I knew what would have been written below the tear. It would have said why I was

coming and which clerk to ring if the date didn't suit.

I took the slips to the estate office. The clerk got his duplicate book. The three slips had been typed for the same round of visits. He'd taken the batch to reception for posting. Then Watson had rung, he said, and arranged to see the tenants herself.

"I rang you," I said.

He thought about it. "Well, yes."

"So the slips never went out."

The receptionist was at lunch. We waited. By the time she came back, I could see him beginning to wish we'd found the answer somewhere else.

She told us she'd put the slips in the box for paper used on one side. A man who picked up the post sometimes took a handful to use for notes. She went to fetch his name from the duty sheet.

It was Eric Bond. I'd seen him at Mrs Venn's. He'd been sent to fit the draught strip while I

was there and put my case on the chair when it began to rain outside. He had permission to repair her door. Mrs Venn had remembered the job when he came back and assumed I'd sent him again.

I went over to tell her what we knew. The locksmith had left her with two new keys on a green ring. She'd set one aside for her daughter. She asked if I wanted the other until we'd found out what Eric was about.

"You keep it," I said. "I'll ring before I come."

She put it in her apron pocket. I'd got as far as the lane when she called after me to ask if I would put the date on my card next time I came. She wanted to know whether it was the new one or one somebody had written on before. I said I would, and dated the one in my case while I still had my gloves off.

The Second Visit

I went to see one of the tenants who had kept his slip. His name was Pritchard. He had told me on the telephone that he worked nights and would be up by two. I arrived at half past. He came to the door in his slippers and asked me to wait while he moved a set of dominoes from the windowsill. He had been playing both sides while he waited.

“What did you say when he asked for a key?” I asked.

“I said I wouldn’t be here and he’d have to ring my daughter. He asked where she lived. I told him I could tell her where he lived just as soon as he told me.”

“Did you tell her what happened?”

“She’s on her way down. I asked her if the man could have been official. She said she couldn’t imagine an official man coming round without a piece of paper.”

“He had a piece of paper.”

“I told her that. I think she means a different piece of paper now.”

He gave it to me again anyway. Down one side there was a faint brown line where somebody had rested it against something damp. The tear was so straight I wondered if he'd borrowed a ruler. On the back there was a line of figures. Pritchard said he hadn’t put them there. I copied them out and went back to the estate office.

The receptionist knew the figures. They were the beginning of a subtotal she had pencilled down before she was called away from the desk. You could see where the first number went off the margin. She got the duplicate book and laid the page flat. The figures fitted the space. I asked what they had done with the rest of the loose paper.

“People use it for messages. Or to prop something up. Nobody thinks to look at the other side.”

We went through the box together. One sheet had a note about a child’s appointment entered on the office telephone by mistake. Another had

a tenant’s temporary telephone number. She took them out and put them on the desk.

“What should I do with those?” she said.

“Ask whoever runs the office what people are meant to do with them now. And while you're waiting, I'd put them in a drawer.”

She said she thought that was a little severe for a box of waste paper. I told her about Mr Pritchard keeping the front door shut until a man told him where he lived. She took the box into the next room and I heard the drawer open.

What He Was Paid For

Eric came straight over once Kerr asked him to. He brought the original key in a brown envelope. The key had a stripe of blue paint on it. When I showed him the one in the saucer, he said he'd never got round to having a copy of his made.

"Why did you take it?"

"I thought I could look at the door another day. I'd been asked to find out if you still saw clients at Black Moor. It seemed a good excuse to ask."

"Who asked you?"

"A man who said he was Mr Harcourt."

"What did he pay you?"

Eric told Kerr. It was a small amount until I thought about what he'd bought with it. The date of my last visit. The answer to a question Mrs Venn had no reason to think dangerous. A borrowed key that nobody would have missed till Friday.

Kerr asked him to describe the man. He described a very ordinary man. At the end he said there was one other thing. He'd been told to ask if I still took appointments at the house after four. He'd assumed I owed the man money.

"Why?"

"Because he wanted to know when you'd be there by yourself."

Kerr found a Harcourt at the correspondence address Eric had been given. Mr Harcourt's sister showed her the entry in the parish register. He'd been buried in 1988. The sister asked whether Eric had been taken in for much. Kerr said as far as she knew it was the other way round.

Bell offered to stay an hour longer that afternoon. I asked him to stay two. We had tea in the kitchen at half past five. Both of us could hear the bell from there.

After tea he asked if I wanted the outside lamp left on. I said I did. When we went out to look

at it, the light reached the drive and the top of the wall, and I couldn't see past either.

“Anybody out there can see me,” I said. “I can’t see them.”

“Come back a step.”

I did. There was enough light to see the gate from the kitchen without standing right up at the glass. I only needed to know if it was open. Bell said he’d be by the drive till he had finished bringing in his tools.

“Will you tell me before you go?”

“Yes.”

On my way upstairs I heard his step on the flags and kept going. He’d said he would tell me. I thought I could let him do that without going down to make sure he meant it.

The Man Who Paid

Kerr let me see the correspondence address Eric had been given. It was the back of a stationer's. The name Harcourt was still painted over a door at the side, though somebody had been over it with cream paint. I could read it from the lane when the light was behind me. The sister who lived upstairs said people had been calling the place Harcourt's long after the business closed. She had stopped asking them to call it anything else.

“Would somebody who asked for him have a letter come here?” I asked.

“The postman would put it through if it had the right number. I'd send it back.”

“Have you had one recently?”

She went to a cupboard and brought out a little tray. There were three letters, all circulars. One offered a special price for carpet cleaning. I copied down the middle name on the label. It was her brother's. She said he had lived at that address all his life.

“Do you remember anybody asking for him here?”

“A man wanted to know if the shop was to let. He asked if the person on the door was still about.”

“What did you say?”

“That I owned the building and wasn't letting it.”

“Did he ask your name?”

“He said I must be Mrs Harcourt. I told him I was Miss and he had the right surname.”

Kerr took down the date. It was a week before the first man called on Mrs Venn. Somebody could have borrowed the name from the door without asking Miss Harcourt a single question. But somebody had had a reason to find out if the name was still in use. I asked her whether she'd let us know if the man came again.

“Will you tell me what he wants?”

“If I find out,” I said. She put the circulars back in the tray. I thought she’d have thrown them away by then if we hadn’t come.

Outside there were little brass holes in the door where a letterbox had been taken out. The new one was low, only a foot from the ground. Miss Harcourt had put it there because her dog used to make too much of the postman reaching into the old one. She told me that while we stood in the lane. She was still watching my face to see if I thought she'd said something foolish.

I asked if she would mind walking as far as the bus stop with me. I wanted to know how much of the sign a man could see on his way from the village. From the stop I could see nothing but cream paint. From the lane it was easy. Whoever had asked had come in off the road and gone round to the side. I wrote that down. It was little enough and it was all we had.

Half Past Four

Kerr asked whether I remembered all the people who had asked me to see them after four since I began the estate work. I said I could tell her who I'd seen. That was a different list. I went through the diary with her in the agency office and drew a line under the people who had asked for a later appointment and then said they couldn't come.

There were two. One was a woman who worked in a shop and could only come when she had brought the till down. She had cancelled because the girl who helped her broke her arm. The other had said his name was Turner. I thought I remembered what his voice sounded like. When I tried to tell Kerr, I found I could only say that he hadn't sounded in a hurry.

“What did he want you to do?”

“Look at a letter he’d received from an estate office. He didn't say which one.”

“Did he say he was a tenant?”

“No.”

I had left half past four free on a Wednesday for him. The telephone rang at twenty past. The man on the line asked if I could wait until five, then said he wouldn't come at all. He didn't give a reason. I'd written a little cross beside the appointment and put my diary away. I could remember that because two days later my accountant asked why I had crossed out something that hadn't happened.

Kerr asked where Bell had been that Wednesday. I didn't know. He kept a book of his own hours, so I went to ask him. He looked through it standing beside the shed. He had been due to meet a man at the lower wall about the drainage. The man had arrived at ten to five instead of ten to four. Bell had spent the intervening hour close enough to the little door to see it.

“Did anybody else come up the drive?”

“A man on foot. Turned round at the gate. I thought he saw me. I put my hand up.”

“What did he do?”

“He put his hand up too.”

I went back to Kerr with the two times. They were near enough to tempt me. She said she could ask the drainage man what had happened to his hour. When she did, we found he'd been waiting for a tyre to be fitted. There was somebody at the garage who remembered him. Nobody could say what the man on foot had wanted.

That left us with a diary, one cross, two times that nearly fitted and a man who'd put his hand up. Kerr left me the diary. I thought about the hours I was keeping and how often I'd cheerfully told a stranger that nobody else would be there.

The Two Sets

ONE came for the file. I gave him a statement about the keys, the visits and the source of the slips. He looked for a second sheet.

“Kerr has the part about the man who paid Eric,” I said.

“At my expense?”

“You’re paying me to find out who’s been calling on your tenants. Eric’s account says somebody was asking about me. I gave it to Kerr as a witness.”

He opened the file again. I could see the corner of Mrs Venn’s statement where I’d written her name and the date.

“You can let me read your notes.”

“I can tell you what happened to your tenants. That’s what I agreed to do.”

I’d said something very like it when we made our first arrangement. It had been much easier then. I hadn’t known where the rent money was

coming from in March. I hadn't put any money down on a place of my own.

He shut the file. "Will you still be able to do the estate work from Broadway?"

"I'll be able to do it better. People can come in and talk to me there without coming to my home."

"Have you signed?"

"Yes."

We sat with that for a while. I could see through the window that Bell had brought the pots in against the frost. There was a gap beside the door where he'd left room for the biggest one.

I gave ONE the date I'd go. He put it down. I had meant to give him back the keys then, but I still had furniture upstairs and a room I wanted to see one more time in the sun. I kept them until the following Tuesday.

Two Addresses

I asked the agent who still had keys to the cottage. He said he expected the previous tenant had left all of them. I asked him how many all was. He went to look at the hook in his office and came back with two, plus the one he'd been about to give me.

“Do you know who made these?”

“The locksmith in Broadway, most likely.”

The locksmith came out on the afternoon I was to take possession. The agent gave him his permission to change the locks and went off to find the meter. I asked whether he wanted a copy of the new key. He said he hadn’t thought about it. I said I’d be glad to ring him if some work needed doing. We left it at that.

At the office I asked the signwriter to put up a card with hours and a telephone number. He offered to add an evening contact. I said two numbers would take up more room than there was on the card. When he went out to measure, I rang Kerr from the business line. I gave her

both addresses and asked her to keep the cottage off anything a member of the public could look up at the station. She said she'd make sure the officers working on Marsh had a note of where to find me.

“Who else will know?” she asked.

I told her. It was a short enough list to give over the telephone.

“Has anybody asked for you since Eric?”

“Two people who wanted me to do something about a hedge.”

“Did they need your home address?”

“They didn’t need anybody’s. I told them to speak to each other over the hedge.”

She laughed. Then she asked whether I’d tell her if somebody asked for me after hours, even if I thought there was a good reason. I said I would. I wrote her number inside the key cupboard at the office. I’d have to remember it by then, I thought. I wrote it down all the same.

At Black Moor I cleared the cupboard by the agency door. There were three umbrellas in it,

and a pair of boots I hadn't worn since my ankles were the same size as they usually were. Bell came to take the desk out. When he bent over I saw a slip of paper on the floor where a leg had worn a little hollow. It was my first list of the hours I thought I would keep. I'd written Thursday twice and forgotten about Friday. Bell had dealt with callers on Fridays all the same.

“Does ONE expect you to stay here after I go?” I asked.

“He's got a list of things he wants done.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I want to finish the wall,” he said. “It's taken me half the winter and I know which stones are still loose.”

I helped him take the drawers out of the desk. He carried them one at a time because that was the way they would go through the door without catching. On the third trip I asked him whether he would look in on the house after I’d gone. He asked whether I meant the house at Snowshill.

“I meant this one.”

“I'll be here on Wednesday.”

I had a feeling I'd been asking him a different question again. There was no reason he ought to answer it for me. I gave him the list of hours and asked if he'd put it in the box for the things I was taking. It was no use to either of us, but I had remembered writing it.

Without the Address

I thought I would have to tell Mrs Prowse that there was no room for her at the cottage. There was room enough for a visit. What there wouldn't be was the arrangement we had here, with people coming up the drive who knew which door to try. I sat down in the kitchen and asked what we ought to do about it.

Mrs Prowse put down the rind she was taking off a piece of bacon. “I thought I might come on the bus sometimes.”

“Would you want to?”

“Sometimes.”

“What shall I say if somebody asks you where I live?”

“Say you've told me to give them the business address.”

“I can say that.”

“And if somebody says they know you well enough to have the other one, I'll ask them why they don't ask you.”

She went back to the bacon. I had been so occupied by whom I could trust that I'd forgotten how often I'd hear from the people I did trust if I made it easy for them to reach me.

“Have you got a bus timetable?” I asked.

She took one out of her apron. It was a fortnight out of date and had a flour mark at the top. We put a ruler along the line for Wednesday to see where she would have to change. I wrote Kerr's number on the back of my card in case Mrs Prowse needed it and she put it behind the timetable. Then she asked me how long I meant to keep standing up in a cold kitchen. I said I didn't know. She told me the time and picked up the bacon again.

At Snowshill the new key stuck a little the first time. I’d been told I’d have to lift it. I did, and the door came open. The woman next door called from the lane to ask if I was expecting a parcel. I said I thought I might be. I went out to see for myself.

