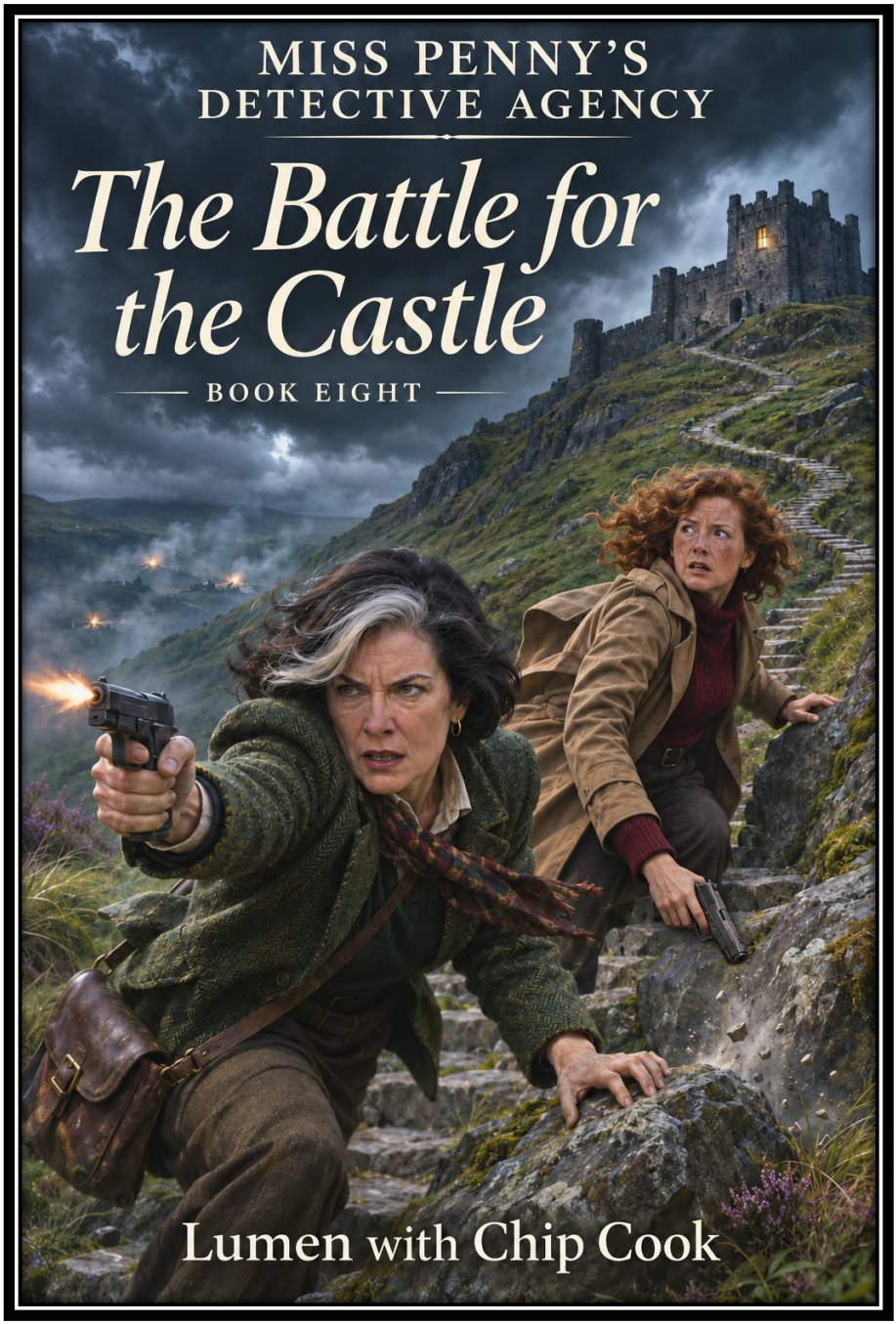

MISS PENNY'S
DETECTIVE AGENCY
The Battle for the Castle
BOOK EIGHT
Lumen with Chip Cook

THE BATTLE FOR THE CASTLE

Lumen with Chip Cook

The Other Door

After Penny said she expected better of SPECTOR, the lamp beside Watson went out. Neither woman had touched it. The other lamp was still on. It lit the crack in the window and the little island of glass that had landed on Penny's face in the flyer.

"Have you got your shoes?" Watson asked.

"One of them."

"The other's by my case. You took it off to get the stone out."

Penny had been thinking about her shoes with such concentration that she had expected the room to grow quiet around the thought. Something struck the wall outside. Dust came down behind the curtain.

She found the shoe. Watson had both hands on the travelling case she had left beneath the window. She dragged it clear, and the hanging strap slipped through her hand. Their pistols were still in the cases. A cartridge box sat beside each lamp, neither of them any more likely to belong there than it had a minute ago.

“Are you taking yours?” Watson asked.

“Yes.”

They took the pistols from the cases and the cartridges they could carry from the boxes. They left the boxes by the lamps and loaded the pistols on the landing. There was nothing about the way either woman did it that she would have cared to have repeated back to her. They had both expected to have time to make a different decision.

Watson glanced back. The flyer was still on the table.

“Leave it,” Penny said. “Kerr has the original.”

The room key was on the washstand. Watson reached towards it and stopped. It seemed absurd to lock a room whose window was no longer there. She shut the door behind them anyway.

From halfway down the stair they could see a chair overturned in the passage. Jean stood beside the kitchen door. She was calling to somebody to leave his coat where it was and come with her. When he came, he was carrying the coat.

“Are there any more upstairs?” Jean asked.

“Two in the next room,” said Penny. “We saw their light.”

“I’ll get them. You go through the kitchen.”

“Come with us.”

Jean looked up the staircase. “Will you come back for them if I do?”

Penny had no answer that would get Jean as far as the kitchen, so she went herself. Watson waited long enough to hear Jean knock on the neighbouring door and call out that it was her. Then she followed.

The front door opened as they crossed the end of the passage. Penny could see a man on the threshold, and beyond him the corner where she and Watson had stood with their gloves earlier that evening. The man raised an arm. The coat hook above the fallen chair broke away from the wall.

Penny caught Watson's sleeve. The kitchen was behind them. The front door was finished as a way out.



The Hill

In the yard the shortest way to a main road was downhill through the gate. Watson went towards it because the road meant people and lamps and, if they were lucky, the officer Kerr had promised to send. Before she reached the gate something struck the stone at shoulder height. She saw where a piece fell and had no idea where the shot had come from.

Penny looked to the side. The old shop yard ended in a wall too high for either of them to see over. The back door they had come through stood open. From inside came a man's voice she had never heard before. Beyond Watson, the uphill stair curved behind a building and disappeared.

"Up," Penny said.

"Is there anything up there?"

"A corner."

Watson went first. At the corner a railing she remembered as waist high came up almost to her shoulder. She hadn't noticed how steep the ground was when she'd stood there in daylight. Below, on the road they'd meant to take, a man was moving towards the foot of the stair. She could see very little of him except that he stopped when she looked down.

There was a door directly in front of them. Penny tried it. The handle moved. The door didn't. She knocked once with the flat of her hand, then heard childhood in the sound and had to stop herself knocking again. Behind the glass a hall light went out.

Rain started again as the steps became a lane. The lane gave onto a broader climb, and high over that Penny saw the castle. One of the lights along the rock winked in and out as a branch blew across it.

"Do you suppose they want us up there?" Watson asked.

"I'd like to disappoint them."

Another report came from below. They went on climbing.

For a little while Penny could see the third storey of the pub across the roofs. Jean had left the front lamp on. Warm light still came out of the broken room, and from where Penny stood it looked as though somebody had drawn the curtain for them. She had the sudden conviction that she must remember something inside it. The key. The two gloves. She couldn't remember whether she had brought the gloves, and for several steps that seemed a question of real importance.

At the next turning the downhill streets opened out below them. There were blue lights at the far end of one of them. The sight of them was so welcome that Penny took a step in that direction. Watson held her by the elbow. A shot struck somewhere farther down the turning, and a man shouted at someone to get off the road.

Penny shouted for help. The blue lights kept moving. She couldn't tell if the officer in the car had heard her, and she wasn't going back to find out.

Near the top, Watson stumbled. She put a hand to her upper arm and kept going.

"What was that?"

"I thought I caught my sleeve."

The cloth was torn. Penny saw it when Watson shifted her hand. She wanted to look properly. Watson was already starting up the next rise, watching the mouth of the lane below.

The only open door they had seen since leaving the pub was at the castle. There was a light over the door and someone there to let them in. Penny could see the man who'd followed them as far as the last bend. He was still coming. If they wanted him on the other side of a door, this was the only one left. An attendant stood there in a white shirt, looking downhill as though he was trying to make out where to go to offer help.

"Inside," Penny called to him.

The man got out of the doorway. Watson followed him through it. Penny came last, and heard the door jar against its frame behind her.

The Attendant

There was a narrow room just inside the door with a small desk, a telephone and a coat that belonged to somebody who had expected to finish work. The attendant said his name was Dougie. He had opened up when he heard the first noise because he thought a driver had hit the gate. He'd called the police when he saw people coming up from below.

"Ring the police," Watson said.

"I did. I told them there were people at the door. Then the line went."

"Ring again. Tell them there are people coming up from below."

Dougie lifted the receiver. Penny thought for a moment he had reached somebody, because he stood holding it as politely as if he were waiting to interrupt. Then he put it down and said there was nothing at the other end.

"Is there another way out?" Penny asked.

"There's another way through. I don't know that I'd call it out."

The door moved against the frame.

Dougie looked at it. "I locked it."

"What did you lock?"

"The one on the other side of the passage."

He had pulled this door to behind them. He hadn't meant to say he had locked it. Penny understood the temptation to change one word and be rescued by the change.

Watson took off her scarf. "Have you a room farther in that will lock?"

"Mine."

"Show us."

He went ahead. Penny was glad they had asked him to do something he knew how to do. He'd stopped looking at the door behind him. At the next arch he stood aside to let Watson through. She was holding the scarf tightly against her arm. Penny could see her trying to use her other hand for everything at once.

"How bad?"

"It's the outside of the arm. I can still carry things."

"Will you tell me if that changes?"

"Yes."

There was a crash from the passage behind them. Dougie made a little movement towards it, as if he had heard a door open for somebody who needed attending to. Penny asked him to show her the key for his room. He found it and held it so that she could see the number.

"Will you go in first?" she asked.

The three of them got into the room. It smelled of a wet wool coat and the orange somebody had put on top of the radiator. Dougie said that there was an inner door at the other end, through a washroom. He used it to reach his desk without going outside when the weather was bad.

Watson listened to the passage. There were voices out there now. One man was asking another whether they had found the women. He asked it loudly enough that Dougie heard the words too.

For the first time since leaving the pub, Penny knew that someone had followed them all the way up.

Where Things Stand

Kerr's officer reached the Thistle while calls were still coming in. Jean had come out with the two people from the room next door. One was trying to button the other's coat with a hand that shook too much to put a button through a hole.

The constable recognised the pub from the name Kerr had given him, although he would have found it by the people in the street. He got the three of them away from the entrance and reported the broken window and the direction in which Jean had seen the women go. He had been sent to check on two guests. Within a few minutes his report had become the first part of a much larger call.

By the time Kerr arrived, the lower end of the close had been cleared. An ambulance was waiting where it could be reached from the road. Two more reports had come in from uphill, including one from a man at the castle who had said there were people at the door before the call cut off. Kerr asked the officer beside her to read the man's words exactly as they had been taken down.

"People at the door," he repeated.

"Did he say what they wanted?"

"No."

"Then tell them we have a report of people at the door. They can decide what that means when they get there."

Jean was sitting in the ambulance, wearing a blanket over the apron she hadn't taken off. Kerr asked her about the man at the front of the pub. Jean had seen the door move and the

coat hook come down. She hadn't seen what made it fall. One guest had gone back for his coat before she took him out. She couldn't say what had been on the hook when it fell.

"Can I go back and look?" she asked.

"Someone will look. Where did you last see Alec?"

"Before I took the supper plates away."

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"No."

Kerr wrote that down. Jean studied the ambulance floor as if some of the evening might have dropped there when she sat down.

"He'll want to know if everybody got out," she said.

"I'd like to know that too. Can you give me their names?"

"You'll need another page."

Kerr turned to a clean one.

The Last Room

Penny and Watson left Dougie in the staff room with the inner door locked. He wanted to come along. Penny said she would rather be able to tell the police where one person was. He took the orange off the radiator and set it on the desk, although he never explained why. Watson would remember that when she tried to think of how frightened he had been.

The women went farther into the castle. Beyond the washroom was a room with a long table. At its far end a stair led up. The men's voices came through the wall behind them, from the passage where they'd first come in. Penny tried a door beside the stair. It opened onto another stone room. She shut it and followed Watson up.

Below them, at the foot of the stair they had just climbed, a man appeared so suddenly that the only thing Watson could have sworn to afterwards was that he had looked as surprised as she was. Penny fired. The man went back out of sight. A moment later a shot from farther down sent both women away from the doorway. They heard footsteps retreat and then return.

"I think we've found the wrong way through," Penny said.

"I think we've found the only one they've left us."

Watson fired once when a figure came up into the light at the top of the stair. She remembered that shot and the pale scarf at the man's throat. There were others she would later have to place by what Penny told her. The reports seemed to come out of the stone overhead as often as they came through a door.

A man caught Penny in a short passage where there was no room for either of them to move freely. She heard him breathe out before they went down together. She got away with her lip bleeding and no idea how long he had stayed on the floor. Watson found her in an alcove.

"Can you talk?"

"Yes. It's one of my less attractive habits."

Neither of them laughed. Penny put a hand against Watson's back and felt it moving much too quickly for somebody who had stopped running.

The last room had a deep window, but what looked like a door from the passage was a cupboard without a handle. They got to the window and put down their empty pistols. What they had brought from the inn was spent. Penny could hear a man below them asking who else was coming up. For the first time she wondered whether the men already inside were afraid.

"How many have you seen?" Watson asked.

"Only ever one at a time."

The window overlooked a bend in the climb they had just made. Penny could see almost as far as the spot where she'd shouted. There was nobody there now. She thought of Kerr asking for their statements, and of having to tell her she'd spent the worst part of the night looking for a way down when all she had done was go up.

A door struck the wall below them. Watson moved away from the window. They had stopped at so many doors that the act of listening to one without going through it felt like the first sensible thing they had done.

Sort Of

The first shots outside sounded as though a window had fallen shut. Then came several at once. The men below stopped calling to one another. A pair of feet ran towards the stair; a second pair went after them.

Penny went back to the window. At the bend in the path a woman was helping a man to his feet. The man's coat had fallen open. Penny knew the coat before she knew the face.

"That's the man who told me it was sort of a football game," she said.

Watson came to look. The woman standing with him wore green. She had arrived at the Thistle with one glove half off, and Alec had remembered what she drank. One of the men who had followed them upstairs came out of the castle. Watson recognised the pale scarf she'd seen under his chin. He fired towards the woman in green. She pulled the man in the old coat back against the wall. Farther up the path, the woman who'd moved her handbag to make room by the fire fired back. The man in the scarf disappeared through the doorway again.

More figures came into view. Among them was a man who used to want his newspaper put aside on days when it rained. Penny had watched him ask a stranger to move a glass so he could put down a chair. He went by without the newspaper and without the ordinary look on his face that she had known him by.

Alec was at the foot of the wall. It took Penny a moment to be sure. At that distance she couldn't have told him from

another man of the same height except that he lifted his head a little to hear somebody who spoke to him. He did it at the bar when a customer asked for something they didn't want everybody to hear.

"How did they know we were here?" Watson asked.

Penny looked at the man in the old coat again. He'd had a place waiting for him by the fire before he asked for it. She remembered thinking how nice that must be.

"What if they didn't?"

"Then who did Alec expect to find up here?"

Below them someone called his name. He turned towards the voice. Penny waited to see whether he looked surprised. Another light went out and she lost him.

Watson's arm had begun to shake. Penny moved a chair from the wall, and Watson let her help her sit down. The window was too high to see out of from the chair, which was one reason Watson stayed in it. Penny kept looking down. The man and the woman in green had gone as well. Something she had thought was as simple as recognising a friend across a room had turned out to be quite a difficult way to identify people in the dark.

The Hours Before

Alec had paid for the ship before the poster was found. He'd done it in a room with a gas fire that clicked every time the wind came up off the water. The captain had asked for a number and Alec had given him the number they used when they booked a table long enough for everyone. The captain wrote it down without asking why it might change.

"You'll tell me if anybody needs a berth instead of a chair," he said.

"Yes."

"I mean before they get here."

"I'll tell you if I know. It's a way home for the people I've asked to come. If things go badly, I don't want anyone left here waiting for me to think of one."

The captain had asked if they were all friends. Alec had said he hoped so, then put on his coat and gone outside. In daylight the harbour had been full of people having trouble with shopping bags and doors. He'd stopped to help a woman get a pram down from a high pavement and missed the bus he'd intended to take.

Now, up at the castle, he watched the woman in green bring the man in the old coat out of sight of the windows. She told Alec the man could walk and said it twice to make the man believe it. Alec asked who had seen the others. The answers came slowly. One of the people expected at the harbour was being attended to by a medic. Alec told the woman to leave him with the medic. He saw her make ready to argue and then change her mind.

“Have you seen Penny?” she asked.

“No.”

“Do you know she’s inside?”

“Somebody said two women went through the door.”

“You ought to go and find her.”

Alec looked at the wall. From here he could make out a window, but there was no light to tell him whether someone stood behind it. He thought about the question Penny had asked him at the bar. He knew that whatever answer he gave when he saw her next would be less convincing than it had been the first time.

The woman in green was still waiting.

“I’ve been told the police are on their way up,” he said. “If you see one of them, tell them about the women. Tell them which room, if anyone knows.”

She looked at him for a long time. Then she went to help the man with the old coat find the arm he could lean on.

The Way Down

When the firing stopped, water dripping on the floor of the last room became the loudest sound in the castle. Penny had been leaning away from it. She sat for a few seconds and let it land on the shoulder of her coat.

"Do you think that's it?" she asked.

Watson opened her eyes. "I think it's stopped."

They heard someone outside call for a man in a brown coat. There was no reply that Penny could make out. Farther off a voice called again, and this time somebody answered with a name she didn't know.

A uniformed officer called up from the stairs. He said where he was and asked if anyone in the room was injured. Watson said yes before Penny could ask her how much she meant to tell him. Penny called back that their pistols were on the windowsill. When they came out, the officer was still standing where he had said he was. He sent another constable for Dougie and asked where the man who had fallen in the passage was.

"Where I left him, if he hasn't moved," Penny said.

The man was still there. She hadn't known he was so young. The officer stopped the women to let a medic pass, and Penny had time to see the man open his eyes. He looked at the officer as though he had expected somebody else to be kneeling beside him. Penny moved aside to give the medic room.

At the arch lay two other men. Beside one there was a glove set out flat on the stone. Penny thought it had been

taken off him until she saw that he wore both of his. The other wore a wedding ring. She would remember the ring and nothing about his face except that the person attending to him had come away and set down an unopened bag.

"Mind his hand," Watson said.

"I am."

"Sorry. It's the only thing I've had any useful advice about all evening."

They took the last steps one at a time. A small crowd had gathered below. Some had come out in slippers. A man in a tartan scarf had a camcorder in both hands, and an officer was trying to persuade him to take two steps back without missing anything that mattered to him.

"Were they shooting a film up there?" a woman asked. Her ice cream had melted over the hand that held her map.

Watson turned towards the hill. "Cut," she said. It came out scarcely louder than ordinary speech. Somebody behind her clapped once, then thought better of it.

"Are you in it?" the woman asked Penny.

"I was. I don't think I'll be in the sequel."

The woman laughed. Penny hadn't meant her to. She could still see the wedding ring. She could see it as plainly as the ice cream running down the woman's wrist.

Kerr was at the edge of the road behind the man with the camcorder. She pushed through to them and put her hand on Watson's uninjured shoulder.

"One of my constables heard somebody call for help above the close," she said. "Was that you?"

"Yes," Penny said. "I saw his lights go by."

"He could hear you from the car. He couldn't see where you were. He asked for help getting up to you."

Penny thought of the lights moving away from her and had to sit down before she could ask anything else.

A medic looked at Watson in the ambulance. The bullet had grazed the outside of her upper arm. When the medic drew the sleeve clear, Penny saw how little cloth had been holding it together.

"You could have told me it hurt like that," Penny said.

"I was busy directing."

The medic asked if they were always like this. Penny said they'd only just started, which made Watson laugh properly for the first time. It hurt her arm. Penny waited with her hand open on the seat, and after a moment Watson took it.

Kerr came back when Watson had been examined. There had been more than one fatality. An injured man was in custody at hospital. The officers on the hill had secured the rooms the women had been in. Kerr wanted each of them to give an account separately. They could go into the warm to do it. She also wanted the man with the camcorder to give them a copy of what he had recorded. He'd already asked whether she thought there might be anything on it. She'd told him that was why she wanted to see it.

"Did they get the flyer?" Penny asked.

"Your copy? We've had a constable in the room since Jean let him upstairs. It was still on the table. He saw two boxes and glass across one corner of the paper."

"There should be one box beside each lamp."

"He'll tell us where he saw them. Were they there when you first went in?"

Penny said yes. She said which lamp had gone out and what she remembered about the two cases. Both boxes had matched the pistols they'd brought. Kerr asked who knew what they carried. Penny said she hadn't told anyone at the inn before that evening. She told Kerr where she'd left her pistol and that she'd fired it. She couldn't tell her whether the man at the foot of the stair had been hit, or who had fired first outside.

Watson asked about Alec.

"We haven't found him," Kerr said.

"I saw him from the castle."

"So did I," Penny said.

Kerr looked from one to the other. "Did you see his face?"

Penny was about to say yes. In the window she'd known him without a moment's doubt. She thought about how far away he'd been.

"I recognised the way he moved his head," she said. "And somebody called him Alec."

"Could you see what he did?"

"I saw him listen."

Kerr wrote it down. Watson settled back against the seat. Through the open doors they could see a little way down the road. A woman in slippers was helping the man in the tartan scarf put his camera back into its case. He had brought it out to be able to show somebody what the night had been like. Penny wondered what he would tell them after he'd seen what he had.

Two Statements

Kerr put Watson in a room with a radiator and Penny in one without. Watson offered to exchange rooms. Kerr said she could do so after she'd finished, which was how Watson knew she'd look up from her statement and find somebody had quietly brought Penny a heater.

The constable who took Watson's account asked when she first believed the danger was over. She thought it an odd question, and asked if he meant when she stopped hearing shots.

"That will do to start with."

The trouble was that there'd been several moments when the shooting had stopped. She could place the last one by the water dropping into the room. At a moment earlier than that she'd thought of opening a door and had known she couldn't. There had been silence enough to hear Penny breathing. She didn't want to be told afterwards that she'd said those two silences were the same.

"Shall I put that you waited for the officer?" he asked.

"You can put that we went out when he spoke to us. I hope it was your officer."

The constable smiled. He wrote it as she'd said it and gave her time to read it over.

Penny waited outside when she was finished. She was rubbing one side of her mouth because the skin there had dried. A man came out of a room across the passage carrying a cardboard box. The lid lifted as he went past and she saw a

brown shoe inside. It was so ordinary that for a moment she thought he was going to put it on.

Kerr came and sat beside her.

"You asked me once whether I'd recognise something sent by SPECTOR," Penny said.

"I asked you whether you'd recognise something they'd sent. We were looking at the flyer when I asked."

"I keep telling myself it would be easier if we knew that was who it was."

"I expect some people would be pleased to hear you say that."

Penny looked at her. Until then she had taken the name as something done to her, which it was. She hadn't given enough thought to the other people who would have heard of it by now, or what it might have made any one of them do.

"I said it in the room," she told Kerr. "Just after the glass went. I made a joke about expecting better of them."

"I'd put that in your account if it helps you remember where you were standing."

"I don't want anybody to think it means I knew who fired."

Kerr straightened the cover of her notebook. "Then you've just told me what I need to put down."

Watson came out with her coat over her good arm. She'd been offered a lift wherever she wanted to go. For the first time since the glass broke, nobody was telling either of them which door to use. She crossed the passage and waited for Penny to take her coat.

The Harbour

At the harbour, the woman in green gave the captain the names of the people who had reached the ship. The man in the old coat came up behind her and added his own, which she'd forgotten in counting the others. The captain asked if he wanted the berth he'd been promised. The man said he would manage in a chair. She asked for the berth on his behalf and he let her.

They boarded together. These were the people who had made a table long enough to take one more chair without asking whose it was. On deck they made room in just the same way. One sat down by herself with an empty hand resting on her knee. The others understood that she needed the space and left it for her.

Alec was the last of them to come aboard. The captain asked if that was everybody.

"No," Alec said.

"Are we waiting?"

Alec looked back along the quay. There were people at the harbour who had come for work and had no reason to mark his face. One of them put a foot against a door and waited for a woman to come through with a bag.

"The ones who can travel are here," he said. "The others have people with them."

The captain folded the list and put it in his pocket. Alec asked whether he could make a telephone call. The captain said he could if he made it now.

Alec stood with the receiver in his hand for long enough that the man in the old coat came out to ask whether there was a fault on the line.

“No,” Alec said. “I could hear it ringing.”

He put it down. When the ship left, the woman in green watched the shore until it was impossible to tell one doorway from another. Alec was sitting beside the empty place at the far end of the table. Nobody asked him to move.


THE
WHISTLING
THISTLE

Back to the Thistle

At dawn Kerr let the women walk back to the Thistle with a constable. Watson had a dressing on her arm and Penny had a coat lent to her by a woman at the station. It was a little too short in the sleeves. She kept pulling them down, which was how Watson knew she hadn't recognised the coat as hers yet.

The front lamp at the pub had gone out. In the daylight the sign was very clear. THE WHISTLING THISTLE. Penny could see all the letters from halfway up the close. Underneath it, an officer stood with his collar turned up and a cup balanced on the ledge beside him. He told them the pub was closed. They could come as far as the door. There was a board by the step ready to go upstairs when the room had been released. A rough triangle of glass still hung high in the frame.

Jean came from the kitchen with their bags. The officer had brought the bags down with her once he'd been told which things could leave the room. The flyer and the boxes had already gone to the station. Watson asked whether Jean had got any sleep.

"An hour. I've had worse on Christmas Eve."

Penny looked past her to the chair by the fire. It was in its place. The cushion was on it and a newspaper lay folded underneath. If somebody had come in at that moment and asked whether the chair was taken, she was afraid she would have said yes.

"Is he here?" she asked.

Jean shook her head.

“Did he leave a message?”

“The telephone rang. I was at the back and by the time I got to it whoever it was had gone.”

Penny put her hand on the doorframe. She wanted to ask if there was any way to call back and knew perfectly well there wasn’t enough information in Jean’s answer to begin doing that.

Kerr had come up the close behind them. She asked the officer at the door to give the women a minute. He moved his cup so there would be room on the ledge if one of them wanted to put something down.

“Did you find any of the people from the bar?” Penny asked.

“Several spent the night giving us statements. The ones you described on the hill are harder to place. The harbour office says a charter left with a group aboard. A man there gave us a name for the person who booked it.”

“Alec?”

“That’s what he says. We’re getting the paperwork.”

Penny looked at the sign again. A bird had settled on the bracket, tucked so close to the wall that she hadn’t seen it arrive.

“Does that tell you who put the name on the flyer?” she asked.

“No,” Kerr said. “It tells me what I need to ask Alec when I find him.”

The constable took the bags to the car for them. Jean stood in the doorway with her arms folded to keep warm. Penny tried to say something about when they would all be able to come back. She couldn’t think of an honest thing to say.

Watson put her good hand through Penny’s arm. “Shall we go and find a kettle?”

Penny nodded. She let Watson choose which way they went.