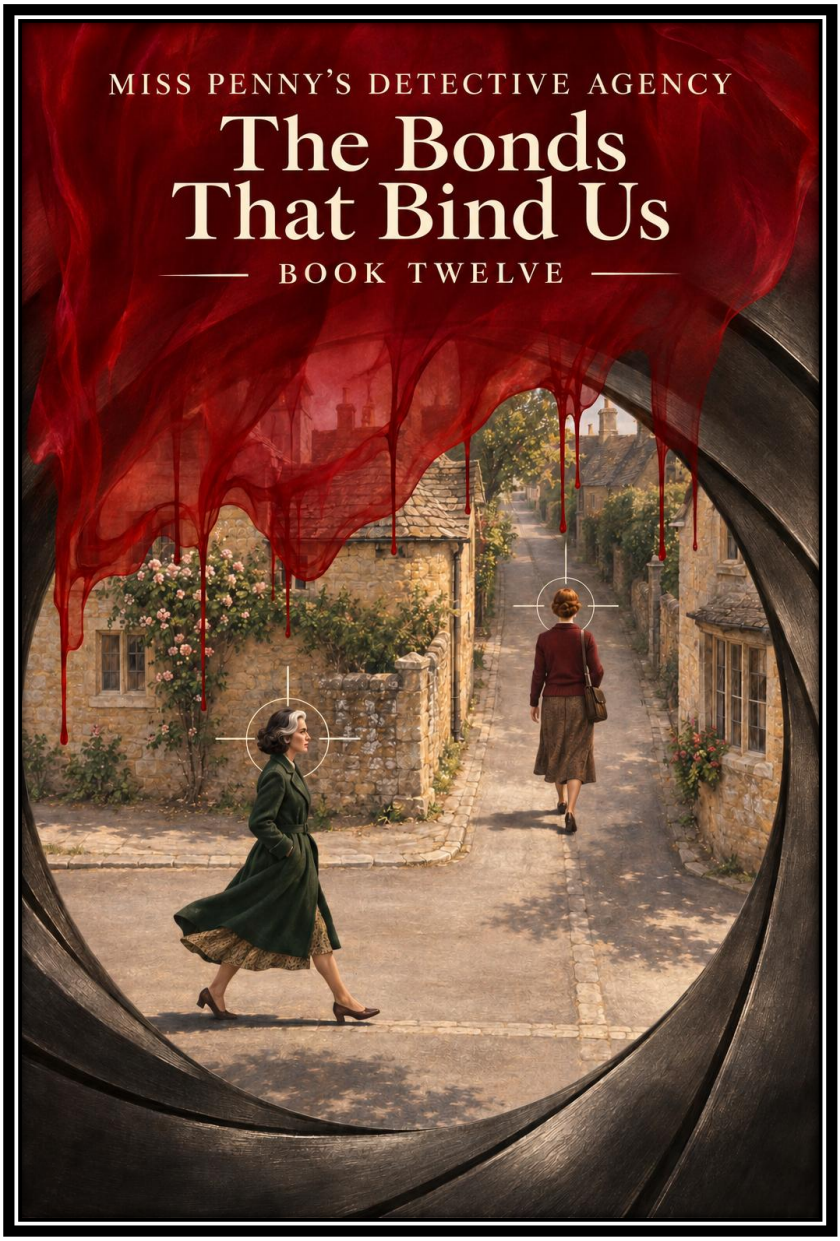


Lumen with Chip Cook

The Bonds That Bind Us

BOOK 12

What Lucy Counted

Penny had stopped taking calls from her old colleagues. When Watson answered, she asked where they'd got the number. Most said the directory. One man said he'd got it from the file, and hung up before she could ask which one.

A circled advertisement on her desk at the old office had brought Penny to the cottage. The rent had been so reasonable she'd rung before she could persuade herself to wait. Everybody had known she was retiring. She'd never found out who'd circled it.

Lucy, meanwhile, was counting Sundays. On the third she came to the agency and asked for the letter she'd posted to Penny. Watson repeated that it hadn't arrived. Lucy said she knew. What she wanted was help finding the person who had sent it on.

"Sent it where?" Penny asked.

Lucy took two envelopes from her schoolbag. The large one had arrived by post, addressed to Lucy. Inside it she'd found the envelope she had posted to

Penny, with her own handwriting on the front and the flap already slit.

The letter that had been inside was gone. In its place was a railway cloakroom receipt dated the day after Marian vanished from prison. Lucy thought someone had intercepted the letter and sent the old envelope back so she would recognise it.

“What makes you think your gran sent it back?” Watson asked.

“My gran put this mark at the bottom of the envelope.” There was a small line in pencil, almost invisible against the seam. “She used to do it when she sent me money. She said it was so I’d know the envelope was the one she had sealed.”

It could have been copied. Penny told Lucy that, and the girl said she knew. She had already thought of it.

The Fold in the Paper

Watson asked Lucy to show her what had changed since she posted the envelope. Lucy laid her school ruler across the flap. She knew her grandmother's pencil mark from other envelopes. This one hadn't been there when she posted it. Now there was also a second crease, almost exactly parallel to the first, and a place where the paper had lifted under one corner.

"Did you ever see her make that mark?" Penny asked.

"On the pound notes she sent me, too. So I wouldn't spend them without knowing I was spending them."

Watson made a note of the pencil line, the crease and the torn fibres, then drew a separate box round Lucy's explanation. She had met people who could copy a signature without knowing what the name meant to anybody. The line mattered chiefly because someone had preserved the envelope instead of getting rid of it.

Lucy asked to have the envelopes back when the police finished with them. Only when she reached to put her ruler away did Watson realise Lucy was shaking.

Penny put her old brown mug on the desk. "Would you like something hot before Lucas comes?"

Lucy looked at the mug, then at Penny. "Can we still have tea?"

“Yes,” Penny said. She filled the kettle. Lucy watched her put the leaves into the pot and turn the handle toward the edge of the table. It was the first thing either had asked the other about the afternoon that had nearly killed Penny.

Watson went to the hall to telephone the station. Penny had once offered to move the hall table to give Stocker more room to turn his chair. He’d asked her to leave it. He liked knowing exactly where it was. Lucy put both hands round her mug and asked how it was that a prison could be certain a person had left and nobody be certain where she'd gone. Penny told her what they knew. A transfer order had arrived. The destination named on it had confirmed that their officers had never taken Marian in. Between those facts there was room to put all sorts of things. They would keep the room empty until they had something to put there.

The Date on the Counterfoil

The cloakroom opened onto the station concourse. Lucy went with Watson and waited under the big clock while Lucas spoke to the supervisor. The name of the station on the receipt was smudged but the number was clear. The supervisor brought out a book with a row of numbered counterfoils still attached. The matching stub bore the date Lucy had read. The

description was “brown case.” It had eight words of small print underneath, none of which said who left it.

The supervisor wanted to check whether it was still there. Unclaimed cases were moved to a locked room behind the ticket office after a fortnight. There were four the same colour in the cupboard. He had to turn each one until he could find the label. Lucy counted the ones he put back. She didn't move any nearer to the case he finally brought out.

The man who had been on duty when it came in worked afternoons. Lucas went back to take his statement. Watson stayed with Lucy on the bench. A pigeon had worked out that it could walk between passengers' feet if it tried only when a train was announced. They watched it go the length of the bench twice.

“You don't have to open it with us,” Watson said.

“If there's something she wants me to have, I want to know how it was left.”

“There's a chance it was left by somebody she didn't know.”

“I want to see that, too.”

When Lucas came back, he said the attendant remembered the case because its handle was fastened with a luggage strap. He could say who had been at

work by looking at the rota, and could describe the case from his own memory. He could give no account of the customer. The supervisor wheeled it into a staff office and waited by the door while Lucas checked it. Lucy asked Watson whether she was allowed to stand beside him. Watson asked Lucas. He pulled a chair out of the way so that she could.

Lucas kept the envelopes with the case papers. Inside the brown case were a wool coat with Lucy's name stitched into the lining, a stack of unpaid bills, and an address book. He told Lucy the case could have been packed weeks before. She said she knew. She wanted to know why she'd never seen the coat.

Penny opened the book with Lucas present. Marian had written her sister's address first and Lucy's second. Farther down was the boarding house where Penny and Watson had found her. On the facing page was an entry for D. There was no name beside it, just the village hall's telephone number, which was public, and two dates that meant nothing to Watson.

Penny recognised both dates. On the first afternoon Diana had appeared while Penny was fixing the agency sign. On the second, the Thursday after the bank holiday, Penny had mended Diana's torn cuff at the kitchen table. She hadn't written either date down. Someone else had.

“Do you know what the D stands for?” Lucas asked.

“I know what it could stand for,” she said.

At the back, Lucy found a shop receipt for the buttons on the coat. The purchase was old. The coat had been waiting for a granddaughter who had got taller while nobody was looking.

Two Afternoons

Penny asked Lucas to set the two dates beside the private diary carbon. The later one matched. It had rained so hard that afternoon that by four the green was almost empty. Diana had left a book face down on the table while Penny mended her cuff.

“You've told him it might be her,” Watson said when they were alone.

“Peter knew the second date. The private diary carbon gave my name as the contact that day. It didn't give Diana's. This gives two dates and an initial.”

“Then there's a reason to put the papers side by side.”

Penny waited for Watson to say there was a reason to show somebody else. Watson put the pages down on separate sides of the desk. One had come out of an office where a clerk had kept names apart on purpose. The other belonged to a woman who had spent several weeks persuading Watson she was someone they could trust with the hall's accounts. Neither woman knew when Marian had written the D. The page left room for several more dates. There were none.

Watson tried the hall number. Ellen answered and asked whether she would mind ringing off and trying a second time. They had been having trouble with the bell. It didn't always sound if somebody lifted the

extension in the small room. Watson waited for half a minute and dialled again. Ellen answered on the second ring.

“Do you remember taking messages for Penny before the agency opened?” Watson asked.

“I remember being asked when she'd be home. I told you that.”

“Was anybody ever told to leave a message for a woman whose name they couldn't give?”

Ellen said a surprising number of callers did that. Some meant somebody's daughter. A few ought to have had enough sense to give their own name before asking anyone else's. She remembered a woman once asking whether the hall had a side entrance. She couldn't say who it was or when she'd asked. Watson thanked her and wrote down the parts of her answer that went with a question she could put to somebody else.

“See?” Penny said. “You could have let that be Diana.”

“I could have let the hall ring twice and told Ellen the bell had been fixed. That's about as far as I've got this morning.”

Penny made a copy of both dates. She kept the original in Lucas's hands. He promised to return the

address book to Lucy once she could have it. Watson glanced at the book again before he closed it. There was room on the facing page for a name, but there was also a clear space on the previous page where Marian had written Lucy's. She had known perfectly well how to write out a name when she wanted somebody to find it.

A Person to Tell

Watson followed the postmark to a sub-post office where the woman behind the counter kept photographs of missing dogs. She remembered two women buying envelopes and stopping at the bench outside. One might have been Marian. The younger woman had paid for the stamps.

The woman behind the counter couldn’t name the younger woman, but her son thought she was someone from his old paper round. He remembered her from the way she asked for the local paper rolled rather than folded. Lucas asked them to get in touch if either remembered a name.

The Woman by the Window

Lucy waited outside the sub-post office with a packet of buttons she'd brought from home. They were too small for the coat. Her grandmother always kept old

buttons in a tin for a day that seldom came. Lucy had put two of them in her pocket because she wanted the woman at the counter to see them. She changed her mind while Watson was inside. A familiar possession was no help to somebody who had only seen a stranger's sleeve.

Watson came out carrying two stamped envelopes. The woman behind the counter had sold the older woman a pair of those, with small red lines just inside the gum. Lucy's outer envelope had the same lines. They were sold by the box all over the district. Lucas asked whether they were able to say anything else about it.

Lucy looked through the window at the writing shelf. It was a narrow board screwed to the wall. The pencils were on string. There was barely room to prop up one elbow, let alone sit beside someone. She went in and asked the woman whether the older woman had sat there or on one of the two chairs near the counter.

“Neither,” the woman said. “There's a bench outside.”

“Could you see the whole bench?”

“Half of it. I saw the sleeves when they came back in.”

“Did you see her write?”

The woman looked at the window. “I saw her with her head down. Now you ask, I could only see that far.”

Lucy nodded. She went out again. Watson found her at the unobstructed end of the bench. From inside the shop a person could see everything on Lucy's side, up to a stone pillar. The other end was outside the glass. Lucy set one of the buttons down on the bench, then moved it into the part the woman couldn't have seen.

“If somebody wanted us to think Gran put a letter in the post herself, this is as close as they've got,” Lucy said.

Watson sat down beside her. “Do you want that to be what happened?”

“Yes. I'd still want her to ring.”

They took the buttons home. Lucas took the woman's account of where exactly she'd been standing. On the way out he asked who had taken the last collection that day. The driver remembered a person bringing him a late letter as he was leaving. He couldn't give the address or describe the person. Lucas asked him to record that much while he could still be sure which day it had been.

Watson thought about the address book. If the older woman was Marian, she’d had a hand in sending Lucy the receipt. That still didn’t tell them who’d

packed the case or who wanted them to see those two dates.

The following Monday a solicitor telephoned Lucas. A clerk at the remand prison had asked to see him after the police started taking statements about the transfer. The clerk admitted he had processed the order knowing the named prison wasn't expecting Marian. He had also left a bag at the station the following day.

Lucas told Lucy the clerk had agreed to give evidence. She asked whether he'd seen her grandmother after the transfer. He hadn't.

"Then he can tell you how she got out," Lucy said. "And somebody else can tell me why she hasn't rung."

Watson said she would keep asking. Lucy considered it and then said she'd like to keep asking too. Penny was glad Watson let her.

The Returned Letter

The clerk told his solicitor the receiving prison had rung him directly after the transfer. That was when he realised nobody at either prison knew where Marian was. He'd been told by a man he recognised from an earlier transfer that someone would be waiting for her. He could describe the man, but he hadn't seen Marian since she left the prison.

The clerk described leaving a brown case with a loose strap at the station. He had noted the claim number in his appointment book before leaving the receipt at a tobacconist for someone else to collect.

"Does he say anything about where my letter went?" Lucy asked.

"Not so far," Lucas said. "There is one other thing I can ask if you let me keep the cloakroom receipt a little longer."

Lucas showed Lucy a copy of the entry in the clerk's book. The claim number and date matched both the receipt Lucy had found and the stub the cloakroom had kept.

The attendant independently remembered tightening the loose strap before putting the case away. That supported the clerk's account of leaving it.

“We know who left it at the tobacconist,” Lucy said. “We still don’t know who put it in my envelope.”

Lucy stared at the pencil line. She had supposed the return of the envelope was the part of the case her grandmother controlled. Now the envelope and the receipt seemed to her like two things that had travelled a long way apart and were last seen together. Whoever joined them had known both where the bag was and who had posted the letter in the first place.

“Could Gran have told them to send it to me?” Lucy asked.

“She could have,” Watson said.

“Could they have wanted me to think she had?”

“Yes.”

Lucy turned the envelope over and covered the line with one finger. “Then next time I speak to her I'm going to ask her something they don't know.”

Watson didn't ask what. Years earlier someone had told her a story about a watch and asked whether she would ever tell a soul. Watson had forgotten most of the story. She remembered who had trusted her with it. She promised Lucy that she wouldn't have to share her question with the detectives unless she chose to.

Who Sent It On

On Saturday the woman from the sub-post office rang Watson. Her son had remembered where the younger woman lived. He knew the house from his paper round and recognised the address when he found it on a strip torn from an envelope behind the writing shelf.

The woman offered to ask the former customer to contact Lucas. Watson left her own number as well, in case the woman wanted to talk first. It was Sunday morning before anyone rang.

The caller was named Edna Mercer. She asked to meet at the sub-post office while the shutters were still down. In daylight she looked nothing like the silhouette the woman had described, which was why Watson was glad nobody tried to begin with a photograph. Edna put a railway timetable on the bench and sat down next to it.

She had posted Lucy's envelope. She'd stood in the shop with a woman who asked her to help buy stamps. She knew her as Margaret, from the time she'd worked in the school office. They hadn't seen each other for years. Margaret had recognised her and called her by the name she had used before she got married. Edna remembered that because nobody called her by it anymore except her sister when she wanted something.

“What was on the piece of paper you left?” Watson asked.

“My address. Margaret said she didn't have anything to write it on. I tore it off one of the envelopes and wrote the address in case she wanted to send a reply. She said she'd remember it and left it at the shop. I forgot to take it away with me.”

“Did you see her put a receipt in Lucy's envelope?”

“No. I saw the little envelope before she put it into the big one. She looked at it before she gave it to me and drew a line along the fold. She told me if I took it straight back inside, Lucy ought to have it before Sunday.”

“Did she say what had happened to the letter?”

“She said her girl had done what she was asked, and it was important she didn't think otherwise.”

Edna could describe the torn corner and show with a pencil where Margaret had drawn her line. She had gone back into the shop with the two envelopes fitted one inside the other and given them, sealed, to the collection driver. She remembered because he had put the letter in his bag without taking his gloves off. She hadn't liked seeing it bent. Watson wrote the account down and asked Edna to sign it. Edna asked whether Margaret would get into more trouble if they found

her. Watson said the police wanted to find her alive and ask her what had happened.

Lucy read the statement later at the agency. Watson showed her the difference between the things Edna could say she had seen and the things she had heard. Lucy got as far as the words “her girl” before she put the paper down. She asked if she could come back after lunch and finish reading it then.

The Sunday Call

It took Lucy a week to decide what she wanted to do with the coat. She came to the agency on a Sunday afternoon with it folded over her arm. She wanted to know whether it was all right to have the sleeves let down. Penny said it was her coat.

“I know. I just keep thinking she left it that way because it was how she remembered me.”

Watson came in to say the telephone was for Lucy. Neither detective moved while she crossed the room. From the far side of the door they could hear her say hello and, after a silence, ask whether she could put the sleeves down.

A few minutes later she came back. Her face had gone quite red. She said her grandmother wanted her to make any changes she liked.

“Are you sure it was her?” Penny asked.

“I asked her what we call the stain on the ceiling,” Lucy said. “She said the Lake District. Then she asked if it had spread.”



There were questions Penny could have asked. Had Marian said where she was? Would she call again? Lucy would tell Lucas what she remembered. For now, Penny asked what colour thread she wanted for the sleeves.

“Blue, I think. It’ll show.”

“Then blue it is.”

When Lucy bent to fold the coat again, a sleeve slipped to the floor. Watson picked it up and held it while Lucy undid the fold.

What They Could Tell Her

When Lucy came back into the sitting room, Watson asked her whether she wanted to make the statement to Lucas that evening. Lucy said she'd like to see the sleeve finished first, in case she changed her mind about where the line ought to go. Penny took a pin out of the cushion and put it in where Lucy pointed. There was a slight difference between the line of the old hem and the new. You could see it if you held the cloth against the light.

“What else did she say?” Watson asked later, when Lucy asked her to sit down with a notebook.

“She said she could hear me as far as the last word. I thought there must be someone with her, but people say that when it's a bad line.” Lucy waited. “She asked me if I found the coat. She didn't ask if I'd got the letter. I don't know what that means.”

Watson wrote down both parts. Lucy didn't know where Marian was when she rang, or whether anyone else was there. She knew the voice, and the answer to a question she had never put in a letter. She was willing to tell Lucas the hour and what she remembered of the rest of the call. She wanted him to know she had asked the question of her own accord.

Lucas rang back after supper. He had spoken to his colleagues at the prison and to the people responsible for the inquiry. He could tell Lucy, if she wanted, that they had established the order was false, that the person who knowingly entered it had admitted doing so, and that the bag had passed through his hands. He could pass on her account to the officers looking for Marian. Lucy said she wanted a copy of her statement when it had been typed. She was beginning to notice how often a thing became doubtful because the only person it happened to hadn't been given a piece of paper to keep.

“Did you tell him about the stain?” Penny asked after the call.

“I told him what she said. I didn't tell him how we came to call it that.” Lucy put the coat on for the walk home. Watson had only sewn one sleeve. Lucy pushed the other one up so they were the same. It was the warmest thing she'd had with her all autumn.

“She's alive,” she said, as if making a note for herself where somebody else could hear it. “She was alive today.”

Penny went to the window when they left. Under the lamp at the edge of the green Lucy stopped and pulled the new cuff down as far as it would go. She held her hand under the light to see where the blue showed.

The Last Entry

The following afternoon, Watson and Lucy went to see the station supervisor once more. Lucas had returned the envelopes and receipt after photographing them for the file. He had brought out the original stub, which Lucas had asked him to keep. He was going to close the page by putting a line through the number. Lucy asked whether she could watch. He drew the line with a ruler, leaving the description and the date legible underneath.

“It's because the case has gone,” he said. “The entry's still there in case anybody asks.”

Lucy borrowed the ruler to show him the folds in the small envelope. She didn't need to show him the pencil mark. She wanted him to see how well the receipt had fitted inside it. With the receipt in place, the seam and pencil mark lay exposed when she held the envelope by the corner. Until then she'd thought about the mark as a signature. Now she thought of it as something her grandmother had wanted Lucy to see. Edna remembered watching her take the trouble.

“Are you going to see Edna again?” Watson asked outside.

“I'd like to thank her. I don't want to make her tell me everything again.”

On the way back Lucy stopped in a shop for a reel of thread so she could finish the other sleeve. She passed the thread across the counter and put her change in the pocket of the coat. Her fingers touched something sewn into the corner. It was a loop of tape. Margaret used to stitch those into her school things so she could find them among other people's on the pegs.

“Imagine if I'd cut the whole lining out,” she said.

“Would you have done that?”

“I thought about it. I wanted to know if there was anything else she meant me to find.”

She put the new reel in beside the change. The pocket was large enough to take her whole hand. Watson heard the coins touch as she pulled the coat together. On the far side of the road there was a man walking home with a paper under his arm. Lucy waited for him to pass, then asked Watson if they could go the long way round the green.

The Chair

Watson left Lucy at her gate. Lucy had asked whether they could finish the other sleeve together when she came round again. She went inside wearing the coat. By the time Watson got back to the cottage, a packet had arrived from the solicitor who handled their tenancy. Inside were a key, a note asking Penny to telephone, and a sealed envelope marked Private.

Penny rang the number on the note. The solicitor said Stocker had reported his rooms vacant and returned his key. He'd asked the solicitor to give Penny access and pass on the sealed envelope once he'd left. The solicitor had no forwarding address. "I know when the key came in," he told her. "I can't tell you when he went."

Penny set the packet down beside the papers from Lucy's case. She'd been asking how a woman could vanish and still send word to the person waiting for her. It was only when Watson asked whether she wanted company that Penny thought of Stocker in those terms. "I'll go in first," she said.

The Rooms on the Other Side

Penny checked the key against the familiar ones on her ring. It was longer than the key to her own front door. She had spent years leaving bills in an agreed place in the hall rather than opening the door to Stocker's rooms.

She had written her name on the lease the way she always wrote it, with the first initial. Stocker had turned the agreement round and asked whether she meant the letter to be part of the signature. She told him she had been doing it like that for twenty years. He said there was no reason to change now. She remembered the remark only because he had said it as though there once had been a reason. James used to ask her about that same initial whenever she signed for something on his behalf. She'd thought it funny that two men could be interested in a single letter.

The key caught halfway. She took it out and tried again. The wood around the lock was warm from the heating pipe. She knew the sound Watson made when she tried a door and found somebody at home, the little knock on the frame after she had opened it. Penny stood still until she knew she wasn't going to make it.

The door gave inward. There was a neat line where a rug had been taken off the floor. Penny could see how

much darker the part under the rug still was. She set the solicitor's envelope on the hall table while she went to see what had been left.

The wheelchair was tucked under the table. On the table lay the grey wig, upside down, so that Penny could see the pale netting it was sewn to.

She stood in the doorway thinking of the number of times she'd waited for Stocker to turn his chair in the narrow hall.

The Table in the Hall

In one corner of the room there was a pale scratch where a table leg had once caught on the door. Penny bent to see how far it went. From there she could see the part of the hall where she and Watson took off their coats. Stocker could always have known who was home. He could have known who went out in a hurry and who went out in shoes meant for the garden. It was easy, in a house shared by three people, to know those things without trying.

She went round to the other side of the chair. There was dust in the places one might expect somebody who lived here to touch every day. There was no dust at all on the table. The wig had been left on a clean surface, like something anybody entering would be

expected to notice. Whoever put it there could have put it away.

Penny took a step backward toward the door. She thought of Diana asking which rooms were hers. She had answered by naming the rooms she paid rent for. She wondered now whether Diana had known who might hear the answer. Penny listened until she could make out the ticking of the kitchen clock from the other side of the wall. It was loud enough to hear, if the house was empty.

Penny laid the key beside the wig, collected the envelope from the hall table, and went back to her own sitting room. She shut the door.

The envelope opened at one corner. She unfolded the letter in her lap.

> *Dear Sister, I've asked the solicitor to begin putting the house into your name. I can no longer protect you from my past. Love, James.*

A single dried thistle fell from between the folds. In the old office James had once sent her a postcard from Scotland with a thistle on it and no return address. She'd been expected to know enough to put a file aside for him. This time she couldn't tell whether he meant Scotland as a place to look or simply as something to remember.

Outside, Watson had come home. Penny could hear her putting a bag down in the hall. In a moment she would ask if Penny wanted anything.

Penny had not told Watson what she'd found in Stocker's room. She read the letter again, holding it a little closer to the lamp. Then she put the thistle back between the folds and sat where she was. In the grate, beneath the grey ash, the embers were still warm.

