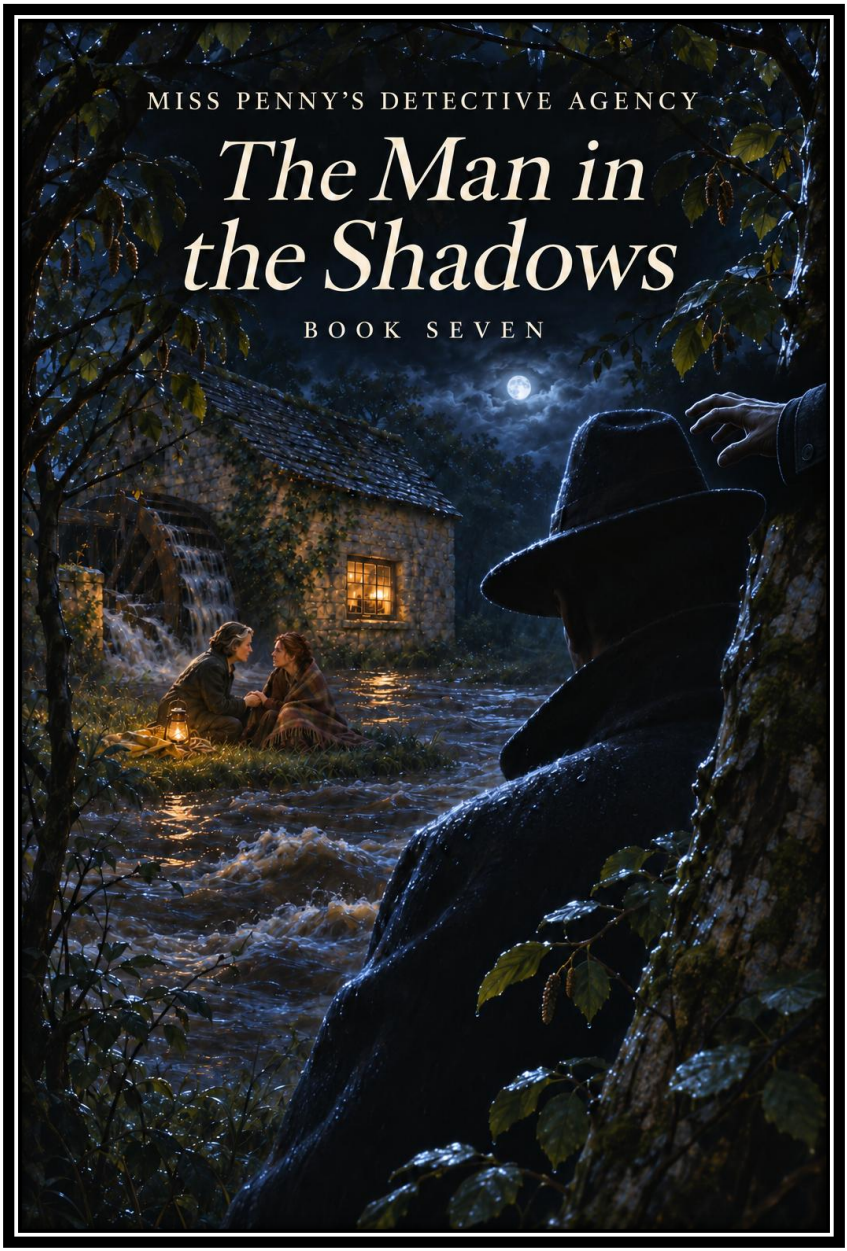

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
The Man in the Shadows
BOOK SEVEN

The Other Bank

The dead man came back to the mill on a Wednesday. He arrived in the bucket of a council excavator, between a length of hawthorn and somebody's green wheelie bin.

Penny heard about it from Ellen, who rang at seven and asked whether Watson was up to taking visitors. Penny said that depended on the visitor. Ellen said this one was a policeman.

"Then he can come round the front," said Watson from the kitchen. "And he can wipe his feet."

She had started saying things from other rooms again. Penny counted it an improvement. For the first two nights after the flood Watson had come to the kitchen doorway every time Penny went to put the kettle on.

Detective Inspector Lucas came in with two photographs in an envelope and mud above the soles of his shoes. He stopped at the mat and scraped each foot with exaggerated care.

"Thank you," said Watson.

"I had the impression you might be watching."

"People often do."

He sat where he could see both women. He asked Watson to tell him again what she'd heard before the water came in.

"A voice outside. The man said, 'You can leave it with me.' I thought he meant the folder. Then the key turned. I distinctly remember thinking it was rude of him."

"Rude?"

"It took a while to become anything worse."

The first photograph showed a pair of black shoes. One was missing a heel. The other showed a dark overcoat laid flat, wet enough to shine. Below its left pocket there was a neat repair in lighter thread.

"Do you recognise either?" Lucas asked.

Watson pointed to the repair. "A man wore that coat at the parish archive. He stood behind me while I requested the mill papers. I remember thinking someone had mended it very nicely with the wrong colour."

"Do you remember his face?"

"He kept his hat on. I remember his voice better."

Penny looked at the pale stitching. Somebody had gone to considerable trouble to save that coat. She wondered whether they knew where it had ended up.

“Did he drown?” Watson asked.

Lucas tucked the photographs back in the envelope. “That’s what I came to ask you about. If you remember seeing him anywhere else, I’d like to hear it.”

At the door he paused.

“You thought the man outside meant your folder.”

“He said ‘it.’ I was the one who decided what he meant.”

“Is there a possibility he meant something else?”

“I wish I knew,” Watson said. “It might tell us why he followed me.”

By the time Lucas had gone, the landlord was at the front door in his chair with a brown envelope on his lap. He’d found their copy of the tenancy agreement among his papers. Watson waited until he’d gone to read the signature. Dr. Stocker.
“Is he a physician?” she asked.
“I never thought to ask,” said Penny.

Duplicate

Their client, Rose Vale, had brought them a photograph of a supper at the old mill. Her father, Daniel, stood against a wall at the back with his apron folded over one arm. Rose had been nine when he went away. For

nearly forty years she'd had the same story from everyone she asked. Daniel had packed a bag on Monday and taken the train.

Rose knew the supper was on Thursday because her mother's birthday cake was on the table. The photograph had sent Watson to the archive. The flood had interrupted everything that came after.

Now she fetched her notebook and put it between their plates.

"I found the old transport records," she said. "Most of them were for flour or sacks. Then there was an order for a driver to collect Daniel Vale from the mill on the Friday morning, at six. It said he was to be released into the driver's care. That's the word I couldn't get out of my head. Released."

"Did you tell Rose?"

"I went straight to the mill. I wanted to see the room people were still calling stores on the transport slips. I thought it would be simple enough to ask."

"Who did you ask?"

"The archive volunteer gave me the number for the caretaker. I rang from the desk. I said I'd found a release order in the mill papers and asked if I could look inside the supper room. He told me he'd leave the door open."

She turned the notebook towards Penny. She had copied the date, the time, and three words under the receiving signature. The last initial was clear. Beneath it she had drawn a question mark.

“Edmund?” said Penny.

“It’s an E. There are several Edmunds in England.”

“Even more if we count the ones who lie about their names.”

Watson pulled the notebook back. “I left the slip on the reading table when I went to the telephone. Anyone behind me could have seen it.”

They returned to the archive at ten. The volunteer, Mrs Kersey, remembered the man in the mended coat. He had brought a typed request of his own, which turned out to be for parish boundary maps. She remembered the typewriter missed the top of its capital A. The request was still in her drawer, underneath a receipt for biscuits.

“Did that man come back for the mill order?” Watson asked.

Mrs Kersey looked first at Penny, then at the box she had taken from the shelf.

“He asked where you’d gone. I told him. I thought he was with you.”

Watson said, “He wanted you to think that.”

The order was gone. There was, however, a little piece of pink carbon paper stuck to the back of the next sheet. Watson held it up to the high window. Three backward characters showed in the light.

“There was a duplicate,” she said.

Mrs Kersey began to close the box.

“Who got the pink copies?” asked Penny.

“The drivers. They needed something to get paid with.”

The Driver’s Receipt

They found the driver’s surname in an index of local carriers. Pritchard was common enough to be no help until Watson saw the address in a ledger. Ivy answered the door in her slippers and said she hoped to goodness they hadn’t come about the car again.

“This time it’s your husband’s paperwork,” Watson said.

“That’ll be worse.”

Ivy brought down a biscuit tin containing a good deal of paperwork and four actual biscuits. She put the biscuits on a plate and offered them round. Penny took one before Watson could examine it.

Ivy’s husband had worked for his father, the elder Arthur Pritchard. He had kept Arthur’s driving records

after the business closed. Ivy remembered the pink receipts because he used the backs for shopping lists. She lifted a stack and read “two tins peaches” aloud, in the voice of someone briefly hearing her husband in the room.

A receipt with the date Watson had written down was folded around the pink carbon copy of the release order. Watson checked it against her notebook. The wording and time were the same. Payment had been claimed for going out to the mill and coming back empty. Set against the release order with its six o’clock collection, the receipt looked unremarkable until Watson noticed a cramped line at the bottom.

“Couldn’t take passenger,” she read. “Passenger declined to go without …” She angled the paper towards the window.

Ivy leaned in. “That says child.”

“Yes,” Watson said. “It does.”

The two dates were the same. The signature on the order began with E. The return receipt was signed in full by Arthur Pritchard.

“Could Rose have been the child?” Penny asked.

“Rose spent that week at her aunt’s,” said Watson. “She told us her aunt kept her home from school because she wouldn’t stop asking where her father was.”

“Who was the child?”

Ivy had been stacking the papers again. She stopped. “If you find out, ask before you tell anyone. We had a bit of that business ourselves.”

Watson understood. The last time they had sat with Ivy, her missing car had become everybody’s story before she could say what losing it meant to her.

“May we take these to Rose?” she asked. “She can decide what to do with them.”

“Make copies,” said Ivy. “Give her those. I’d rather keep Arthur’s writing here.”



A Question of Custody

Mrs Kersey rang while Watson was copying the papers for Rose. She said her husband was in the garden and that she had about ten minutes.

“I gave the man in the coat your directions,” she said, “but I didn’t say you were going alone. He knew that already.”

“What made you think he knew?”

“He said he’d give you time to have a look about before he joined you. I said you might prefer company and he laughed.”

“What sort of laugh?”

“I don’t know, dear. The sort that makes you laugh as well before you’ve worked out if there was a joke.”

Watson let her finish. Mrs Kersey said she’d spent the last few days going back through the conversation. It was becoming less clear every time she did. There was one thing she was sure of. The man in the coat had asked whether Watson had taken the release order with her.

“What did you tell him?”

“I said our records don’t go out of the reading room. I thought I was being very firm.”

“You were.”

“Would it have been better to say you had it?”

Watson looked at the copy coming out of the machine. “I don’t think there was a right answer he would have thanked you for.”

Mrs Kersey asked whether she ought to tell the police. Watson gave her Lucas’s number and said she could ring from the agency if she wanted somewhere quiet. There was a scrape at the other end of the line. Mrs Kersey’s husband had come in to ask where she kept the secateurs.

Watson waited for her to put the receiver down. Then she brought the two copies of the pink slip into the sitting room and handed one to Penny.

“He asked whether I’d taken the order. He’d seen enough to know what I was looking for. By then he knew I might have made a copy, and he couldn’t know what I’d told you.”

“Did you tell anyone you were going to the mill apart from the caretaker?”

“No. That’s what makes it so difficult. He had everything he needed from an ordinary afternoon at an archive. Next time it could be an ordinary afternoon somewhere else.”

Penny turned the copy face down on the table. “There’s a difference between telling someone where you went and sending them after you. I’d like Mrs Kersey to remember that when Lucas asks her.”

“Lucas will be fair,” said Watson. “I hope she does.”

Rose at the Door

Rose read the receipt in her own kitchen while her neighbour put washing on the line. Once through, then once again with her finger under each word.

“He’d have refused to leave without a child,” she said.

“Do you know who it might have been?” asked Penny.

“I know who he would have gone back for.”

Rose disappeared upstairs. When she returned she had a photograph of two little girls in swimming costumes, one leaning solemnly into the other. On the back someone had written Rose and Helen, August.

“Helen slept in our box room one summer. My father said her mother worked nights. I used to lend her things that were too small for me and tell her to be grateful. It was the proudest I’d ever been to have something to lend.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was supposed to go to Canada. I waited for a postcard. When I got older I thought perhaps she hadn’t known how to spell my address.”

Penny asked if she could take a copy of the photograph. Rose looked down at the two girls and held it with both hands.

“If she’s alive,” she said, “I want to go myself. I’ve been waiting for her to write to me long enough.”

As they left, Rose called after Watson.

“Did he stay for her?”

“It looks as though he did.”

“Then I can tell my mother that much.”

Watson stood in the doorway for a moment. Rose’s mother had been dead ten years. Neither woman asked Rose what she meant.

The Man in the Coat

Lucas came back after lunch. The missing heel had caught behind the mill wall, upstream of where they’d recovered the body. The pathologist found a neck injury that would have killed the man very quickly, and no evidence he’d drowned. The flood could have carried him downstream after death. The pathologist

couldn’t place the injury more precisely within the hours around the flood.

Watson told him about the release order and gave him a copy of the return receipt.

“Someone went to a great deal of trouble over a piece of paper,” he said.

“Over what it says,” said Watson.

The dead man’s photograph was circulated locally. By the following morning a landlady in Stow had recognised the lodger who paid a week in advance under the name Philip Marden. In his room the police found reading glasses and a library book. The borrower’s card tucked inside carried the same name as the rent book. Lucas was willing to call him Marden for the time being.

Lucas showed Watson a photograph of the inside back cover. Beneath some crossed-out map references, someone had written W. at mill after 4. Watson noticed the figure was open at the top, the way her old arithmetic teacher had insisted fours ought to be written.

Lucas watched Watson read it.

“Any chance it refers to someone else?”

“It could,” she said. “But I’ve rather lost patience with giving him the benefit of the doubt.”

The landlady had kept the telephone message in which her lodger arranged to collect his key. Lucas played it for Mrs Kersey, who recognised the voice of the man who'd asked for maps. When Watson listened separately, she put her pencil down halfway through.

"You can leave it with me," she said, repeating the words she'd heard through the door.

Lucas stopped the tape. "He doesn't say that here."

"He says 'I'll be there by six.' It's what he does with the last word. It falls away, like he's already turned his back on you."

She made him play it once more. Then she told him she was sure.

Lucas stayed with Penny in the corridor while Watson went to collect her coat.

"The caretaker says he left the outer door unlocked and went home when his wife rang about the roads. He thought Watson would telephone when she was through."

"Does he normally leave a key in the supper room door?"

"No. He keeps a copy on a hook in his office. It was gone when he looked for it."

"Have you found it?"

“Have you seen the river lately?”

Penny had. The thought of anyone searching it for a key seemed suddenly much harder to bear than the prospect of anyone finding one.

The High Water Mark

Watson asked Penny to go back to the mill with her in daylight. She had put it off until the stream fell low enough to distinguish water from ground. It would have been easy to put it off for another week. Penny understood this when Watson walked straight past the lane and had to come back.

The caretaker, Mr Crowther, brought them round to the far bank. In the daylight the square window was no bigger than a bread tray. The water had left a brown line along the side of the mill, interrupted by the bright blue scrape the firefighters’ ladder had made on the stone.

“That's the part I remember,” Watson said. “When I saw the ladder I thought it was going to be all right.”

“Was that when you heard me?”

“I heard somebody shout my name as if she was cross with me.”

“I was a little cross.”

“That’s how I knew it was you.”

Mr Crowther unlocked the yard entrance. Dried leaves covered the flagstones inside. Watson stopped before stepping over the threshold. Penny waited where she was.

The trestle table had floated across the room and come to rest on its side. A thick brown smear ran across the wall some inches below the sill. Watson stood in the doorway while Mr Crowther pointed out the old iron grating through which the water had come. There was a modern flood board beyond it. He had found the board lying on dry ground the next morning.

“Could the flood have carried it there?” asked Penny.

“Up onto that shelf?” Mr Crowther pointed through the grating. “I suppose a man could have carried it there when he came to help.”

Watson remembered the first call she’d made for help. The room had still been dry then. She remembered a sound like an empty drawer being dropped in the passage. She told Penny, who asked Crowther if anyone had come to the mill that afternoon on business.

“One man. A fellow came to see whether the marks on the wheel matched some old survey. He said he’d asked for maps at the archive.”

“Did he sign in?”

Crowther gave a little laugh. “He signed out. He put a time in the book himself. It saved me looking up from the job I was on.”

“What time?”

“Three forty-five. I can show you.”

On the way out Watson lifted a fragment of wood from the floor. A bit of the table’s broken edge, Penny thought. Watson set it carefully on the sill.

“Do you want a minute?” Penny asked.

“I’ve had one,” she said. “I’d like to see the book.”

The surveyor’s signature was unreadable. He’d put the archive telephone number in the margin. The four stood open at the top, like the one Watson had noticed in the library-book photograph. She copied it into her notebook. She’d want to see the two together before she made anything of it.

On the way back to the car, Penny said, “Out at three forty-five. At the mill after four.”

“One of those is what he wanted someone to believe.”

Mr Crowther was locking the yard gate. Watson went back to ask who else knew that the board was there.

“Anybody who’s done a survey,” he said.

A Polite Enquiry

Edmund agreed to meet at the Farmers Arms. He arrived early, took a table by the window and waited for Penny to order her own drink. In the days when she had trusted him he would already have had it on the table.

“Did you know a man called Philip Marden?” she asked.

“I was hoping we could get through one conversation without a dead man.”

“Then you should have asked what I wanted before you came.”

He looked at his glass. Penny knew the look. It usually came before he told her something true that would distract her from a larger lie.

“Marden did private work,” he said. “Years ago. He turned up with a letter from someone who could have kept him in work all his life. They’d agreed a trial period.”

“Did he pass?”

“You’d have thought so. They kept paying him.”

She laid a photograph of the typed maps request on the table. Edmund glanced first at the damaged A, then at the bottom of the page.

“Who gave you this?”

“Who were you expecting to have it?”

He sat back. “I had a letter signed by Arden. The A in my address was missing its top, just like that one.”

“Did you ever see him use the machine?”

“No. His signature told me who’d signed it. I made the rest of the connection myself.”

Penny thought of another signature, an E she might be reading the wrong way round. She told Edmund about the release order without showing him the copy. He listened until she reached the words “into the driver’s care.”

“How old do you think I am?” he asked.

“Old enough to tell me where you’ve heard those words before.”

“In a stack of old transfer forms I was asked to sort. I can tell you what the stamp looked like. I can’t tell you who used it here.”

Somebody put a fresh log on the fire. For a moment the wood hissed.

“Does the child have a name?” he asked.

Penny folded the copy of the maps request and slipped it back into her handbag.

“Why is that the first thing you’ve wanted to know?”

The Message

Lucas let them see a note they had found under the blotting paper in Marden's rented room. He kept the original in front of him and gave Watson a copy to turn over. There was nothing on the back. On the front, in a different hand from the library-book entry, were two lines.

Return by appointment. Bring original.

"Appointment with whom?" Penny asked.

"We looked for a date," said Lucas. "We looked for almost anything that would make sense of it."

Watson thought of the empty space in the archive box. "Was there anything else about documents in the room?"

"He'd got a library book about surveying. Also an envelope from a bank with nothing in it. There was no folder, no original, and no diary."

Penny asked if he'd found anything to say who Marden worked for. Lucas said he'd found enough money to suggest someone paid him. It was hard to tell the difference between that and a man who never liked leaving a tip.

"Can you tell whether he wrote the note himself?" asked Watson.

“The handwriting looks different from the entry in the library book,” said Lucas. “That’s as far as I’d go.”

At the agency Watson set the typed map request beside Lucas’s copy. She left space between the two sheets for the missing original release order. Penny came in with the teapot and waited for her to move something.

“The paper in the middle is the one I’d like back,” Watson said.

Penny pushed two old coasters out of the way and made room for the pot. “Tell me what you’d do with it.”

“I’d start with the name at the bottom. A man was held at the mill and somebody had to sign for his release. There’s a reason Marden went looking for the one sheet on which that person put pen to paper.”

“Could he have been looking for the person who wrote it?”

“Yes. He could have been working for that person. He could have been working for somebody who wanted to find him first.”

Penny sat down. “And somebody else could have been watching to see which he was.”

Watson put her finger on the empty part of the table. There was a small pale ring where a cup had been left to sit after it was empty.

“The person I keep coming back to is Rose,” she said. “Someone told a little girl her father had gone away. Whoever signed that paper knew enough to tell her something different.”

The kettle had been boiled twice before they got round to drinking the tea.

The Life She Had

Helen had spent most of her life under her married name, teaching piano. Rose found her through a cousin who remembered a Christmas card. She rang the agency to say she’d made an appointment and asked whether Watson would come.

Helen lived in a terrace with three steps up to the street. A child was playing scales in the front room. Rose waited until the last uneven note had finished before she raised her hand to knock.

Helen recognised her before she said her name.

“You used to lend me dresses,” she said.

“I used to make a point of telling you they were mine.”

“Yes. I knew that already.”

They laughed. Watson took a step back towards the pavement and Helen reached round Rose to catch her sleeve.

“You can come in. She told me why you’re here.”

Helen remembered the supper room. The mill owner’s wife used it some afternoons to mind children whose parents worked shifts. There were two doors. One went into the yard. The other went up a flight of steps to the office. Daniel had been held there after he found Helen hiding under the table on the evening she was meant to leave.

“Where were you meant to go?” Rose asked.

“I don’t know. I knew the woman who came for me. I knew what she meant when she said I’d have to be good.”

On Friday morning Daniel told Helen to wait out of sight while he spoke to the driver. He came back and told her the man had orders to carry only one passenger. Daniel told her he’d asked to bring her. Helen had stayed hidden while he asked. Later that morning, Daniel folded her a paper bird from the wrapper of his sandwiches. When the shouting began upstairs, he sent her out by the yard door to the baker’s wife. She slept at the bakery that night. On Saturday morning the baker’s wife put her on a bus to her sister.

“Did you see my father again?” Rose asked.

Helen shook her head. “He’d given me his scarf. I thought that meant he’d come for it.”

There was a long silence. Watson put her notebook away.

On her way out, she asked Helen whether she could tell Lucas where to come if he had questions. Helen looked through to the piano. The next pupil's music was laid out on the stand.

"Tell him to ask me," she said. "I'd like to tell it myself."

A Key in the Dark

Mrs Kersey checked the requisition slips for the transport box. In the previous year, only two readers had signed it out. Watson was the last. Mrs Kersey recognised the other name from the trustees' letterhead.

Arden.

The original release order was still missing. The pink copy and Helen's account gave Lucas enough to reopen the question of what had happened to Daniel. He was careful about what else they proved. Helen had been a child. Daniel had been alive Friday morning. The rest would need witnesses or records, and he wanted people to come to him before they heard what somebody else remembered.

Lucas sent an officer to collect the signing-out book and photograph the displaced board. Then the woman

who'd brought blankets to the firefighters came forward. On her way back up the lane, she'd stopped at a gap in the hedge. A man in a hat stood among the alders, watching the window. Farther up the path, another man moved only when the first turned away.

"How long had the second one been there?" Watson asked when Lucas told her.

"She couldn't say. She'd gone back to her car when the first crew arrived. She's sure the man in the hat was still standing when the crew reached Watson's window. If that was Marden, he was alive that late."

"Could he have come after the rest of you?"

"Easily."

Penny said, "He might have been following Marden."

Watson took a long breath. She had spent several days thinking somebody had watched her drown by inches. It was a small relief to be able to doubt it.

"If he followed Marden," she said, "how much did he know before he got there?"

⁂

The second man stood on the path above the alders, on the watcher's side of the millrace. Across the water, the rescue lights caught a firefighter's hand on the sill. A blanket went down the line. Then someone called that they had her.

Below him, the man in the hat reached into his pocket. Something caught the light as it fell into the race. The watcher never looked up the path. When the firefighters turned back towards their lights, the second man came down to the alders.

Two Explanations

Penny was washing up when she remembered James sitting at a hotel breakfast with a pair of unpeeled boiled eggs on his plate. A man they'd both known had been killed the previous evening. James knew Penny was waiting for him to mention it. Instead he turned one of the eggs round in its cup and said, "The only good murder is a dead murder."

She'd asked him what on earth that was supposed to mean.

He had picked up his spoon. "It depends who's doing the talking."

She told Watson now, because she was tired of having private conversations with a memory.

"Do you think it was him?" Watson asked.

"I can imagine him following a man he suspected. Keeping far enough back to see where he went. By the time he got there, you were out. If he saw the key go into the water, perhaps he had his answer."

“Perhaps,” said Watson. “And somebody who sent Marden might have followed him for precisely the same reason. To see whether he’d done what he was paid to do.”

“Who would kill a man for making a mistake?”

“Someone who thought he was entitled to a perfect result.”

“SPECTRE crossed my mind,” Penny said. She wished she had something more to offer Watson than an old name. Nothing they’d found at the mill pointed to it.

Watson dried a teaspoon carefully, right down to the groove in the handle.

“The man in the boot died after the shot missed you,” she said. “Marden died after I got out. Twice now we’ve lost someone who might have been able to tell us who sent him.”

“I was hoping to be grateful.”

“You can be grateful I got out. I certainly am.”

Penny gave her the cup to set on the shelf. Watson set it facing out, the way Penny liked. It was a small kindness, and Penny knew it cost her nothing to accept it.

Rose put the supper photograph on her mantel beside a new one of Helen at the piano. She told Watson on the

telephone she’d moved her father’s picture there as well.

“I always kept it in a drawer,” she said. “It seemed the right place for someone who’d gone away on purpose.”

Watson found a note from Ellen in the agency post. The village hall needed another pair of hands on Thursday. A retired school secretary named Marian Bell had offered to put the kettle on. Watson rang Ellen and said she’d come. She fancied an afternoon when nobody would ask her about the mill.

Case File 01 · M. Penny

The caretaker's first statement attributes the incident to rising water. His second adds the missing key and the displaced flood board.

The older mill records present a separate problem. One copy of the release order has been recovered from the driver's family papers. The driver was paid for the journey and the person named in the order did not travel with him.

Ms Watson's visit to the archive is dated. The first surveillance of her is harder to place.

The file clerk found an unmarked envelope inside the pouch that brought the mill papers. It contained a sheet listing two private visits by Diana, Princess of Wales, to M. Penny. Both predate Rose Vale's first appointment. Beside the second someone typed, "Did she come alone?" The reference number is from a different file. The dispatch list records only the mill papers.

There is no confirmed identification of the second man on the riverbank.

A second copy of this entry was requested. No name accompanied the request.

The Side Gate

The next morning Watson put the kettle on early. There was a pale line of dawn beyond the roofs. Penny had left the side gate on the latch the night before. Now it stood open a few inches.

“He could have been a friend,” Penny said. She had come up beside Watson without her hearing.

“Yes.”

“I’d like to know which it was.”

Watson picked up her teaspoon. A narrow run of rainwater had washed the path clean. Beyond the gate she could see all the way to the lane.

“So would I,” she said, and let the tea go on getting stronger.

