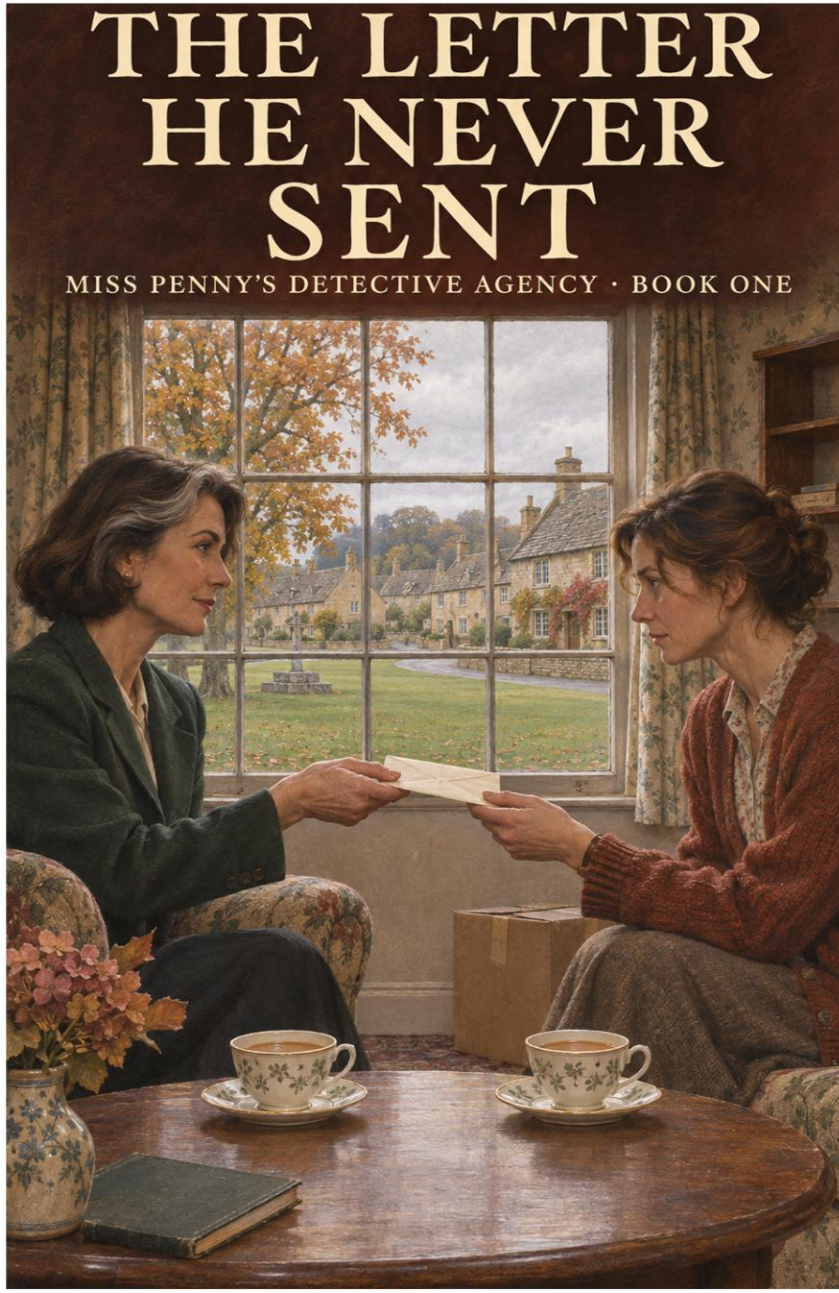

THE LETTER HE NEVER SENT
MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY · BOOK ONE

The Brass Plate

The young man read the brass plate twice before he knocked. On the second reading he took his hat off. Penny, watching from the sitting-room window, thought that if Watson polished the plate any more they might have to issue dark glasses to clients.

“Miss Penny?”

“That’s right.”

“I was told to ask for M. Penny. Does the M stand for—”

“No,” said Penny.

Watson opened the appointment book.

“They said you used to work for the government.”

“Lots of people used to work for the government.”

“And did you ever meet Sir James Bond?”

“From a distance.”

This appeared to satisfy him. Penny had learned that almost any distance would do.

“Now,” she said, “how can I be of service?”

His name was Daniel Mercer. He laid an envelope on the table and then, a little way apart from it, a cheque whose amount he had left blank. His father had gone away the previous Tuesday. They had quarrelled on Monday night. It was now Thursday of the following week, and Daniel had spent most of the intervening time being told to give the man a chance to cool off.

“He never went anywhere without saying when he’d be back,” Daniel said. “He even did it when he went out for milk.”

Penny unfolded the letter.

Daniel,
I have taken work elsewhere. I shall be on the 7.40 bus from the village green to Cheltenham on Tuesday. Mr Julian Fenton has kindly agreed to let you have the cottage until Friday the eighteenth. Please leave the keys at the estate office.
A. Mercer

“Mr Fenton brought it round on Tuesday afternoon,” Daniel said. “He manages the estate. Dad does the carpentry.”

“Did,” said Watson, looking at the paper.

“That’s what Mr Fenton says.”

Penny was fifty and had worked for men who could pick the one word in a report that would allow them to do what they had already decided. She looked at *kindly*.

“What did you quarrel about?”

“I got a job at the motor factors in town. He thought I’d be taking over from him one day. I said I’d rather make my own mistakes.” Daniel pushed the envelope towards her. “Is that enough?”

“It’s enough to start. And fill in the amount before you sign that cheque. I’ve only just met you.”

When he had gone, she handed the letter to Watson. Neither had touched the tea. Through the window they could see Daniel crossing the green with his hat in his hand, though there was nobody left to take it off for.

In her last week at the Agency, Penny had come back from lunch to find a newspaper cutting on her desk. Someone had circled a small advert in blue ink. Half a house to let in Guiting Power, overlooking the green. There was a telephone number and a rent so low Penny read it twice.

Everyone knew she was retiring. For weeks people had been leaving things on her desk that they thought she might find useful. She supposed somebody had remembered she liked the Cotswolds. She put the cutting in her handbag and rang that evening.

“Is that the rent per month?” she asked.

“Yes,” said the man at the other end. “Were you hoping it was per fortnight?”

When she came to see the place, she stood at this very window. The sitting room had space for Watson’s desk as well as her own, and a front door a client could find from the green. She asked once more about the rent. The landlord named exactly the figure in the advert. By the time she went back to London, she had the keys.

She had meant to thank whoever left the cutting. In the commotion of her last day, she forgot to ask.

CASE FILE 01

Father. Admiral John Penny, Royal Navy. Frequently absent during subject’s childhood.

Raised by Eleanor Penny, paternal aunt. The family had sufficient means to engage a governess. Miss Eleanor undertook the child's education herself until the age of nine.

Given name removed from bedroom nameplate with a butter knife. Replacement reads PENNY.

Mother. See separate sheet.

The sheet referred to is absent.

Tuesday’s Bus

At the stop on the green there was a new timetable in a plastic sleeve and the remains of an old one underneath. Watson raised the sleeve with the end of her umbrella.

“There used to be a 7.40 to Cheltenham on Tuesdays,” she said. “Now the only 7.40 from the green is on Thursdays. I suppose they think people go to town to be looked at on market day.”

Penny watched an empty milk bottle roll forward and back in the gutter.

“When did the new one start?”

“The Sunday before he went missing. He might have walked here thinking there was a bus.”

“He might. Let’s find out what Mr Fenton thinks happened when he got here.”

The estate office occupied two rooms above a shop that used to sell feed and now sold lamps made to look like things you would throw out of a barn. Julian Fenton offered them coffee in cups whose bottoms were both marked *Not for resale*. He was about Daniel’s father’s age and had the practised air of a man being kept late by someone who had arrived early.

“Arthur and I shook hands on Monday,” he said. “He called in and signed the letter before he left on Tuesday. Said he’d take the bus from the green. I saw it pull away myself.”

“You saw the seven-forty leave the green on Tuesday?” asked Watson.

“From my car. It was standing there when I turned off.”

“Then he must have had somewhere definite to go,” Penny said. “Where should we send anything of his that Daniel finds?”

“He felt it would be best to make a clean break.”

“Did he say that?”

Fenton looked down at one of the cups. “He wanted to save the boy further embarrassment.”

They left without asking him about the timetable. On the stairs Watson passed a woman carrying a sheaf of pay envelopes. The woman stopped and turned sideways to let her by. On the top envelope was the name of a carpenter whose son was supposed to hand in his keys the next day.

“Still on the payroll, is he?” Watson asked.

The woman slipped the top envelope underneath the others. “They’re in alphabetical order,” she said. It seemed to be the only answer she could give while Mr Fenton’s door was open.

The Warning

Daniel took them to the barn at the end of the working day. He waited until the estate van had gone, then lifted the bottom of a loose gate. Behind the barn stood a packet of timber under a sheet of striped plastic. Through the open doorway Penny could see the first steps of a wooden staircase and a bright mark on the stone wall where the upper steps ought to have been.

“Dad said it was moving at the top,” Daniel said. “He told me that over supper. Then I told him about the job.”

“Did he tell anyone here?”

“He wrote things down if he thought he’d have to say them twice.”

Daniel’s key still fitted the cottage. He showed them the chair with his father’s work jacket on the back. His father’s old notebook was in the pocket, with a list of measurements on the last page. Three leaves earlier was an entry in pencil.

Monday. Temporary stair moving at landing. Told J.F. Needs closing off.

On the inside of the front cover were two telephone numbers. One belonged to a timber merchant. The other had *Joan* beside it.

“His sister,” Daniel said. “They didn’t speak for years. Then she came to Mum’s funeral and I told her to go away.”

“Did she?” asked Watson.

“She did after she’d put the kettle on.”

Penny asked Daniel to ring her. He put his finger in the dial and stopped before moving it.

“What if he’s there and he told her not to tell me?”

“Then you’ll have a conversation you already need to have,” Penny said.

Joan’s telephone rang eight times. Daniel waited for the ninth before he hung up.

As they came out, Mr Fenton's car was parked opposite the cottage. He had come to remind Daniel about the keys. He smiled at Penny and Watson, both of whom had been introduced to much better smiles in the course of a week.

"The new tenant is expecting to move in on Monday," he said.

"Have they seen the place?" asked Daniel.

"Of course."

Daniel turned to Penny after the car had gone. "I've been in every evening. Mr Fenton still thinks I work the late shift."

Penny went round the back of the cottage and looked in the windows. At the rear, a pane above the sink showed her the kitchen clock. The other three panes were covered by a row of large geraniums. Anyone who had come to see the cottage had seen very little of it.

CASE FILE 01

Birth entry names Marianne Vale. The entry gives no indication of whether she used that name in government service.

Both parents served the Crown. Admiral Penny's place of burial is on record. The Department states that the subject's mother died in its service. No date or place supplied.

A request to inspect the original notice was acknowledged. There is no reply on this sheet.

The Pin Mark

The next morning Watson sent word for Penny to meet her in the payroll office while Fenton was out. Mary Prentice let her in and went downstairs to watch for his car. There were two sheets of paper on the desk. One was the letter. The other was a form agreeing to a deduction from Arthur Mercer's wages for a pair of safety boots.

"Mary fetched it from the drawer," Watson said. "She'd pinned it up after he signed it, ready for the next pay run. Then she filed it with the other deductions."

Watson moved the desk lamp nearer.

On the wage form there was a small hole in the loop of the *A* at the beginning of Arthur's signature. Watson laid the departure letter next to it. The same small circle divided the same stroke, but the paper beneath was whole.

"The hole went through the photocopier," said Penny.

"Apparently the rest of him took the bus."



Penny held the two pages up together. The letters agreed down to a place where Arthur had hesitated and left the pen resting slightly too long on the paper. She lowered them.

"Mary says he borrowed the signed form on Tuesday," Watson said. "The copier's just outside his door."

"What does Mary think she's risking?"

"Her job. I asked if she would tell us the same thing with someone else in the room. She said it would depend who."

Watson brought out a second slip. It was the office copy of a delivery docket. A driver had brought timber and plasterboard to the barn at eight on Tuesday morning. Mary remembered the driver coming back

for his delivery book that afternoon. There was blood on the cuff of his jacket. He said it wasn't his.

They went back to the agency with the docket. Watson put it by the telephone. The merchant would know which driver had signed it.

"Have a look at that first," said Watson.

A cream envelope lay on the hall table. Their landlord had picked it up from the mat on his way in with his shopping. There were no stamps. There was a Cheltenham address and an appointment at noon. Below them, in a hand Penny knew, were four words.

Come in your own name.



Watson caught her looking at it.

"I'll take the docket to the merchant's," she said. "If the driver knows whose blood it was, I'll find out where he took him. Give me until three."

"I can be back by four."

"Then one of us is getting quite ambitious about the buses."

WATSON • PERSON OF INTEREST

Reason for opening. Association with M. Penny.

The payroll clerk confirms it was Watson who asked for the original form. Earlier attribution amended.

A Letter for Mrs Bell

The first time Diana and Penny had sat down together, it had been in a hotel kitchen, drinking tea someone had made for the staff. An earring had lodged in the turned-up cuff of Diana's coat. Penny had found it and given it back to her in a saucer. Diana had rung the following week to ask whether Penny always took her tea that strong. They had been friends for three years.

This time Diana had found a room in Cheltenham with a carriage clock that had stopped at ten past two. She took the seat that did not face the window.

“I did make the tea myself,” she said. “The question is whether you can tell.”

Penny took a sip. “Was it meant to be coffee?”

Diana laughed. For a moment she looked as she had in the kitchen before anybody thought to look for her there. Then she put an envelope on the table.

“Ruth Bell used to work for me. Before that she typed letters for the government. She typed the one they sent to your father when your mother died. She saw a cutting recently with the name Marianne Vale under a photograph. She recognised the photograph. She remembers typing a different name.”

“Did she tell you what it was?”

“She asked to tell you herself.”

Diana had addressed the envelope to Ruth in Cheltenham. No crest and no title, just an address in a hand that might have written out a shopping list. Penny put it in her bag.

From a call box by the station she rang Watson. A man had telephoned the agency fifteen minutes earlier. He had asked for Penny by her first name. When Watson said there was nobody there by that name, he had given her a number and asked her to pass it on.

Penny knew the number.

“Return the envelope,” the man said when she rang him. “Unopened, if you please. I can arrange for you to see your mother’s file. There’s a room free on Monday.”

“Can Mrs Bell see it as well?”

“Why would she want to?”

Penny waited. It was an old habit, and occasionally she got something for it.

“It’s a matter of loyalty,” he said.

The pips went. She had one more coin in her coat pocket. She left it there.

Ruth Bell opened her own front door wearing slippers with buckles on them. She took the envelope and asked whether Penny would wait while she read it. When she had finished, she folded the letter and put it in her skirt pocket.

“I thought I’d remember the name when I saw you,” Ruth said. “Your father came to the office once. He had your photograph in his wallet. I remembered the photograph before I remembered you’d be older now.”

Penny had wanted to ask about her mother. It took her a moment to discover she wanted to ask what the photograph looked like as well.

“I used to write difficult names in an appointment diary,” Ruth said. “Then I could check the spelling if anybody dictated them again. Let me look for it.”

Penny wrote down the agency number. At the gate she heard Ruth call after her.

“You were sitting on a pony. You didn't look at all pleased with it.”

“I never was,” Penny said.

CASE FILE 01

R. Bell recalls typing a name different from the one on the birth entry. Memory of the spelling unconfirmed. Diary sought.

A copy of the order to recover the envelope is attached. It carries no signature.

Home with Joan

Watson had found the driver and persuaded him to draw the staircase on the back of a delivery sheet. When Penny came in, there was a pencilled cross halfway up the steps.

“He was carrying a saw. The top came away first. The driver took him to hospital in the van. Fenton got there before they left and told the driver he’d see to the family.”

“Which hospital?”

“Cheltenham. The driver didn’t know where he went afterwards. Joan does.”

Watson had rung once while Penny was out. Joan had answered and said she would speak to Daniel if he called again. When he did, he spoke for nearly a minute before he told her what he wanted. Penny could hear him starting sentences over. At last he put down the receiver and asked if they could all go together.

Joan lived above a closed ironmonger’s. There was a roll of carpet halfway up the stairs. Daniel began lifting it on his way to the door, as if it had been left there for him to put away.

“I was going to ring him tomorrow,” Arthur said when they came in.

His right wrist was in plaster. He had a borrowed shirt on with one sleeve cut open at the cuff. Looking at Daniel, he tried to button the good cuff one-handed. Daniel sat beside him and did it up.

“I wanted a day or two,” Arthur said. “Joan offered to ring you for me. Then I thought you might be relieved I’d gone, and I was afraid to ring and hear it for myself.”

Daniel put the letter on his father's knee.

“Mr Fenton says I have to be out tonight.”

Arthur read it slowly. He ran a finger over the signature, then flattened the letter against the plaster.

“I didn’t write that.”

“I know.”

“Did you take the job?”

Daniel nodded. Arthur looked at the good cuff. “Will they let you have tomorrow off?”

“They might. What for?”

“I could do with somebody who knows about motors. That bloody van sounded awful.”

Penny and Watson went downstairs. There was nothing the two men needed them to say.

The Keys

Fenton had a set of keys on his blotter when they arrived at the estate office. He picked them up and put them in the drawer. Watson asked Mary Prentice if she would come in. She had brought the original wage form in a folder of her own.

Penny laid out the letter, the old form and the bus timetable. Watson laid the driver’s drawing beside them. It was the drawing Fenton touched first.

“He signed the office form and told us to use his signature,” Fenton said. “His hand was in plaster. There’s no mystery in that.”

“You told us he signed the letter himself before the seven-forty,” said Watson. “There was no seven-forty that morning.”

“Then I had the day wrong. Or Mary misunderstood what he wanted.”

“He had no business going up those stairs,” he said.

“His notebook says he told you they needed closing off,” Penny said.

“I said we’d make them good by Wednesday.”

Nobody spoke for a while. Mary took a handkerchief out of her sleeve, polished her glasses and put them back on.

“You took the signed form from my drawer on Tuesday afternoon,” Mary said. “You brought it back with a copy of the letter and told me to file them together. That’s the first I heard of any notice.”

“You told me to take him off next week’s wages,” she said.

Fenton looked at her. “I thought he’d be gone by then.”

“Gone where?” Penny asked.

He took his hand off the drawing. “If the place was empty when he came back, there’d be less for him to argue about. The trustees wanted the barn open on Saturday. I wasn’t going to explain to them why we’d opened it late and still owed a carpenter his wages.”

“Do the trustees know you’ve demanded the keys?” Penny asked. “Have you got an order for possession, or are you just hoping he’ll hand them over?”

Fenton looked at the drawer where he’d put the keys. “I haven’t spoken to the trustees.”

Watson took out her pen. “Write to Daniel. Withdraw the demand for the keys. Put in writing that Arthur gave no notice to leave. Mary can make a copy for the trustees.”

He looked as though he would like to ask who had given them the right. Penny could almost hear him considering which of the three women would enjoy answering.

Mary put a fresh sheet of paper in front of him. “By hand will do,” she said.



At the agency, Watson gave Daniel the manager's withdrawal and the name of a solicitor who could advise his father about the cottage and the injury. She'd put copies of the letter and the notebook entry in an envelope for Arthur to take with him. Daniel laid the cottage keys on the table while he put the sheet away, then picked them up again. On the way out he stopped to straighten the brass plate. It had been put up in a hurry and always moved a little when anyone touched it.

Next door the landlord rolled his chair to his own front door and opened it as Watson came back from seeing Daniel off. She told him the case was finished. He asked whether the man had got to keep his keys.

"How did you know about the keys?" she said.

"I own a house," he said. "People mention them to me."

She asked if he'd come in for tea. He lifted the glass he was holding.

"I appear to have started without you."

There was a curl of lemon peel in it. Watson regarded it a moment and said she hoped he knew what he was doing.

“Usually,” he said.

Penny was at the desk with Ruth Bell’s address. She had written *Mother* above it. After a minute she crossed out the word and wrote *Ruth Bell* instead. She would have to begin with the person whose name she knew.

Watson set the appointment book beside her and drew a line beneath Daniel Mercer’s name.

CASE FILE 01

First agency inquiry concluded. Arthur Mercer located and reunited with his son. Notice to vacate withdrawn.

Enquiry concerning the subject’s mother reviewed on this date. Name on birth entry remains the only name in the papers examined. Original death notice untraced.

In the margin, in a hand not otherwise identified:

The registrar would have written down whatever he was told.

End of entries to date.