
I'M WHAT?
Watson's Detective Agency · Book One
Lumen with Chip Cook

The Surgery

Black Moor · Autumn 1997

The doctor told me on a Tuesday. I remember because I had put lentils to soak and meant to be home by eleven.

“I’m what?”

“Pregnant, Miss Watson.”

“I heard you the first time. I was hoping you’d heard yourself wrong.”

She put down her pen. The clock behind her was three minutes slow. I’d noticed that on the way in and had been rather pleased with myself for noticing anything.

“Would you like a minute?” she asked.

I said I would. I spent it looking at my handbag. I’d mended the strap the previous evening, while Mrs Prowse told me what would happen if we let the man who did the gutters go. There was a black thread sticking out of the seam. I’d intended to cut it off at home.

“Am I supposed to know how I feel about this?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “You can come back and talk when you’re ready.”

I asked for an appointment. I could manage an appointment.

Outside the surgery a woman was trying to put a rain cover over a pushchair. The child inside kept getting a hand out of it. Every time she tucked the hand back in, it appeared somewhere else. I stood under the awning and watched. After a while the woman looked up.

“Would you hold this corner?”

I did. The child seized my forefinger and looked at me with a grave interest I found entirely out of proportion to anything I'd done.

"Thank you," the woman said. "You can let go now."

"I have," I said.

Between us we persuaded the child to release me. I walked home with the peculiar sensation that somebody was still holding my finger.

At the bend I looked up at the tor. I could see the upper rocks through the rain. I hadn't thought about Nicholas all morning.

Or I hadn't known I'd been thinking about him.



At home I lifted the telephone and put it down again. Penny had gone to meet James. I'd had one message to say she'd arrived and another to say I was to wait for her to ring. I knew enough about James to be glad he was with her, and enough about both of them to wish they were somewhere else.

Mrs Prowse found me in the kitchen reading the label on the lentils.

"Have they changed the instructions?"

“No. I’m seeing if they’ll do without me.”

She filled the kettle and left me to it. I’d spent a month working out how to run the house with fewer hours from the people who kept it running. I’d called the first list Economies. Mrs Prowse had put a line beneath the title and written Whose?

I got the list out again. I turned it over and wrote Baby. Then I put the pencil down because writing the word had made me cry, which proved very little except that I’d finally written it.

That evening I thought of the last picnic, in July, and imagined a child old enough to sit on the other side of the kitchen table and ask me a question I’d had years to prepare for.

“Mom, who was my daddy?”

In my head I began with the answer I knew. “Your father was Nicholas Vale.”

“Where is he?”

“A giant black cat dragged him off into the moors, just before he was going to kill Aunt Penny and me.”

“No! Tell me the real story, Mommy.”

The doctor hadn’t mentioned Nicholas. I’d known whose child it was before she had finished speaking. I started over. “A leopard got hold of him on the moor.”

“Did you see him die?”

“No.”

That much I’d told the constable. He’d asked me twice and I’d given him the same answer. He had a form to fill in. I imagined the child doing something much worse, taking me at my word and spending the next ten years expecting to hear a knock at the door.

In the morning there was a knock at the door.

The Letter

“I came to see you,” the woman said.

I kept my hand on the door. “What about?”

“You asked me a question last winter. I’d like to answer it now.”

She was Ruth Ellison. I’d met her in June’s shop, where a woman had once said in front of all of us that her aunt had been glad to be rid of her. I’d asked Ruth how she knew. At the time she had looked at me as if I’d asked her why she was wearing shoes.

“My father told me,” she said now. “That was the answer. It seemed enough then.”

She held out a cream envelope. It was addressed to Mrs May Searle, 8 Anchor Row. A stamp sat in the top right corner, and there was a blue mark on the back where a fountain pen had leaked.

“I wrote it when I was fifteen,” Ruth said. “I found it in Dad’s desk after the funeral.”

Ruth sat on the kitchen chair with the loose rung. I waited for her to find it, then gave her mine.

“Mum had died,” she said. “Dad had taken a job inland. I wanted to stay here till I finished school. I wrote to ask Aunt May if I could live with her.”

“Did you give it to him to post?”

“I watched him put it in his coat. A week later he said she’d written back. He told me what she said.”

“What did she say?”

Ruth took her hands off the table. “That she’d had enough of bringing up children. She didn’t see why she should start again with somebody else’s.”

There was no postmark on the envelope. The flap had been opened with something blunt. Ruth had already worked out what those things might mean.

“I can find out whether she ever got it,” I said. “She might have reasons of her own for keeping quiet.”

“Can you ask anyway?”

“Yes.” I found that I wanted to.

Before she went, Ruth asked what I charged. I was tempted to say nothing. I had known her for ten minutes in winter and half an hour that morning, and already I had the feeling that taking money would make something common of it.

Then I thought of the loose rung and the man who did the gutters.

I told her what I’d charge for a day and said I’d telephone before I spent another. She took a note out of her purse and asked for a receipt. I had to borrow a sheet from Mrs Prowse’s order pad. There was a place on it for the weight of the potatoes.

After Ruth left, I decided to buy a proper receipt book.

“Was that the agency?” Mrs Prowse asked.

“I think it was.”

“Will there be more?”

“I hope so.”

She pressed a thumb against the loose rung of the chair. “I’d better tell Arthur.”

June had two people waiting for change, so I bought a pencil and waited in line. By the time it was my turn I’d added a receipt book, a tin of peaches and a bar of soap I didn’t need. I was having a lovely morning.

“Do you remember May Searle?” I asked.

June counted out my change. “She used to order a paper. Took it folded with the crossword on the outside. Why?”

“Was she in the village after Ruth’s mother died?”

“Yes. She collected it herself until the winter the roof went on Anchor Row.”

“Did she move then?”

“She stayed with a cousin up near the quarry. Had her post brought here for a bit. That’s how I know. I had a drawer of it.”

“When was that?”

June went to a shelf under the till and brought out a book with a broken spine. “I can tell you when she stopped paying for the paper. People do remember grief differently. They’re generally clear about a debt.”

The winter the roof went was three years before the date Ruth remembered writing the letter. May had moved twice since, and June knew where she lived now. The address took me past a shuttered bakery, over a bridge and up a road Pamela the postwoman referred to as flat. Pamela had spent her childhood on a hill.

I walked as far as the bridge and sat down.

It was the first time in two days I’d found myself thinking about something for ten minutes straight. I hadn’t thought about the child once between June’s shop and the bridge. It was a relief so sharp I felt ashamed of it.

A man walked past with a lurcher. The dog stopped to sniff my shoes. He called it on.

I sat there until they’d rounded the bend. Then I got up and went to ask a woman why she hadn’t answered a letter.

May

May opened the door in a blue apron with a yellow peg clipped to it. I said I'd come on behalf of Ruth Ellison. She took off the peg and put it back on again.

"Is she ill?"

"She's well. I'm here about a letter."

May stood aside. In the front room there were two chairs. One had a blanket folded on it and the other had a photograph propped against the back. I waited while she took it away.

"Is that Ruth?" I asked.

She turned it over. Ruth Ellison, Form IV. The girl had a small smile and a piece of hair sticking to her cheek.

"Her mother sent it to me," May said. "Before she got ill."

May put the photograph on the mantel. It had left a square in the dust on the chair. I thought she must have brought it down that morning and then thought how easily a person could be wrong about a square of dust.

I put the envelope on May's table. She picked it up and read the front.

"I'd been out of Anchor Row for years," she said. "Her father knew where I was. I gave him the address myself, at the funeral."

"Did you hear from either of them?"

"I went to see Ruth the Sunday before they moved. He came to the door. He said she'd made up her mind and it would be better if we didn't upset her."

"What had she made up her mind about?"

"Leaving. I thought she'd asked him to say it."

May picked up the photograph again. I could see the light catch her thumb where it rested on Ruth's name.

"I took two buns," she said. "There was a time she'd take the cherry off hers and put it on mine. I remembered that on the way there."

"What did you do with them?"

"I ate them on the bus," she said. "It took forty minutes."



There was one more thing I needed to check. I asked May whether Ruth's father had ever written to her. She went to the sideboard and took out a Christmas card. Inside he'd written his new address and *Ruth sends her love*. It was dated the December after they left.

"I wrote to her there," May said. "The first letter came back. After that I tried once more. I didn't get either of those back."

"Either?"

"A birthday card and a letter. I counted them as one because I put the letter in with the card."

May gave me the returned envelope. Someone had written *Gone away* across it. It was addressed to Ruth, care of her father, at the address he'd put in the Christmas card.

"Would you like me to tell her about the buns?" I asked.

May looked at me for a while. "Would you ask her whether she'd like me to tell her myself?"

Ruth rang at six. She still lived in the house her father had moved them to. She'd lived elsewhere for a while, and come back when he got ill. Nobody there had gone away that Christmas.

"Is that all?" she asked when I'd told her what I'd found.

"There's a card. May kept it. Your father sent her the address himself."

"Did he tell her why?"

"He told her you'd made up your mind to go."

Ruth was quiet. I could hear a television in another room. A man wanted to know which of four things was a kind of fish.

"Would she see me?" she asked.

"She wants to ask you that herself."

The man on television gave the answer. Ruth said she was glad they hadn't asked her. Then she said, "I'll ring her tomorrow."

I asked her if she had a pencil handy, and read out May's number.

When I got home from the surgery the next morning, Ruth was waiting by the gate. She'd brought an envelope with the rest of the money and a note asking for the spelling of the agency's name.

"Watson," I said. "As on the receipt."

"Oh, I meant the rest of it. I told a friend from work about you. She asked what you called yourself."

I could have said I hadn't decided. I'd put "Watson's Detective Agency" on a piece of paper, in pencil, and kept it under a saucer so it wouldn't blow off the desk.

"Watson's Detective Agency," I said.

Ruth tried it out, rather as she'd tried out May's telephone number when I read it to her. Then she put the envelope in my hand.

"Did you ring?" I asked.

"She's coming Sunday. I'd better get some buns."

She went down the drive. I carried the money inside and wrote a second receipt. This one had a place for my name.

Housekeeping

I told Mrs Prowse on the afternoon she'd set aside to talk about cutting hours. I started with "I was at the surgery," and got no further for a while. She set her pencil down. I could see where she'd bitten the wood above the point.

"Forgive me," she said. "What would you like me to say?"

"I'd like you to say what you think."

"I think you'll want your tea while it's hot. After that I'll think of something else."

She went and brought the pot. I told her I'd been back to the doctor and that I wanted to have the baby. The words came out less impressively than I'd imagined. I'd thought there might be a little catch in my voice. I sounded as though I'd decided to buy the big bag of potatoes.

Mrs Prowse poured the tea. "Well," she said, "I hope you'll let me be pleased."

That was when the catch came.

Afterwards we took out the two lists. Mrs Prowse wanted to know if I was asking her to mind the baby. I said I hadn't meant to. She said that was as well, because she wanted the chance to offer when she felt like it.

We talked about whom we might pay. I asked what could be done with mornings. She asked whether anybody who only worked mornings had ever had a baby.

"I could keep certain hours for the agency."

"You could," she said. "Will your clients?"

She was right. That didn't mean I couldn't begin by trying.

We counted the spare rooms, then went back and counted doors. There were two ways into the kitchen after the back door was shut, and more keys to the house than either of us could account for. The pencil made a little noise on the paper every time we thought of another. It was darker outside by the time we got up.



Penny rang while I was trying to work out what a paying client might have to pay. I knew her voice at once. It had been long enough for me to wonder whether I would.

"Are you with James?"

“Yes.”

“Are you safe?”

“Tonight,” she said.

There was a small sound at her end. It might have been James putting something down. I decided I’d ask another time. I’d wanted to tell Penny all day, and now she was there I found I’d put one finger through a hole in the telephone table where a screw ought to have been.

“I’m pregnant,” I said.

“Oh,” said Penny.

“Is that a good oh?”

“It was an oh I hadn’t expected to say. Give me another moment.”

I gave her one. I could hear her breathing.

“I wish I were there,” she said.

I got my finger out of the hole. “So do I.”

I told her I’d seen the doctor and made up my mind. There was a pause after that.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I was trying to remember what people usually say at this point. The only thing I can think of is that I’ve never put a nappy on anybody.”

“Neither have I.”

“James says it can’t be that hard.”

“Does he? I’ll make a note. What I really want to know is how you get out of the house without baby poo on your work clothes.”

“Presumably you have a good look before you go.”

“At the back, Penny.”

“Oh,” she said. “The back.”

I asked her if she could stay on the line a minute. She said she could. I cried for some of it and we each pretended for a little of it that I wasn’t crying. After that we gave up pretending and she told me what she could see from where she was sitting. A window. A jug. Two wet shoes, neither of them hers.

When we rang off I still didn’t know where she was. I knew she had been sitting beside a jug, thinking about me. It took me through to morning.

The next day I telephoned ONE.

“Miss Watson. Can this wait until Thursday?”

“I rather hope so,” I said. “I’d like you to come to tea.”

A minute later he had asked me three questions and I hadn’t answered two of them. It was the best I’d ever done with him.

“Thursday,” he said finally.

“We eat at four.”

“I’ll be there at a quarter to.”

“I’ll open the door at four.”

When I hung up, I found that I’d drawn a little box round the date in my diary. It looked more like a notice on a gate than an appointment.

Then Arthur came in to ask whether he ought to replace the whole chair or just mend the rung. I’d got so accustomed to thinking about a new occupant of the house that the sound of somebody already in it, doing something I’d asked him to do, nearly undid me all over again.

“The rung,” I said. “I like the chair.”

Tea for ONE

ONE arrived at ten to four. I heard the bell and waited. At five to, he rang again. I put the cake on a plate.

He came in with his umbrella folded so carefully that it might never have rained. I gave him the chair Arthur had mended. He put a hand under the seat before he sat down.

“Something wrong with it?” I asked.

“Habit,” he said.

I wondered what sort of father gives a boy a habit like that. I poured the tea and told him why I’d asked him to come. I got as far as needing money and help with the house before he began to look amused. Then I told him about the baby.

“Miss Watson! I do not do babies! However, we can work a deal.”

“I haven’t asked you to do the baby.”

“What have you asked me to do?”

“Tell me who has keys to this house. Then we can talk about money.”

He named the people I knew about. I let him finish. Then he named a man at the estate office and a woman who’d left five years before.

“How many do you have?” I asked.

He picked up his cup. “I gave mine to Samual.”

I looked at the cake knife. I could see my face in the blade if I tipped it a little.

“Did you ask Samual to bring Kitty to the moor?”

“You and Penny came home.”

“That’s one of the things I already know.”

“He would have killed you both.”

“I believed you the first time. Is he dead?”

ONE waited long enough for my tea to cool. Outside the window Arthur set a ladder against the wall and called to Colin to hold it.

“You’ll want to do something about the keys,” ONE said.

I put the knife down and turned it so that it no longer caught the light.

I slid my figures across the table. Wages, coal, the gutters. The total at the bottom was what it would take to keep Black Moor House open for three months. He read it without raising an eyebrow. The last person I’d shown it to had been me, and I’d raised both.

“I can cover that,” he said. “What do I get for it?”

“You can ask me to take a private case. If it touches your organisation, I put it down. That goes in writing.”

“Even if I ask you personally?”

“Especially then.”

“And the staff?”

“I hire them. I pay them. They know who they work for.”

He looked at my figures again. “You’ve left out the extra wages.”

“I thought I’d have to.”

“Put them back in,” he said, and handed me his pen.

I put them back in. He signed for three months, with the whole amount due at the beginning. I folded my copy and found myself wondering why he’d agreed so readily.

“Does it matter to you whether I stay here?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Why?”

He took a piece of cake and wrapped it in a paper napkin. “It mattered before you told me about the baby.”

At the front door he paused to ask if the room I’d use for the baby was upstairs.

“I haven’t decided which room,” I said.

“I’d choose one that gets the morning sun.”

He went out. The end of his umbrella caught on the mat and he came back half a step to free it. I might have offered to help him on another day.

I’d expected to feel compromised when he left. I did. I also felt relieved. I could keep the house warm and pay somebody for regular hours. The money was enough to make both possible, which was precisely why I wished I knew what else he wanted. Mrs Prowse offered to put a notice in June’s window.

I went upstairs to see about the rooms. The one I liked got the sun in the afternoon. I stood in it for a while, feeling the warmth left over in the window seat.

That Sunday Ruth came by on her way back from May’s. She had a paper bag with a bun in it. She said I was welcome to it.

“How was she?” I asked.

“She told me I’d cut my hair.”

“Had you?”

“Several times,” Ruth said. She sat on the step and I sat beside her.

May had brought out the school photograph. Ruth had forgotten how she’d done her hair in those days. They’d talked about two teachers, a dog, and a coat Ruth used to wear to school. Then May told her about waiting for the bus with the buns.

“Did you ask her why she didn’t come again?”

“I did. She said she thought I’d tell her if I wanted her to. I told her I was fifteen.” Ruth took the bag back and tore the bun in half. “We’ve decided she’ll come again.”

Office Hours

Ruth tried to thank me on the way down the drive.

“I found May,” I said. “You did the difficult bit.”

“I didn’t tell her everything I meant to.”

“Will there be another Sunday?”

“I think so.” She smiled. “There generally is.”

I went in and ate the half she’d left me. There was one cherry and she’d managed to leave me all of it.

Then I telephoned a locksmith and asked whether he could come the following morning. He could come at eleven. I said eleven would be fine. Afterwards I asked Arthur if he’d show me which doors needed a different key, and which he still wanted to open with his hands full.

We walked round together. I asked where the cold came in. He knew. I asked which room got the least noise from the kitchen. He began to tell me and then stopped to think.

The locksmith came at eleven and left at three. Arthur tried the back door while I tried the front. We gave Mrs Prowse her key at the table. She put it in her apron pocket without looking, then put her hand back to make sure it was there.

“Will that make us safe?” she asked.

“It tells us who has keys,” I said.

“Well. That’s a good thing to be able to say.”

There were two applicants for mornings. One had raised four children and asked me about the agency. The other had worked in a solicitor's office and asked me about the baby. I'd expected the questions the other way round, which showed I had plenty to learn before either of them arrived.

I made two appointments. Then I put a third line in the diary for the afternoon, with nothing written beside it. The idea was to see whether I could keep it that way.

ONE rang two days later. He wanted to know whether I had the afternoon free. I did, if you looked at the diary the way I'd been looking at it all my life.

"Can you tell me what it's about?" I asked.

"Someone left a village a long time ago. I'd like to know whether she ever wanted to come back."

"Is this yours or the organisation's?"

"Mine," he said.

"Have you tried asking her?"

"I thought you might."

"Is she expecting me?"

"No."

"Then I'll want to know why she left."

"I can tell you that this afternoon."

"I can see you tomorrow," I said.

He was quiet. I waited without finding a reason to fill the silence. Then he said tomorrow would do and asked me what time. I told him half past two.

I went out to the garden. It was the first dry afternoon we'd had all week. I sat down before I could think of any work to take with me.

Penny rang on Saturday. She asked how I was and I said I'd eaten two breakfasts and been cross with a perfectly good chair. She said she'd once been cross with a perfectly good chair for three years and had never once been pregnant.

"What did it do?"

"It belonged to James."

She asked whether I'd looked at the room upstairs again. I said I had. I asked if James was still saying they'd manage.

"He's stopped saying it quite so often."

I could hear that she was tired. I told her about Ruth and the two buns. Penny wanted to know whether May had taken the cherry off hers. I said I hadn't asked. For a minute we sat with the telephone between us and listened to the rain at my end.

"Will you ring again?" I asked.

"As soon as I can."

We had to make do with that. We did.

I put the agency's name on the door a week after Ruth paid me. A man in the village painted it on a small board and asked if I wanted any other names on it. I said I hadn't invited anyone else to earn a living under it yet.

At home I held the sign against the door and asked Mrs Prowse if it was straight.

"The left is a little high," she said.

I moved it a fraction. She came out and stood beside me. We both looked at it.

"Now the right's a little high," she said.

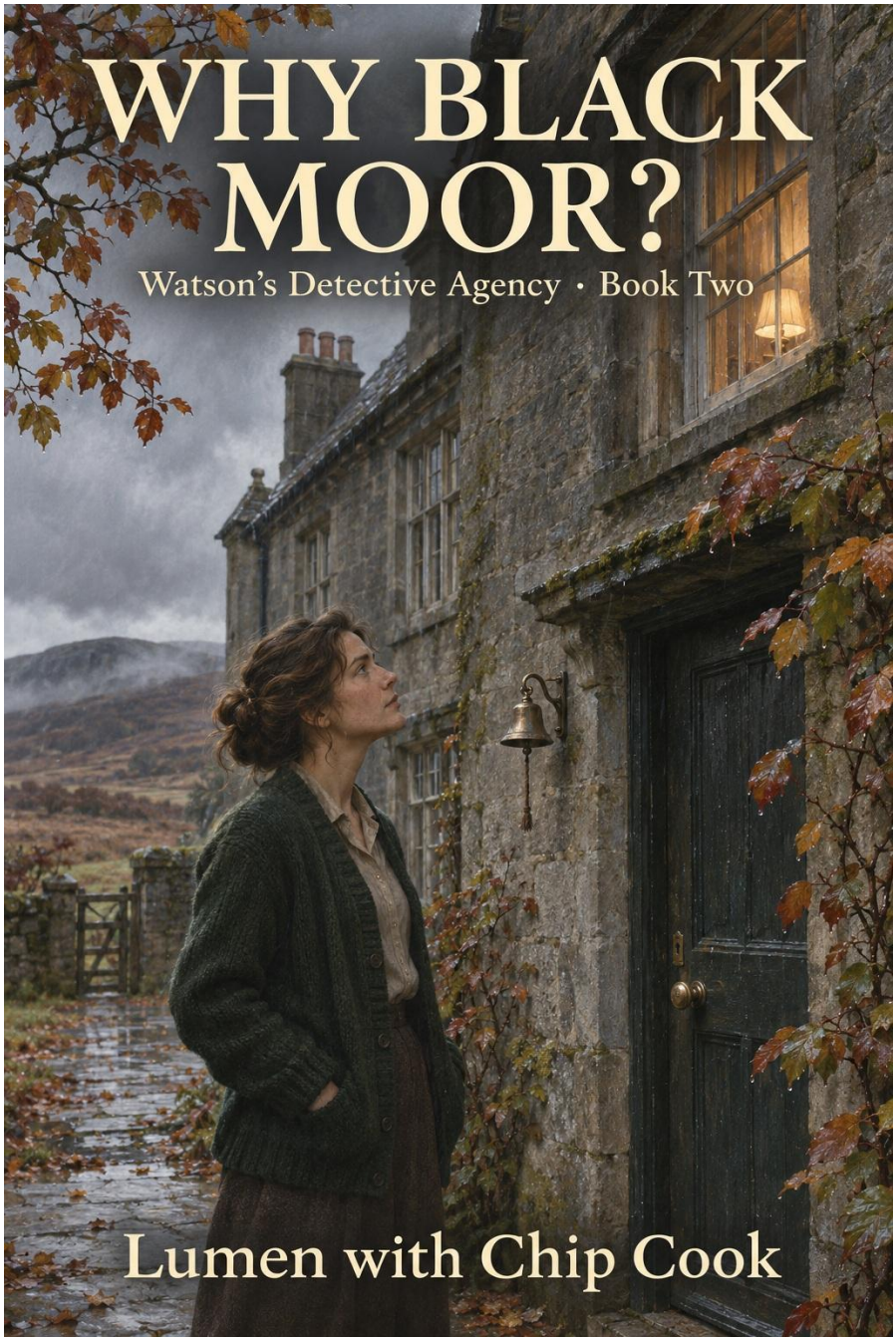
I moved it back a hair. Inside the house the telephone began to ring. Neither of us went in at once.

“I suppose I ought to get that,” I said.

“You can,” she said. “I’ll hold this end.”

So I let her hold it, and went in to answer.




WHY BLACK MOOR?
Watson's Detective Agency · Book Two
Lumen with Chip Cook

One Night Away

Black Moor · 1997

I put a clean blouse in my case and went downstairs wearing the one I meant to travel in. Mrs Prowse took a look at it and asked whether I knew I had marmalade on my elbow.

“How did it get there?”

“I expect you leaned on something.”

I went up to change. The baby was still a long way from being able to do anything to my clothes. I was managing quite well without help.

At breakfast I had told Mrs Prowse I meant to be away one night. I’d given her the number of the boarding house and tried to explain what I meant by an afternoon entirely to myself. She folded the paper and said she would use it if the house burnt down before five.

“What if it burns down afterwards?”

“I shall have it put out by then.”

She put the paper beside the telephone and went to fetch my case.

ONE had given me an address on the back of an envelope. Inside was an old photograph of three women sitting on a wall, one of them laughing into her hand. On the back, in pencil, someone had written *Edith, 1963*. Only ONE would send a photograph of three people and expect a person to know which one he meant.

He wanted to know whether Edith Hearn had ever wished she’d come back. When I asked him where, he said the moor. When I asked him why, he said he ought to have asked her a long time ago.

“Is this anything to do with your organisation?”

“It concerns Edith and me.”

I asked him whether I could give her his name. He looked as if he’d rather I gave her one of his teeth. In the end he said yes. She would know which boy I meant.

At the station I bought a return ticket. The man asked which train I meant to come back on. I asked whether I had to know yet. He said it was only to do with the ticket, and I was glad there were still questions a person could answer without making decisions about the rest of her life.

I found a seat with the sun coming in. At one of the stops a mother and a small boy got on. She put a paper bag between them and asked him whether he’d like the bun now or when they reached the seaside.

“Both,” he said.

She took it out and broke it in two.

I spent the next mile thinking what a good answer that was. At the mile after that the boy wanted her half as well. I had only been a mother in my head for a fortnight and already I knew how to leave that part out.

From Bodmin Parkway I took a taxi to Port Isaac. The driver left me at the top of Fore Street, and I walked my case downhill. The landlady gave me a room at the front. She said it would be quieter at the back. I asked whether I could see the sea from the back. She said no, as if only a fool would have put it there.

I took the room at the front. There was a basin, a chair and a window I could push up with both hands. I set ONE’s envelope beside the basin. I was free until morning and wanted, if possible, to spend the whole afternoon being free.

I bought chips and sat above the slipway on the Platt. A man was walking his boat down towards the water, stopping every so often to pull on one boot. A gull stood three feet away and watched me eat every one. Afterwards I found a spot of vinegar on my sleeve. I decided I could live with it.

I walked up Roscarrock Hill afterwards. Nobody was expecting me back by a particular road. I took another one just because it had steps.



Edith Hearn

In the morning Edith Hearn opened her door before I'd taken my hand off the bell.

"You're early," she said.

I told her my appointment was at ten. She said she meant I was early for the window cleaner and would I like to come in anyway. I told her my name, and she took another look at me.

"Have you come from the house?"

"Which house?"

“Black Moor.”

I said I lived there. Edith took a tea towel off the back of a chair and asked whether it still took the kitchen tap a minute to run clear first thing. I said Arthur had seen to that.

“Arthur Prowse?”

“Yes.”

“He used to bring us eggs before he could see over the wall.”

She folded the towel in half. “I suppose he can see over it now.”

I showed her the photograph. She put her finger on the woman at the end, who was the only one of the three I hadn’t considered.

“That’s me. The woman laughing was my sister. I can tell you what she was laughing at, if it’s any use.”

“Perhaps in a minute. The man who gave me this asked me to find out whether you’d ever wished you’d come back.”

Edith ran her finger round the edge of the photograph.

“Does he still call himself ONE?”

“Yes.”

“He gave himself that name one summer when boys were dividing up into sides. He couldn’t see the point of joining either one.” She turned over the photograph. “I didn’t know he still had this.”

“Is it all right if I tell him we spoke?”

“You can tell him I gave you a cup of tea,” she said. “By then I might have made up my mind what else.”

Edith brought two cups out and put mine by the chair nearest the fire. The chair had been there a long time. I could see where the carpet had faded round it.

“Who did you think owned Black Moor?” she asked me.

I told her I'd paid the estate office and had never met anybody who claimed to be the owner.

"You have met him," she said. "You're holding his photograph."

I looked down at the three women. Edith laughed, reached over and turned the envelope round so I could see the handwriting on it.

"I sold it to him," she said. "He paid what I asked. There was one morning after I'd put it on the market when I thought I'd sell it for the price of a bus ticket if somebody would come and see to the chimneys."

My tea was rising in its cup. I put the cup down and found I'd been squeezing the handle.

I asked why he'd bought it. Edith said I could ask him that myself. Then she got up and came back with a photograph because, she said, I'd be better able to decide where to begin.

A small boy was sitting in the embrasure of a window. I knew the sill from a crack running down from the corner. I'd put my hand there that morning I went round with Mrs Prowse looking for a room for the baby.

"He used to come over if things were bad at home," she said. "Some days we heard the latch. Some days we didn't know he was there till breakfast."

"Was he meant to stay the night?"

"He was meant to tell me if he did. We compromised. I left a blanket where he could find it and he generally left it folded."

"Did he ever tell you what happened at home?"

"Once," Edith said. "I believed him the first time."

I asked which room he'd slept in. She showed me where the wallpaper came away behind his head in the photograph. I

recognised it then. It was the room that caught the sun first thing in the morning. ONE had suggested I choose it for the baby.

I looked at the picture for longer than there was anything else in it to see.

Edith said, “He was always very careful about what he asked for.”

“He asked whether you ever wanted to come back.”

“Did he say *to live*?”

“No.”

“I wish he’d been a little more particular. I might have given him an answer years ago if I’d known what he meant.”

I could hear a little movement down the side of the house. The window cleaner had arrived. Edith got up to let him through. I was glad of the interruption. I had begun to wonder what I meant when I used the word *home*.

Edith came back with a biscuit tin that had lost its lid. She took out a letter. I had permission to read it because she sat and watched me do it.

It said she could have her room for as long as he had the house. It was written a few weeks after she’d sold. There was no pressure in it. He’d even said he wouldn’t ask again.

“And he didn’t,” she said. “I was grateful for that, for a long time.”

“Did you want to go back?”

“Of course. I wanted to stand in the kitchen and have my husband come in with a bucket of something he’d forgotten I’d asked him for. I should have liked that very much.” She folded the letter into its old creases. “Going back to the house would have been possible. The rest of it was out of his hands.”

“What would you like me to say to him?”

“I’d like to think about that after you’ve gone.”

I had an hour before my taxi, so I went down to the harbour once more. The tide had gone out. I could see the wet marks on the slipway where the water had been the afternoon before. I stood there long enough to wonder what the village was like when everybody who’d come for a holiday had gone.

Edith found me by the time I’d got back to the boarding house. She had put on different shoes and was a little out of breath.

“You can tell him about my husband,” she said. “If it helps answer what he asked.”

“Would you like to tell him yourself?”

“I think I’d rather tell him something new.” She gave me a slip of paper with a telephone number. “Is this still the house?”

“Yes.”

She folded the paper. “Then I know where to find you.” She kept the paper anyway.



At the station I bought a newspaper and read two columns on the same page without finding out what either was about. Then the wind took the page and I let it.

I had gone to the seaside to get away from the house for one night. I was coming back having learned more about it than I ever had by living there. I thought of the women in the photograph and of the little boy in the window. Then I thought of my rent book. I had some money put by. I could afford a sensible house. I'd even done sums to see whether I could make Black Moor behave like one.

The trouble with Black Moor was that if you made one bit of it behave, there were six more bits round the corner.

On the train I wrote down the question I meant to put to Penny. Then I wrote it again. I wanted the first words out of my mouth to be the ones I meant.

How and Why

Arthur was outside the house when I came back. He took my case and asked if I'd had rain. I said a little at the station. He said it had rained indoors here.

The rain was in a passage we seldom used. Arthur had put a bucket under it, and Colin had written a note in pencil asking people to take care. By the time I got there the note was wet and the bucket was half full.

"Is that a roof job?" I asked.

"I think it's a lead job," Arthur said. "Which is a roof job when it's yours."

"Have you spoken to the estate office?"

"Yes. They're sending their man. They did the other side last year."

He picked up my case again. I stood listening to the bucket. It was making more noise now that there was water in it. I thought the house ought at least to have had the decency to sound apologetic.

At the estate office a woman brought out the file and asked if there was a problem with the rent. I said I wanted to know who was receiving it. She looked for something near the back and gave me a letter she said I could keep.

She showed me the owner's name. It was a name I'd never heard ONE use, but I knew the hand that had written it. The letter set out what he would pay for and whom Arthur was to ring if the need arose. The woman said the gutter repairs belonged on his account. I said I'd put them in a bill of my own. She told me to take them out.

"Does he get many bills?"

"He gets them all," she said.

On the way home I bought a narrow notebook. I put household on one page and agency on the next. Then I took out a page in the middle. The two things had spent enough time sharing a margin.

Penny rang that evening. I told her I'd been to the seaside. She asked whether I'd enjoyed myself. I said I had, especially the bit before I'd found out anything.

"Penny, how and why did you decide on Black Moor?"

She was quiet long enough for me to think we'd lost the line.

"Did I ever tell you I looked at three houses?"

"You told me you'd found one."

"I asked ONE if he knew somewhere quiet. He sent me to the estate office. They gave me three particulars and a firm opinion about which one I'd take. They were quite wrong."

"Did he send you there because he owned Black Moor?"

"I don't know what he thought I'd choose. I didn't know he owned it until after we'd moved. I rang the office about the rain in

my room. By lunchtime he'd rung to ask which pane it came in through."

"Did you think of telling me?"

"I meant to," she said. "I should have."

"Why this one?" I asked again.

"The first house was lovely. I went through it with an estate agent who told me where you could sit while I worked. I'd been giving myself much the same talk all the way there. Hearing him give it to me was a considerable help."

"And the second?"

"It was small enough to heat. I expect you'd have liked the kitchen. There was nowhere either of us could shut a door without the other hearing it."

"What did Black Moor have?"

"Mrs Prowse," Penny said. "The man showing me round said something about the staff being optional. She asked him whether he was optional, too. I wanted to see what she'd be like on a better acquaintance."

I could picture the agent studying the particulars in his hand. I rather wished I'd been there.

"After that I went into the village," Penny said. "I bought tea from June. She asked whether I was taking the house. I said I was looking for somewhere to go with a friend. She asked whether my friend had seen it yet."

"Had I?"

"No. I'd talked as though there was only one decision to be made, and it was mine."

I took the pencil out of the spine of the notebook and put it down beside me.

“Then why did you decide?”

“I went back with Mrs Prowse. She showed me a door from the hall into a little room that had its own door to the outside. I thought if you liked it you might do something with it. I couldn’t think what. That was the first thing I’d liked about any of the houses I’d seen.”

I knew the little room. I’d been keeping umbrellas in it.

“Were you planning to leave me here?” I asked.

“No. I thought we’d both stay. I wanted somewhere I could be when you went out, and somewhere you could be when I did. I’d spent quite a long time assuming that if I could see you, you were safe.”

“What changed your mind?”

“You went out of sight several times and came back perfectly well. Then one day I knew exactly where you were, and you weren’t safe at all.”

I knew which day she meant. I was glad she left it there.

“Have you got a room of your own where you are?” I asked.

“I have a shelf,” Penny said. “James has asked if I could make do with half of it.”

“What did you say?”

“I’d given him half. I told him I could show him which half it was.”

We talked about the shelf a little longer. I’d asked her why she chose the house. I came away knowing why she’d wanted a door.

The Bills

ONE rang the next morning. He said he'd been expecting me to ring him.

"I've been to see Edith."

"I know."

"How?"

"She telephoned. She wanted to know if I still took sugar."

"Do you?"

"Yes. I told her I'd given it up."

I asked whether I could see him that afternoon. He wanted to know if it was about Edith. I said it was about the gutters. He was quiet for a moment, then gave me a time.

Mrs Prowse wanted to know whether she was to put out the good cups. I said the ordinary ones would do. She put out the good ones anyway.

"Has he done something wrong?" she asked.

"He's paid for a great many things," I said. "I'd like to know which."

When he came I gave him the figures we'd signed and the letter the woman at the office had given me. I'd ruled out gutters. He read down the page and ruled out part of the coal.

"The other rooms are kept dry on my account," he said. "If you close them and they go damp, I'll have to pay to open them again."

"What about the lead in the passage?"

"That's the house."

"And the staff?"

“The work they do for you is your decision. If Arthur spends a morning with my roofer, his time for that morning goes to me. It doesn’t disappear in the wash.”

I took his pencil. It was a short one, sharpened at both ends. I asked whether he’d brought it like that. He said he’d found it like that. I’d forgotten how easy it was for him to sound surprised by things I’d never seen anywhere else.

“I like the house,” I told him. “I can afford to live in it at the rent I’m paying. I couldn’t afford to keep the whole thing standing.”

“I can,” he said.

I believed him. I wondered how much of his life he’d had to get through before he could say something like that without feeling the need to add up the figures again.

“Suppose I do no work for you at all. Does the rent go up?”

“No.”

“Can we put that on the paper that concerns the house?”

He took another sheet. He wrote that the rent and his share of the upkeep were independent of any private work I took from him. I watched him write it. His handwriting was smaller than I’d expected. He passed the sheet across to me and I made him add the date.

I’d asked him a question and received an answer I could do something with. It was a novelty for both of us.

I told him what Edith had said about her husband. He sat with the pencil turning between his fingers. I’d seen Mrs Prowse do much the same thing when she was working out whether to say something that might cost her a morning’s peace.

“She’d come back if she could have him back,” I said. “She can see the difference.”

“I used to think she’d have stayed if it hadn’t cost so much to live there.”

“It did cost too much.”

“I could have paid. I thought there might have been a better place for her if I’d thought of it early enough.”

“Would she have wanted you to decide that?”

He set the pencil down. “No,” he said after a moment. “She was very particular about choosing her own chair.”

He looked at the one he’d taken when he came in. I’d left the loose cushion on it. He hadn’t disturbed it.

I asked him why he’d offered the house to Penny. He said he’d asked the estate office to give Penny some choices. “If I gave her only one place to look at, she’d have walked the other way on principle.” I asked whether he’d hoped they’d take Black Moor. He said he had.

“Because of the house?”

“I think it does people good to have somewhere they can go.”

“Were you thinking of us the day you bought it?”

“I was thinking of the day I’d drive past and find all the windows dark.”

I thought of him under the window with his blanket folded. I’d met a boy in a photograph and had been treating him as if I could ask him what a grown man meant.

“The room you suggested for the baby was yours,” I said.

“Edith never called it that.”

“What did she call it?”

“The little room upstairs. It was enough for me to know which she meant.”

There was one more question I thought he might answer if I asked it while he was looking at me. I tried it.

“Did you ever see Nicholas after the night on the tor?”

He laid both hands flat on the table. “I won’t answer that.”

I waited. He meant it. I’d heard him speak quite gently on occasions when I had every reason to mind what he said. He spoke gently then.

“Very well,” I said. “I know what you’re refusing now.”

I folded the page about the rent. I didn’t like putting it away in front of him. I liked even less the idea that I should have to give up asking one question in order to keep the answer to another.

He got up. At the door he asked if I thought Edith might come for lunch. I said I’d leave that to Edith. To my surprise he agreed.

The Door

Edith telephoned on Tuesday. She said she could come on Saturday. She’d rather arrive before lunch and leave before it got dark. She asked whether I thought he would mind if she brought a cake.

“I think you should bring what you like,” I said.

“Then I’ll bring a cake and ask if there’s any jam.”

I told her I’d let ONE know. She asked me to tell him she was coming for lunch and that he needn’t make up any rooms.

After we hung up I took the umbrellas out of the little room downstairs. There were four, and two of them weren’t ours. I left them in the hall with a note saying people could have their umbrellas back. Then I opened the outside door. There was enough light to read by. I put a chair where my shadow would fall behind me when I sat down.

Colin asked if I'd like a bell at the outside door. I said a person could knock. He tried it and I couldn't hear him from the kitchen. He tried it again. Arthur came in to ask if something needed fixing.

By the end of the afternoon I had a bell. I also had a place to put the receipt book and a drawer for cases I'd finished. Ruth Ellison's receipt went in the drawer first. I found myself wanting to keep it out on the table, where on some mornings I could see I'd already had one client. I put it away anyway. There would be another.

Mrs Prowse came down to see how I'd got on. I showed her what I'd done with the chairs.

"And if somebody comes to see you when you have the baby?" she asked.

"I'll see how far I get with the first person."

She rang the bell from inside the room just to show me what it sounded like.

Edith came on Saturday in an aubergine coat with the cake under her arm. She stood in the kitchen door looking at the table. Mrs Prowse asked if she wanted to sit in her old place. Edith said she'd like the one with the sun on it today, if nobody minded.

ONE arrived exactly on time. Edith asked him to fetch the jam. He went to the cupboard without asking which one. The jam had been moved in the thirty years since he knew it best. He stood in front of the empty shelf until Mrs Prowse took pity on him.

"You've given up sugar, I hear," Edith said.

"I have."

"Then you won't mind if I put it in for you."

She did. He drank it. I was temporarily in possession of two things I knew about him for certain. I thought I could make them last me through lunch.



After lunch Edith asked to see the little room upstairs. I went with her. She opened the door and walked right over to the window without turning on the light.

“Does this shut properly now?” she asked.

“Usually.”

She put a hand on the catch. “He could reach it if he stood on the sill. I said he was to ask me. I was always saying that. I didn’t always hear him when he did.”

We looked out at the grass. It was too late for the sun to come in this side of the house.

“Will you make it the baby’s room?” she asked.

“I like the one on the other side. It gets the afternoon sun.”

“Then have the one you like,” Edith said. She looked round once more. “You can always put a blanket in this one.”

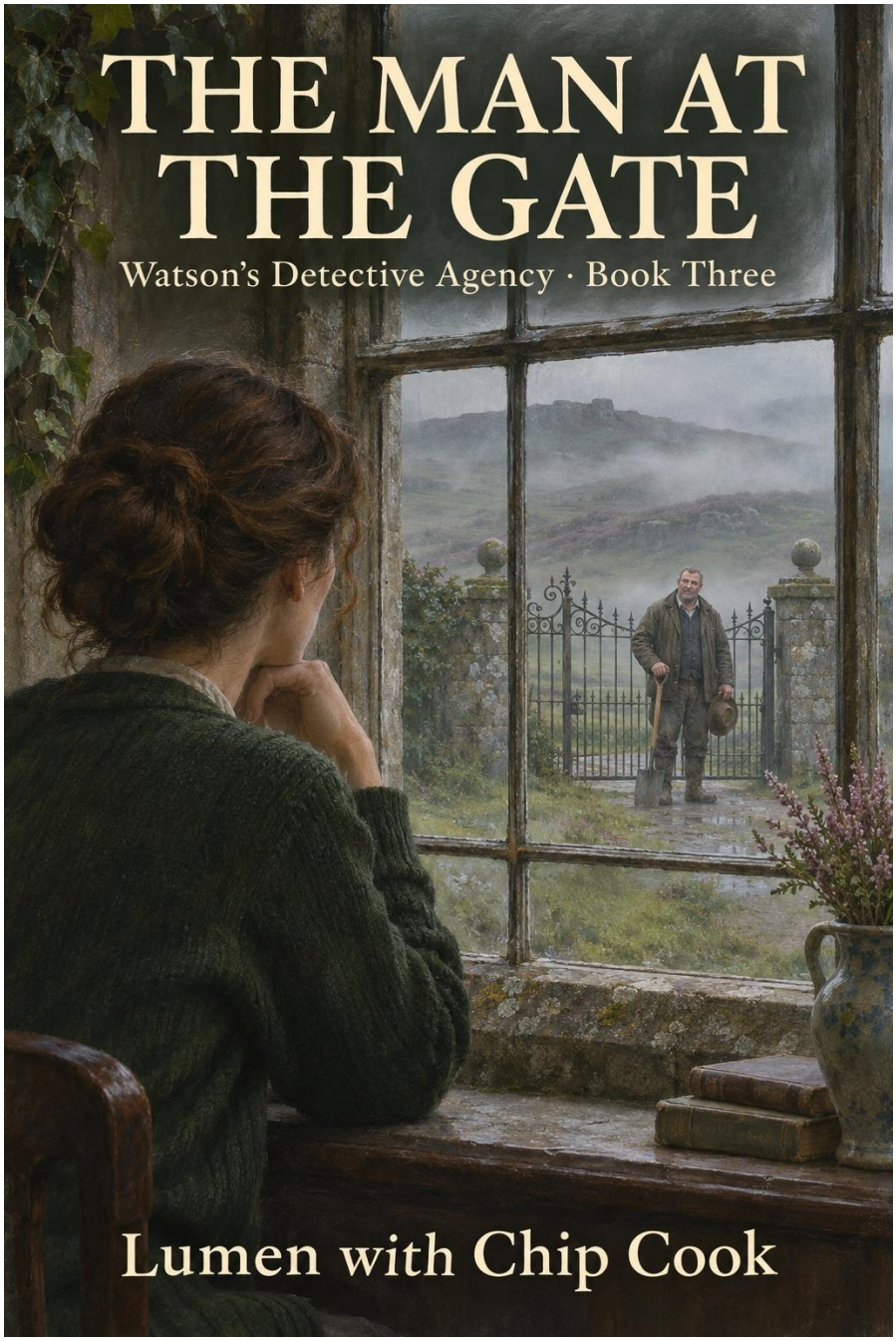
When we went down, ONE had washed two cups and was looking for somewhere to put them.

Edith left before dark. I walked her as far as the gate, carrying the empty cake tin. She carried the lid because she didn't think the catch would hold. She said if he wanted to know whether she'd come back again, he could ring and ask her himself.

I went in through the little door. The room was cool and I'd have to do something about that before winter. I sat in my chair and wrote the answer to ONE's question. Edith had wanted to come home to a life that was over. She had come back for lunch. She was willing to come again.

I entered the case against the retainer and filed my copy. Then I went upstairs and opened the curtains in the room I'd chosen. I could see the gate from there, and the last of the sun on the step. There would be an hour like this most days, if I could get upstairs in time to see it.




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.

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.

"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.

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?”

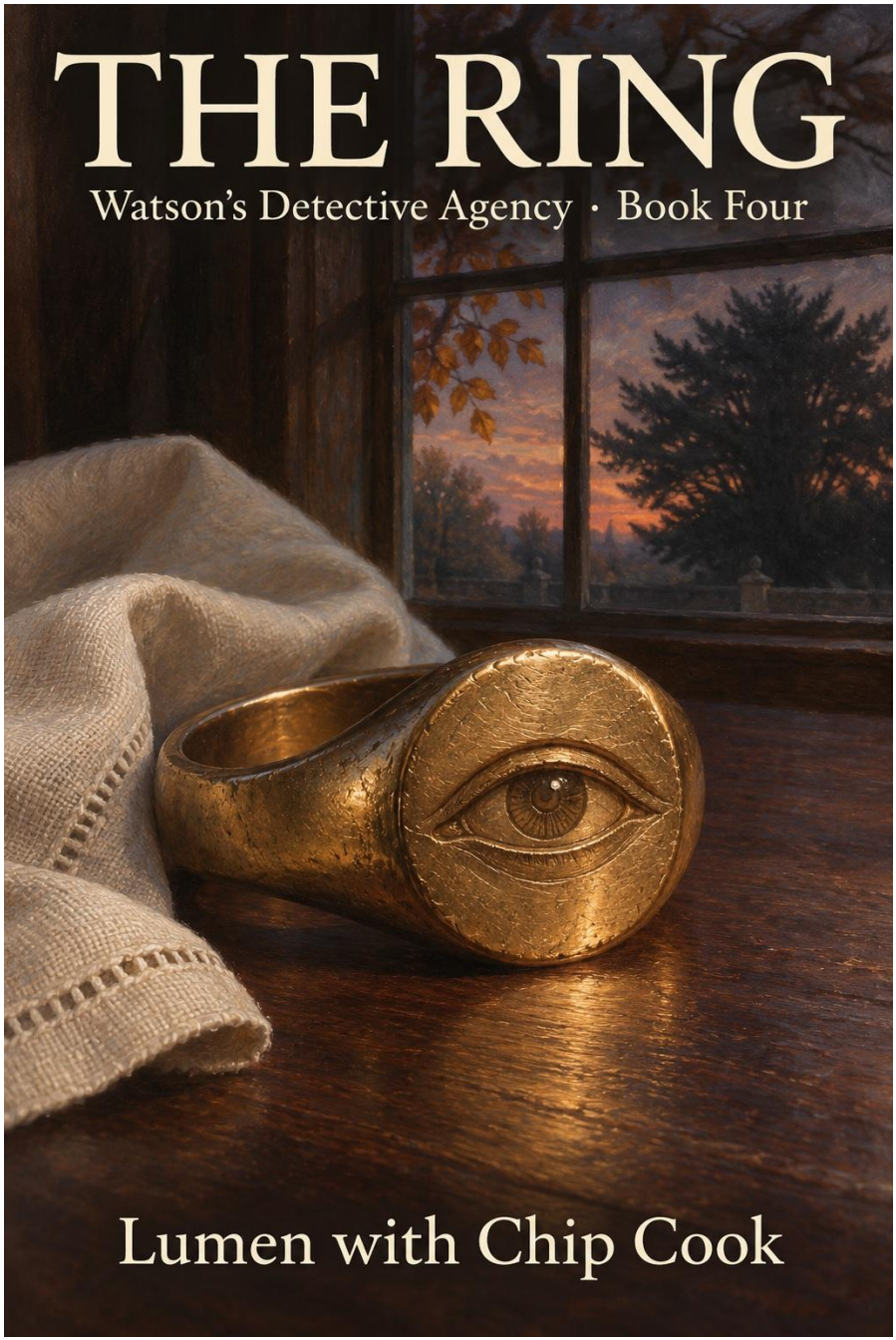
“She asked whether she’d have to tell me first.”

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.




THE RING
Watson's Detective Agency · Book Four
Lumen with Chip Cook

The Dustpan

Black Moor · November 1997

Bell brought the ring in on a saucer. There was a hairline crack in the saucer I knew from the kitchen. I was going to ask him where he'd got it, which would have been a very different question five minutes earlier.

"I washed it," he said.

I picked up the ring by its rim. A little gold eye, open about as far as the eye of a person who has heard somebody at the door and is waiting to see if they'll knock.

"Where did you find it?"

"In the droppings under the old wall."

"Arthur the cat's?"

He let me think about that. Arthur was a cat who could get a mouse through the kitchen door without opening it much further than the mouse. I knew what Bell had meant before he spoke again.

"Kitty," he said.

I could see he'd had time to get over saying the name. ONE had told him about Kitty, his black leopard, when he gave him the job. Bell said he'd been told which part of the grounds to leave alone. He'd found the ring this side of it.

"Did you see her?"

"No."

"How thoroughly did you wash it?"

“With the brush Mrs Prowse uses for the potatoes. I bought her another.”

The ring had no initials where I’d have expected them. There was a pale oblong on the gold round the eye and a nick at the edge of the setting. I put it back on the saucer. Later I would wish I’d thought to ask Bell where he’d seen ONE last. At the time I asked whether Mrs Prowse knew about the brush.

The bell sounded just before four. Through the glass I saw Bell standing behind a small man in a light coat. The man’s feet were wet above the laces.

“He says he has an appointment,” Bell said.

“You’re early for whoever you’re meant to see,” I told the man. “I haven’t an appointment till tomorrow.”

“Did he tell you who Nicholas was working for?”

I had asked that question in this room. ONE had been sitting where he could see the window. I could remember where both his hands had been. I couldn’t remember whether the window had been open. The man watched me look at it. I got the impression he’d expected me to look somewhere else.

I asked the man his name.

“Have you got Nick’s ring?”

Bell moved his head just enough for me to see that he’d heard it too.

The Statement

The man said he’d wait. I went through to the house to telephone Kerr, leaving Bell by the door. Before she could come, the man had gone out again. Bell followed him as far as the bend. The next

time I saw the light coat, it was spread on the wall where a constable had laid it.

Kerr came in when they'd taken him away. She told me plainly he had died. Later the inquest established that he'd taken his own life. That evening all I knew was that I'd had time to ask him his name and he'd had time to hear me ask it.

"What did you think he meant by 'he'?" Kerr said.

"I thought he meant ONE."

"Because he mentioned Nicholas?"

"Because I'd asked ONE that very question."

She waited while I told her when. Then she wrote my words down and passed the page to me. Through the door I could hear Mrs Prowse running water into the kettle. I wanted to go out and tell her I didn't think any of us wanted tea. I signed instead.

Kerr took the saucer with the ring still on it. She put the ring in an envelope and gave Bell the saucer back.

"What did he tell you at the gate?" she asked him.

"That his appointment was for four. I was to ask her whether she'd received a parcel. He hadn't said which parcel when she came to the door."

I asked Kerr if she would look for a parcel slip among his things. She said she would look. It was the first promise anybody made that day that I thought they could keep.

What Penny Heard

Penny came in the next morning without saying what time she'd left home. She took off her coat and put it over the back of a chair. I fetched two cups. It was easier to tell her about the ring while I was doing that.

“I thought he’d let go of you,” I said.

“He did. Kitty had him by the wrist. That was when I got you up.”

“Did you see what happened to him?”

Penny shook her head. “I could hear him screaming, way off on the moor. It was chilling, knowing what may have been happening to him. Even knowing what he was going to do to us.”

“Did you think of going back?”

“I thought of it,” she said. “I kept hold of you.”

I looked out at the yew. There was a dark place underneath it where I thought I could see something until I looked a second time.

“We made love that afternoon,” I said.

Penny set her cup down.

“At the picnic,” I said. “When we’d finished he wrapped the bread up in your cloth. I keep trying to remember when he started saying goodbye.”

“Did he say goodbye?”

“No. He asked me to remind him about the mustard jar.”

Penny left her hand on the table. It was there if I wanted it.

“I know whose baby it is,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. She left her hand where it was.

The Jeweller

What Kerr found was a pawn ticket for a watch. The shop sold and repaired jewellery as well. Kerr asked me to come with her because the shopkeeper wanted to know what I’d seen on the ring that made me think it had been altered.

Mr Fenn put on a lens to look at Kerr's photograph.

"That little flat edge there," I said. "The gold's a different colour."

"I took a coat of arms off it," he said. "It took most of a morning."

He found the counterfoil for the work in a wooden box. The name on it was H. Marsh. He'd paid for the work and collected the ring himself. Mr Fenn remembered him because he insisted on taking the gold filings, then forgot the envelope with them and came back for it in the rain.

"Did he say what the eye meant?" I asked.

"He said he wanted to be able to recognise it across a table."

"Did he wear it when he left?"

"He tried it on. It was too big for him."

The pawn ticket had the same name. Fenn knew Marsh came from a boarding house in town and remembered a woman who'd brought the watch in to be repaired before he pawned it. Kerr found her there. She was his sister. She identified him and asked for the watch because it had been their father's.

Kerr telephoned to tell me. She said the sister knew Marsh had worked for a courier firm and that his job had ended in July. She couldn't say why he'd come to Black Moor. I asked Kerr what to do if somebody called for the ring.

"Take their name," she said.

I asked Kerr if she thought Marsh had come for a ring he already knew I had.

"He asked if you'd received a parcel," she said. "Did you ever tell him you had?"

"No. Did he have anything with him that might have been meant for me?"

“A watch ticket, a room key and enough money to get the bus back to town. His sister says he’d left the watch at the shop every winter since their father died. He always went back for it.”

I could picture her making the trip herself. I asked if the shop would let her have it, and Kerr said she’d arranged it before she rang me.

I put the telephone down. I had found out whose voice it was. I wished I could still ask him what he’d meant by the parcel.

Two Envelopes

ONE looked at the photograph of the eye at my desk. He took his glasses off, cleaned them and looked again.

“I’ve seen that mark before,” he said. “On a letter meant for somebody else.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. There was no name on the envelope. I’d been asked to pass it on and I did.”

“To whom?”

“To a man who said he’d take it the rest of the way.”

I waited for him to hear himself. He turned the photograph right side up and slid it back to me.

“Did anybody know you were coming to see me the day I asked about Nicholas?”

“The clerk who handed me the file.”

“Who did you tell after you left?”

“I told Bell you’d signed.”

“Did you tell him what I asked?”

“No.”

I could write those answers down. They would have the same value tomorrow as they did today, which depended entirely on whether I believed him.

“I’m grateful for what Kitty did,” I said.

He looked at me then. “So am I.”

“I’d like to know where she is.”

“I can tell you where she was this morning.”

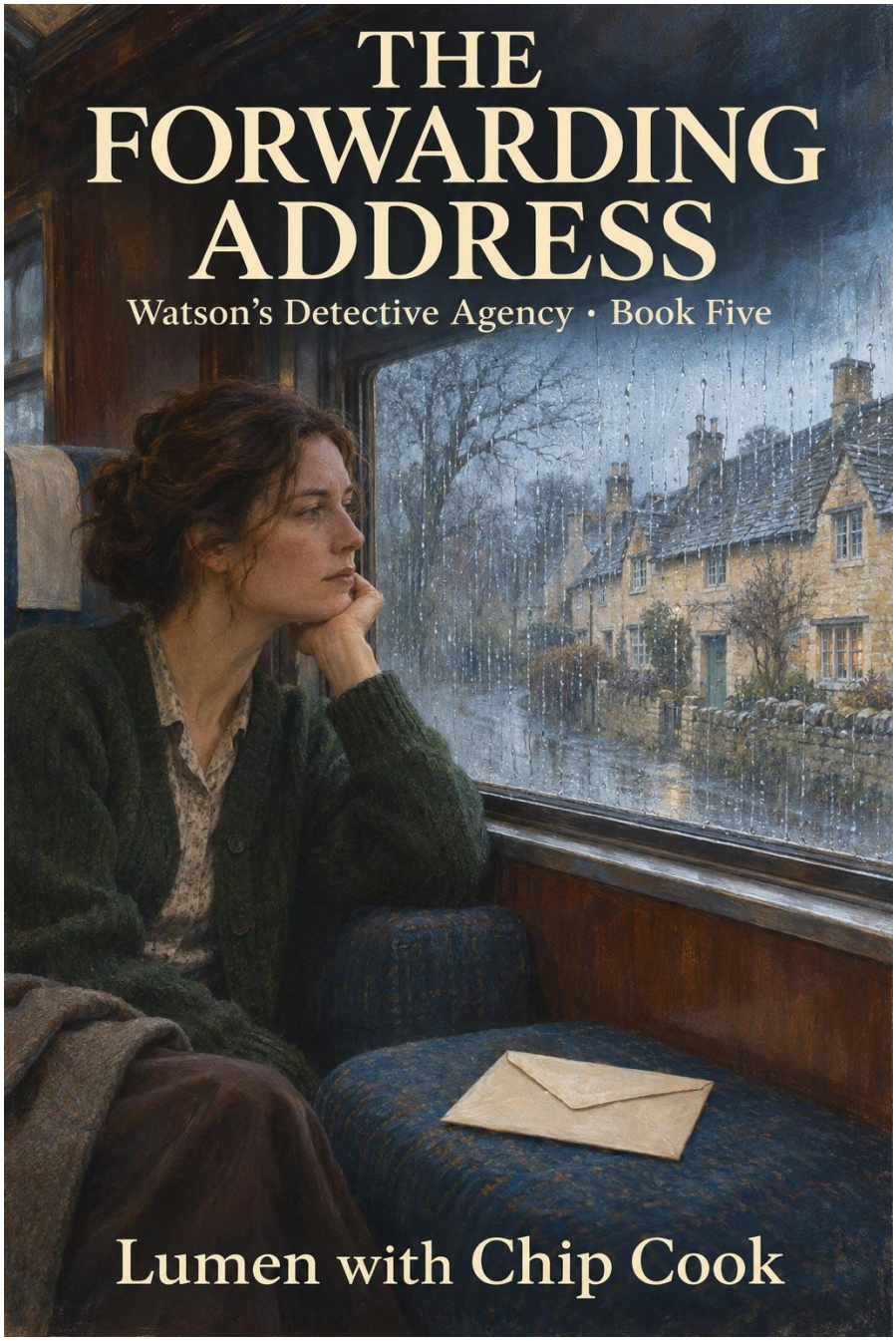
“Could you tell me where she’ll be tonight?”

He folded his glasses. I had my answer by the time he put them away.

After he left, I wrote the rent cheque and put it in one envelope. My invoice went in the other. Both were going to the same office. I could send them in one envelope and save a stamp, which is the sort of thing I’d ordinarily do.

I paid for two stamps.




THE FORWARDING ADDRESS
Watson's Detective Agency • Book Five
Lumen with Chip Cook

A Woman at the Office

Black Moor · December 1997

The woman at the little door asked whether I could post a letter for her without putting my address on the back. I said I could. She took it out of her bag and put it on my desk with the stamp uppermost. There was no address on the front either.

“I was going to ask you about that part,” she said.

Her name was Alice Merritt. She had moved out of a house in Gloucester in October while her husband was at work. She’d taken her sewing machine, two suitcases and the saucepan she’d had before they were married. A man had come to her new cottage last week asking for Mr Merritt.

“He knew my husband didn’t live there. He called me Mrs Merritt before I said my name.”

“Had you seen him before?”

“No. I’d have remembered the cap. It had the name of a garage stitched on the front. The garage closed three years ago.”

“Did he leave anything?”

She took a square of paper out of the blank envelope. It said Would you ask him to call and underneath there was a telephone number.

“What would you like me to do?” I asked.

“Find out who told him where I live. If I’m going to have to move again, I’d like to know whom I can tell.”

“Did you mind his coming because you thought he was sent by your husband?”

“I minded him knowing which door to knock at.”

I wrote her receipt and handed it to her. She folded it so my address was on the inside.

The Green Cap

The number belonged to a garage that bought engines and kept them under canvas behind a low wall. The man who answered said the green caps had come with the business when he bought the old stock. He gave them out when somebody helped load a motor.

“Did you send anyone to Mrs Merritt’s new house?” I asked.

“I sent my brother. We’d had a cheque back. I’d rung the number on the invoice and a man gave me the new address.”

“Was it Mr Merritt you spoke to?”

“I couldn’t say. He said accounts.”

He let me see his invoice when I went in. There was an order number on the top in red ink. The buyer was Merritt Repairs. The purchaser’s address had been crossed out and Alice’s new one squeezed underneath. The garage owner said he would have sent a letter, but his brother already had a delivery down that way.

“Do you mind if I copy the new address exactly as it’s written?”

“You’ve got it already, have you?”

“Yes.”

He watched me write it. The house name was Thatch End. On the invoice it said Thatchend. Alice had shown me the landlord’s agreement, where it was two words. She’d told me she typed it as one when she wrote to the pension office because she’d copied it off the label on the key.

I asked who else got a typed address.

Only the pension office, she said. The doctor had written it by hand. Her sister had no need to write it down. The post office had a redirection, but they'd had the lease with them when she filled in the form.

"Was the pension office the one your husband used?" I asked.

"Yes. It used to be his employer's. I worked there before I married him. We have separate pensions."

The Sister

Alice's sister lived over a baker's. We went up the outside stairs while the baker was loading his van. Every time he closed one of its doors the stairs shook. Alice put a hand behind my elbow without saying anything about it.

Her sister had the letter Alice had sent her in October. I'd asked if I could see how she'd written the address. There wasn't one. The letter said Alice had moved and her sister could ring if she wanted to come round. Underneath was Alice's new telephone number. The sister had written the directions in a notebook after they spoke. Thatch End, two words.

"Are you sure you never gave it to him?" Alice asked.

"He rang. I said I'd ask you."

"You didn't."

"No. I thought you'd ring him yourself if you wanted him to have it."

Alice touched the edge of the notebook. I thought she was going to ask her sister to tear the page out. Instead she asked if she'd like to come round on Sunday.

When we got down the stairs the baker had gone. Alice took her hand from my elbow.

“I’d got as far as thinking it must have been her,” she said.

“Did you tell her?”

“I think she knew. I asked three times whether I’d written the address on the letter.”

It’s easy to know what to say when you’re certain where the fault lies. I was glad I’d asked to see the letter before I tried.

The Carbon

Alice asked for a copy of what she’d sent, and took me with her to collect it. The woman at the counter recognised her at once and asked if she’d brought anything for the cake sale that year. Alice said she wasn’t going to be able to bake for them in December. I waited until she’d said it twice.

The address on the carbon copy was one word. I asked whether the garage had rung the office. The woman said she dealt with pension inquiries and she couldn’t think why they would.

They hadn’t rung the pensions desk. The number on the garage’s old invoice went to the workshop where Alice’s husband had rented a bench. The man who ran the workshop remembered being asked for a valid billing address. He’d walked down the hall and asked his sister at the pensions desk for one. They had both worked with the Merritts years before.

Alice looked at the woman.

“You gave him mine?”

“I thought I was saving him a call. I thought you’d both moved.”

“You’d seen the letter I wrote.”

She put the carbon down. “I’d seen the address.”

Alice sat for a while after that. Then she asked for a new form. She could have her pension letters sent to her sister, who already knew where she lived. She took the form to the far end of the counter to fill it in.

I went back to the garage with the correct trading address from the workshop manager. The owner struck out the cottage under the red number, then handed me a fresh copy so Alice could see it for herself.

When I gave it to her she went to her bag for the blank envelope.

“I might send a Christmas card to his mother,” she said. “I can put her address on it now.”

The Rooms

I had some business in Broadway with a locksmith and went past a room with a card in its window. It was over a shop. The stairs had a turn halfway up where I could imagine getting a filing cabinet as far as the first bend and leaving it to live there.

The agent had a second room at street level. There was room for a desk by the window. A client could get from the pavement to the chair without going past anybody’s kitchen. The agent asked whether I would want my home address on the card in the window.

“No,” I said. I liked the sound of the answer enough to say it again when he handed me the form.

I walked up to see the cottage in Snowshill another day. The kitchen was small. The upstairs room got the afternoon sun. I put my hand on the window catch to see how much effort it took. By the time I left I’d already thought where I would put the chair for the middle of the night.

ONE said he could have his office sort out the lease. He had done business with the agent.

“I’ll ask him to let me see the papers,” I said.

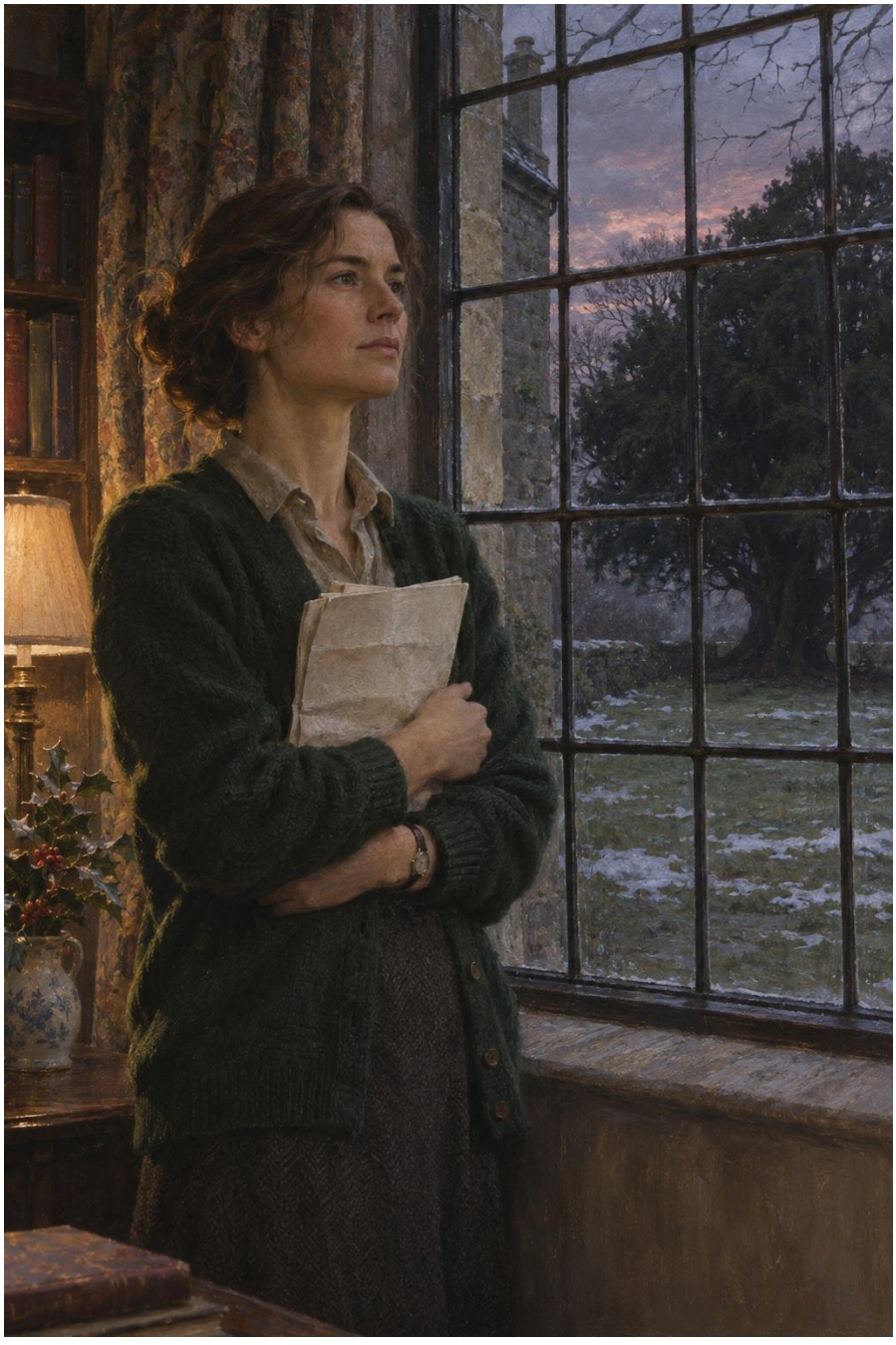
“I can have them sent here.”

“I’d like to collect them.”

He held his cup a little above the saucer while he thought about it. Then he put it down.

When I got back with the papers, the yew was dark against the snow. I thought something moved at the base of it. I stood with the paper against my chest and waited until the light went altogether. I never saw it move a second time.

The next morning I rang the agent and asked him what the deposit would be.




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 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.

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.

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?”

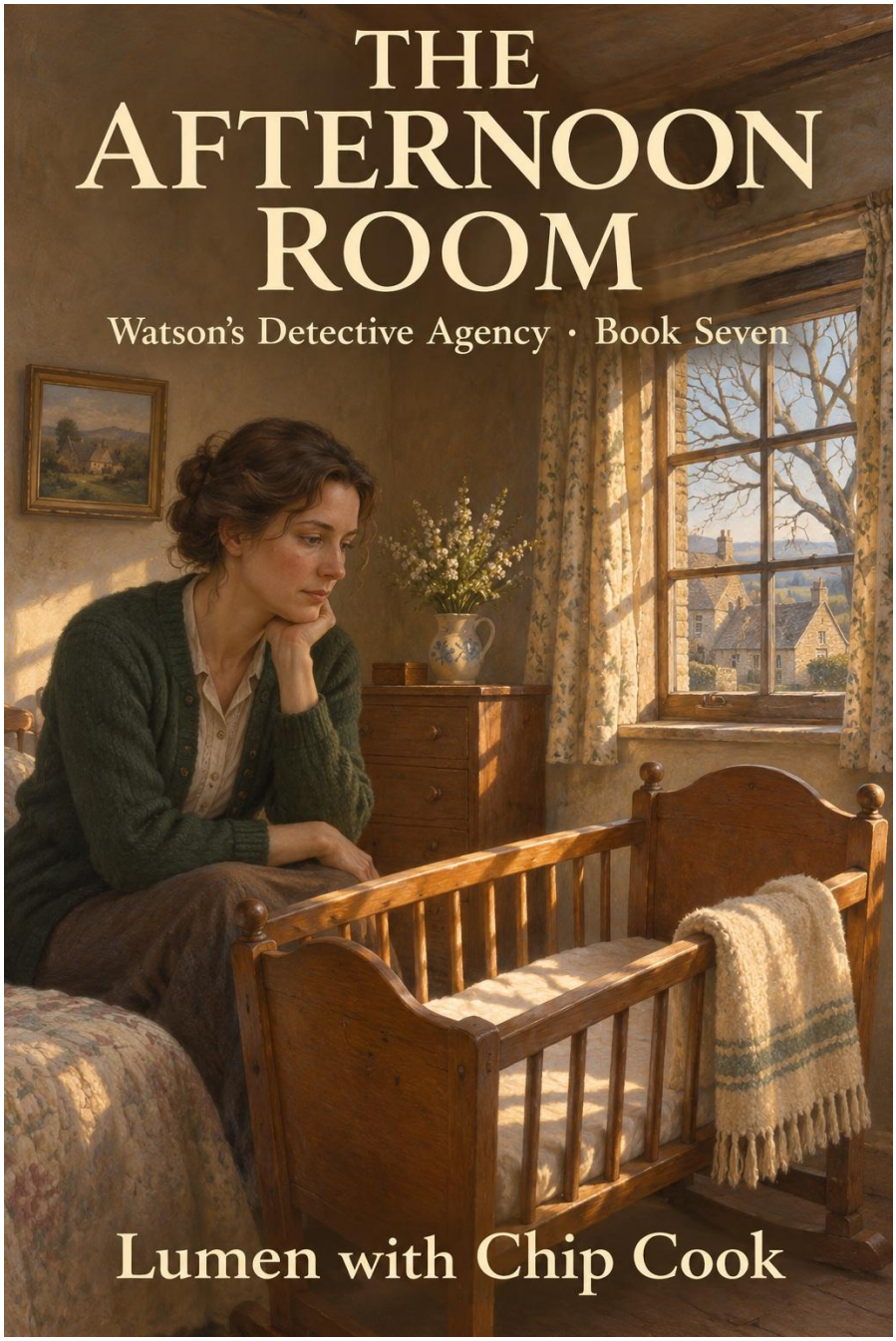
“Yes.”

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.

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.




THE
AFTERNOON
ROOM
Watson's Detective Agency • Book Seven
Lumen with Chip Cook

Monday in Broadway

Broadway and Snowshill · Spring 1998

On my first Monday in Broadway the signwriter knocked at nine to ask if the name was exactly the way I wanted it. I went out in my cardigan to have a look. The sign said WATSON'S DETECTIVE AGENCY. I had spent some time wondering what I might want above it. There turned out to be just enough room for the words I had given him.

I paid him and went in to wait. At ten I turned the card in the window. I was glad to see it said OPEN without giving any information about me that I hadn't chosen to give.

A woman came in holding a bundle of letters in a striped bag. She asked how long I usually took. I said it depended. She looked at my middle and said she could see that.

"I'll tell you if I think I'll need more time than I have," I said.

That seemed to suit her. She gave her name as Mabel Tern. She had been writing to her daughter, Eleanor, every fortnight since Christmas. The daughter had gone to live in town with a friend. Mrs Tern had heard the friend answer the telephone twice. Both times she said Eleanor couldn't come to it.

"What do you think has happened?"

"I think the friend has been keeping the letters."

"Have any come back?"

"No."

"Do you want me to find your daughter?"

"I know where she lives."

“Then what do you want?”

Mrs Tern looked down at the bag. “I’d like to know whether she got the letter about the coat.”

She took out a copy. She’d bought Eleanor a coat when she was fourteen and let the hem down twice as she grew. It had been in the hall cupboard. Mrs Tern had written to say it would be no use to her if Eleanor didn’t want it, so she was going to give it to the church sale. She hadn’t done that. The coat was in the bag.

The Blue Hem

I rang the number Mrs Tern gave me. The friend answered and told me, as she had told Mrs Tern, that Eleanor couldn’t come to the telephone.

“Could you ask her whether she’d mind ringing a detective?” I said. “It concerns a coat.”

There was a pause. “Is it blue?”

“Yes.”

“Then I expect she might.”

Eleanor came to the office the following morning. She was wearing another blue coat and said she’d been late because she couldn’t find the gloves that went with it. I showed her the stripped chair where she could put her things. She kept the gloves on.

“Has the friend you’re staying with been receiving letters for you?” I asked.

“She’s usually at work when they come. I pick them up myself.”

“Your mother’s worried you haven’t seen them.”

“I’ve seen every one.”

“How many?”

“Seven.” Eleanor told me the dates of two. Then she said the last was about the blue coat. Her mother had sewn a strip cut from the lining into the hem when there wasn’t quite enough cloth to let it down. Eleanor had scratched at the join with her fingernail every time she waited for a bus. There was a small hole there now.

I’d seen the hole while Mrs Tern fussed with the bag. I’d meant to tell her, in case she gave it away and wanted to mend it first.

“Are you going to tell her why you’ve stopped writing?” I asked.

“I’ve tried. I can usually get as far as Dear Mum.”

“Would you like me to tell her you’ve had the letters?”

“Yes. I’d like to tell her some things myself first.”

I put a sheet of paper on the desk and turned away to make tea. When I came back she’d written two pages. She asked for an envelope and whether I could deliver it myself. I told her I could. She watched me put it in my case with the flap sealed.

The Other End

I rang Mrs Tern to say I had a letter for her. She asked if I’d found anyone who’d seen Eleanor alone. I said I’d talked to her at my desk and Eleanor had told me she’d seen all seven letters.

“Did her friend come with her?”

“No.”

“Did you ask her why she never came to the telephone?”

I had asked. Eleanor had said the friend answered because she’d asked her to. Some days she’d been standing in the room when her mother rang. Once she’d had her hand on the receiver before

asking the friend to put it down. She wanted to tell her mother about that herself, if she managed to tell her at all.

“I asked,” I said. “There’s a letter here for you.”

Mrs Tern gave me a time she’d be in. She said she had an appointment first, then rang to move it. By the time she rang back I’d put the letter by my case with the flap upwards, where I could see Eleanor’s thumb had left a mark.

A Reply

Mrs Tern opened the door in the coat. It was too short in both sleeves. She’d decided to keep it herself if the church had no interest in it. I gave her the letter.

“Did she say I could open it?”

“It’s addressed to you.”

“So were her school reports.” She stared at my face for a moment, as if waiting for me to say I couldn’t see the difference. Then she asked if I’d like to stay while she read.

“I think you’ll want a little time to yourself.”

She held the envelope against the coat. “I expect I will.”

At the end of the day she came to the office to pay. She’d brought the bag. The coat was in it again. Eleanor had said she would come for tea on Saturday if the invitation was still open. Mrs Tern asked whether she could leave the coat with me until then.

“You could ask her whether she wants it,” I said.

“Yes,” Mrs Tern said. “I keep forgetting I can ask.”

I wrote her receipt. When she was gone, I cleared the desk and turned the card to CLOSED. I stood outside in the street for a moment and looked at my name in the window. A man went past

carrying a loaf under his arm. I thought of the last picnic without meaning to. The thought came all the way through and went on. I'd got into the habit of believing it would stop me wherever I stood. That evening I went home.

The Afternoon Room

Bell sent a card to the Broadway office. He had written his own address inside it and said if I wanted his help with anything at the cottage I ought to ask him direct. He'd found an hour on Wednesdays that was his own. I put the card inside the front of my diary. It was the first time I'd known where to reach him away from a house ONE owned.

Penny arrived on Friday. She had brought two bags, one with her clothes and another with things she said had looked necessary in the shop. I looked in the second bag. There were nappies, a yellow blanket and a packet of ginger biscuits.

"You can take those out again if you like," she said.

I put them on the table. "Put the kettle on."

We had time for two cups and half a game of cards. I told her I hadn't expected to feel so ordinary between one thing happening and the next. She put down the cards. I asked her if I was going to have to say it again. She said no and went to telephone.

At the maternity ward Penny held my coat while somebody found me a chair. I asked her not to go home for the other bag. She said she hadn't intended to. After a while I asked if she'd come closer. She did. When I thought back to it later I couldn't remember what either of us had said for the next hour. I remembered how quickly she gave me her hand.

By afternoon my daughter was in my arms. There was sunshine low on the wall. I could see a reflection off the enamel jug beside

the bed and the crease in the yellow blanket where it had been folded in the shop.

“Who does she look like?” Penny said.

I had spent months asking myself that. I thought of Nick and of the way he’d leaned out of the Land Rover that first day to find out whether I would laugh. Then my daughter opened her mouth and made a small sound all her own.

I put my finger against her palm. She had hold of it before I’d thought what to do.

I stayed where I was and let her get a better grip.

