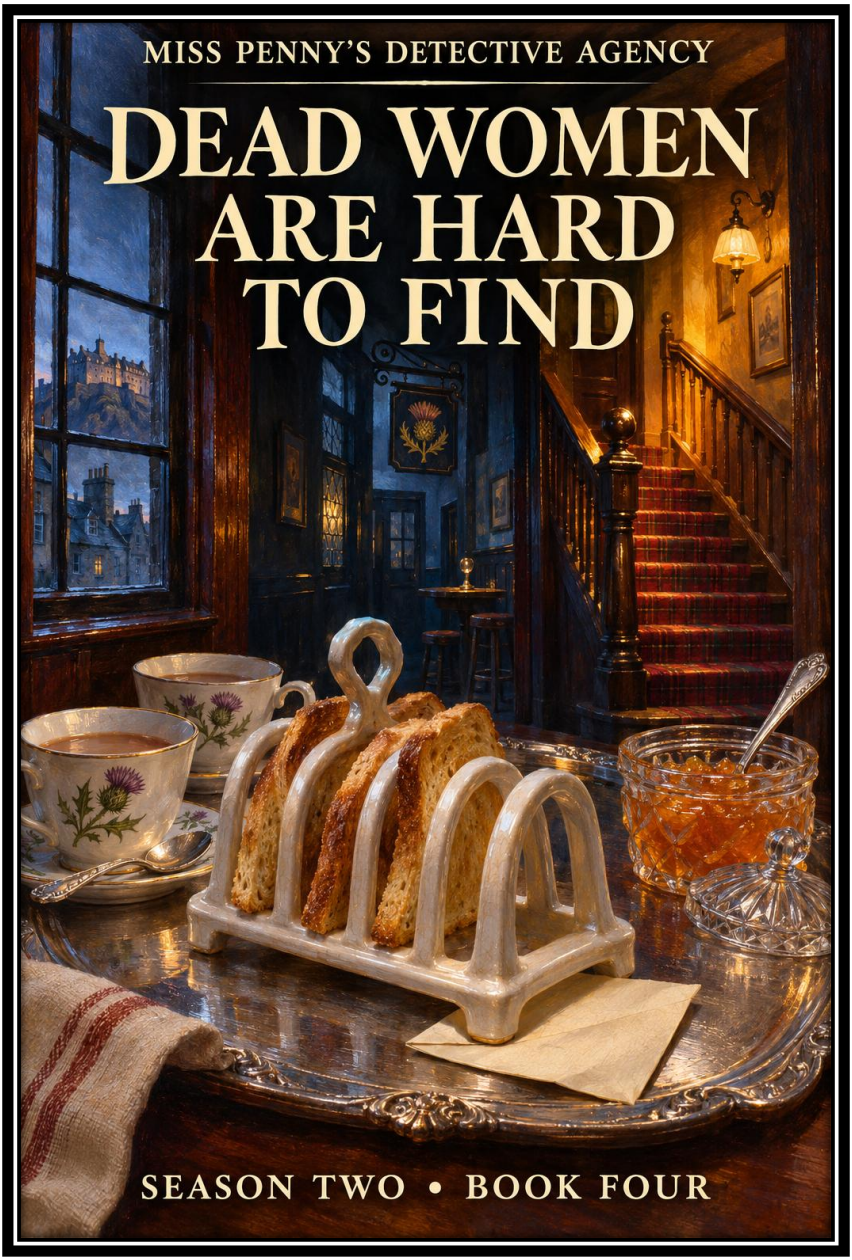

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
DEAD WOMEN ARE HARD TO FIND
SEASON TWO • BOOK FOUR

The Toast Rack

Alec brought up the breakfast tray himself. The toast rack had lost a foot. He'd steadied it with a folded piece of paper.

"That'll last you till I find another one," he said, and went downstairs.

Penny pulled out the paper. The toast rack tipped gently against the marmalade.

Why don't you two just die?

She passed it to Watson, who read it with a piece of toast halfway to her mouth.

"That sounds like a child," Penny said.

"It sounds like somebody who's used to being obeyed."

They rang Kerr. She arrived while the tea was still warm and asked them to tell her, separately, what Alec had said when he brought the tray. Penny remembered the words. Watson remembered that he'd kept one thumb on the toast rack until he set it down.

Alec said he'd found the paper folded on the kitchen dresser. He hadn't opened it. Kerr asked if that was where breakfast orders were usually left.

“No,” he said. “That’s where Jean leaves things she wants me to throw away.”

Kerr put the note into an envelope from her bag. “Yesterday a man called the station and asked whether we’d found either of you yet. The constable asked where we ought to look. He hung up.”

“Did he give our names?” Watson asked.

“Yours. He called Penny ‘the other one.’”

Penny looked at the note again. She’d been so sure it was meant for her that it took her a moment to look up.

“Did he sound disappointed?”

“The constable thought he sounded frightened.”

From below came the scrape of a chair. Alec had taken the tray down. Penny could hear him looking for another toast rack, opening cupboards and shutting them again. She found herself listening for him to stop.

The Other One

Kerr asked them to come to the station after lunch. She had arranged a room where they could speak without somebody coming to the door for the key to a filing cabinet. In the event, a constable came for it

twice. The second time he apologised to Watson by name.

“That's the man who took the call,” Kerr said when the door shut. “He's seen your name about a dozen times since then.”

Watson asked whether he would read out what he'd written, if he was willing. He came back with the occurrence book. The call had been at twenty to nine. It had sounded close and loud until the caller turned away to say something Watson couldn't make out from the constable's transcription.

“Was there anybody with him?”

“I thought so. It might have been somebody he was trying not to wake.”

The entry said, *Have you found Watson and the other one?* On the next line: *Both of them. I was told both.*

Penny asked if he'd said anything about the Whistling Thistle. He hadn’t. Nor had the constable suggested that either woman was missing. He'd asked where they ought to look, and the man took it as a question he was required to answer. Then he'd hung up.

“When you put it like that,” Watson said, “he might have been checking something somebody had told him.”

“He might,” Kerr said. “He also might have wanted us to know somebody had told him.”

Outside the station Penny put on her gloves one finger at a time. “Does it bother you that he used your name?”

“Yes. Does it bother you that he didn't use yours?”

“Yes.”

They went down the steps together. A cab was waiting opposite. Its driver had a newspaper open against the steering wheel and had contrived to fold it so that he could see both sides of the street. Penny remembered the car that had followed Watson in Guiting Power. She reached out for Watson's arm and took it. It was the sort of thing she should have done more often before there was any reason for it.

The Man Who Came Upstairs

Jean had carried the laundry up after breakfast the previous day. She remembered a man asking for Watson while she was turning a sheet so the clean hem would show at the top. He was too far downstairs to see what she was doing and kept asking if he might come up.

“What did you say?” Watson asked.

“I asked what he wanted.”

“And what did he want?”

“To know if you had a forwarding address.”

Watson had told Jean she might go back to Guiting Power for a day to collect the post. She hadn't settled the date. Jean could remember saying something about it to a customer at the bar because the woman had offered to look in on the room while she was gone. Jean had told her the other woman would still be in it. She thought that was the end of the conversation.

“Do you remember the woman?”

“She left her umbrella. I remember that better.”

Alec brought out four umbrellas from behind the bar. Jean took the smallest and opened it halfway. There was a green stitch where one of the ribs had been fastened back into its pocket.

“I did that for her. She said it was only borrowed and she ought to take it back in one piece.”

Kerr asked Jean to say which day that had been. Jean knew because she'd had the needle and thread out to mend a curtain tie. Watson wanted to go straight from the umbrella to the woman. Kerr asked her to wait until they knew who had lent it to her.

That evening the one-eyed man was outside the pub with his cup. He had a strip of newspaper folded over the top to keep out rain, which meant anybody who wished to give him a coin would first have to speak to him.

Watson asked if he knew who had come to the pub that morning. He said he knew who hadn't. The woman who usually bought the evening paper had sent her husband. He'd had to come back because he bought the wrong one.

“That can't be everything you saw,” Penny said.

“No. It's what I thought you might be able to check.”

She stood awhile beside him. Somebody went past with an armful of flowers wrapped in wet paper. The man moved his cup so she could set her own bag down on the wall. Penny hadn't said she meant to stay.

Two Lines

The second letter came through the post. It was addressed to both of them, care of the Whistling Thistle. Jean left it upright against the sugar bowl where they could see it as soon as they came downstairs.

Dead women are hard to find.

You keep going out.

At the end the writer had made a full stop so heavy it showed through to the back. Watson put the note down flat. This time the ink reminded her of a school exercise book. The first note hadn't. That might be significant, or the second pen might simply have been the one nearest to hand.

The postmark was dated the day before the first note appeared under the toast rack. Penny put the two dates on the back of an old bill and read them aloud. Their letters had arrived in one order. Whoever wrote them may have lived through them in another.

“Suppose he had been told it had happened,” Watson said. “Then it didn't. Then he started asking why.”

“Would he write to us?”

“I don't know. He might think being dead is something we ought to have the decency to do quietly.”

Kerr came to take the letter. She asked them which of their recent trips had been public, and which could be put in order without help from anybody at the Thistle. Penny told her about the station, the framer's and the afternoon when Watson had been with Morag Reid. Kerr stopped her at that.

“Where were you?”

“At the pub. Ask Alec.”

“Then you didn't both keep going out.”

Penny looked at the line on the paper. She had taken the words to mean somebody had watched the door. It was possible they described nothing more than a man who had twice found it shut.

Kerr asked if there was somewhere they could go for a few days. Watson said there was, if it would help the inquiry. Kerr said it would help her get some sleep. Penny asked if she could make another pot of tea while they thought about it. In the kitchen she filled the kettle and stared at the water coming out of the tap. She was waiting to feel foolish for being afraid in a place where everyone knew how she took her tea. The feeling didn't come.

Graham’s Inn

The woman who had borrowed the umbrella was called Mrs Boyd. She helped at the darts club and sometimes did the books at Graham’s Inn. Kerr spoke to her first. She had seen Watson with a case one morning and assumed both women were leaving. The case had belonged to a bookseller who had asked Watson to hold it while he opened the shop.

Mrs Boyd had mentioned the departure to a man she knew as Vincent Hale. He used to bring a parcel in on Fridays for a customer who worked away. She had believed he was asking out of ordinary interest. When Kerr showed her a photograph, she recognised him from the way he wore his glasses low on his nose, as though half the people he spoke to were children.

Watson went to the inn after Kerr told her what she could share. Mrs Boyd was standing at the kitchen hatch. A young man came through behind her carrying a pan twice the width of his chest. She told him to put it down before he cooked somebody.

“That's the cook's son,” she said. “He'll tell you I lent my umbrella to the wrong person. I've already heard about it from his mother.”

The young man said that when Hale came in again he was soaked, although it had stopped raining half an

hour earlier. He had a piece of paper in his hand which he kept turning over as though he was going to find something on its back. He asked where the woman with the case had gone. The young man had told him that at that hour she'd usually be having supper at the Thistle.

“Did he tell you why he wanted her?”

“He said he'd paid somebody to tell him where she was. I said he should ask for his money back.”

“Did he laugh?”

“He asked me how old I was.”

The boy glanced towards the kitchen, where there was a sudden noise of lids being put down. Watson said she could tell Kerr that he'd remembered the conversation. He said he would rather tell Kerr himself. He wiped his hands, found something to write his name on and turned the scrap over. A dog had been drawn on the other side in blue ink. It looked like the one he had spent a part of his childhood trying to talk his mother into letting through the back door.

In His Own Words

The police found the caller before they found Hale. He was called Colin Niven. He had once done odd

jobs for Hale and was prepared to say what some of them were. Kerr told Penny and Watson he had telephoned because he was afraid a rumour he'd been paid to pass on had turned out to be true.

He was supposed to say both women were dead. He'd already been paid by the time he began to ask why. After the call to the police he rang Hale and asked him for the women's names. Hale told him he knew enough. It seemed to Niven that this was correct in a sense which ought to have troubled him earlier.

“Did he know their names?” Penny asked.

“He knew Watson's,” Kerr said. “He'd seen it on a note. He says Hale had written it.”

That was as far as Niven could take them. Kerr was careful to say the police had recovered nothing yet in Hale's handwriting. He could be using someone else's name to get out of trouble he had made for himself. He was able to describe where he'd met Hale and to account for a payment the police could place. The sentence he'd been paid to repeat was still only his account of a sentence.

Watson asked what the report was for.

“He thought the man who took it wanted an excuse to stop looking for you,” Kerr said. “When I pressed him he admitted he hadn't asked.”

Penny wondered how many people had agreed to make a report without expecting anybody to require the details. She had typed reports for years. Sometimes she waited for a man to come back to the office and let her put a question to him. Sometimes she knew, from the way he closed the door, that the report would be all she ever had.

After Kerr left she told Alec about a man who used to submit a sheet of paper with everything numbered except the important part. Alec asked what she did about it. She said she made him number the important part too.

“And did that make him tell you what he'd done?”

“No. It made it harder for him to say I'd forgotten to ask.”

Alec was drying a glass. She watched him set it down upright beside the others. “I used to miss him when he was away,” she said.

“Did you tell him?”

“I thought he knew.”

There was a good deal more she might have said. Alec asked if she wanted her tea brought upstairs. She said yes because she wanted to see the room again with the lamps on, and find out if it still looked like somewhere she could sleep.

One Name in the Margin

Kerr came back with something the constable had written on the reverse of his first account. The caller had known that Watson was staying away from home, but when asked which police office he'd meant to ring he said only, “The one where she is.” Kerr had asked Niven how he could be sure he had the right office if he didn't know where she was.

Niven said he'd been given a number to ring. He'd been told it belonged to a friend of Hale's. He'd realised it was the police when the constable answered. By then he was almost glad. He could ask somebody who wouldn't know what answer he was supposed to get.

“Can you establish that the number came from Hale?” Watson asked.

“No. But I can establish that somebody gave him two numbers. Mine, and a woman who runs a lodging house in Leith.”

The woman in Leith had taken one call. A man said he was looking for a woman called Watson who might be staying with her sister. The woman had no guest of that name and told him so. When he rang again she asked whether he meant Miss Watson or Mrs Watson. He said he hadn't been given that much.

Penny took down the pad in which she had written the dates for the two notes. “Someone's giving everybody a different piece.”

“Or they're just guessing,” Kerr said. “The distinction matters to me.”

After she left, they put the dates in order again. The note sent by post came first. So did the inquiry at the lodging house. The call to the station came after that. By the time the note under the toast rack was written, somebody had evidently known where the women would have their breakfast.

Watson rested a finger on the first date. “The mistake was Leith. We know someone made it. We don't know if it was the person who got everything else right.”

“Are we allowed to feel pleased somebody got something wrong?” Penny asked.

“Until they get something else right.”

Penny copied the dates onto a second sheet. She had once kept one version of a set of notes in her desk and another under the blotter where James could find it. She knew which copy he would think was the private one. The memory would have been funny if she could have put a date to the last time he had got it wrong.

That evening they told Jean they would come down for breakfast from now on. Jean said she thought most people came down because they wanted their toast warm. Watson asked her why she thought people liked to eat upstairs. Jean said some always had, and some wanted to see who would bring it.

Penny took the two glasses upstairs herself. She steadied them on the tray with her thumbs as Alec had done with the broken rack. From the bend in the stairs she could hear Jean ask Alec where he'd been that morning. The answer, when it came, was lost in a sudden burst of applause. Someone in the bar had got the wireless working.

Where They Went

In the afternoon Watson and Penny walked to a photographer's shop to collect a copy Morag had agreed they could have. It was a copy of the full print from her father's order. Morag had asked them to keep the mirror in even though there were people who wanted it cut out. The print was ready in an envelope big enough to take it without folding.

On the way back they stopped beneath the arch. Watson wanted to look once more at the place where the shopkeeper had seen a reflected light on the night Donald Reid died. Penny stood on the other side of

the road and looked up at the stone above them. It had been there for her to walk under every day that week. She'd begun to think of it as a place where a man had died, as though it had done nothing before that and never would again.

Watson had brought her notebook. She took it out and turned over a page. “Hale asked about where we went. Tait was told the picture would show something about him. Redd left his coat at the station, or somebody did. If Hale's name belongs beside any of those things, I want to know which.”

“Perhaps all of them.”

“Perhaps.”

Penny looked back at the high end of the street. “I'd like to be right about something today.”

“You were right to tell Kerr about the first note.”

“I nearly didn't. I thought somebody would tell me to go home.”

“I thought that too,” Watson said. “I'd have asked you why he was allowed to be here if we weren't.”

They took the photograph to the station before going back to the Thistle. At the door Kerr asked whether they were staying where they were. Watson said they'd talked it over and intended to be downstairs in

the evening while the bar was busy. Kerr said she would have a word with Alec about the other door. She took the photograph and gave them a receipt for it. Penny put the receipt in the same pocket as her gloves. She wanted to have something there that belonged to this day.

Closing Time

Hale had written both notes. He'd posted the one that said dead women were hard to find. When he heard the women were still taking breakfast upstairs, he wrote the shorter one. It had been satisfying for as long as it took to write. He had thought of what one of them might say when she read it. When he tried to picture either woman being frightened, he found that he was picturing himself.

He watched the windows of the Thistle from across the close. He could make out the lamps in the bar and the square of light from the room upstairs. The women were supposed to have gone to bed. Somebody had promised him that they would.

Below the sign he stopped to pull his cuffs straight. He had let other people disappoint him for long enough. This time he went in himself.

At the corner table Penny was trying to decide whether Watson had won at dominoes or merely found a faster way of counting. The door opened. She saw a man in a good dark coat step into the passage. A regular near the entrance moved his chair without looking up from his paper. Then two cups touched their saucers at the end of the bar.

Alec was back behind it. Penny would remember that much, later. At the time she thought only that he had set down the cups too hard for a man who never chipped anything he meant to keep.



“Where have you been?” Jean asked.

“Have I been gone?”

She gave him the fresh cups she’d been about to carry upstairs. He took them as far as the bottom step. Then he set them both down, very carefully, on the stair.

“Jean,” he said. “Ring Inspector Kerr.”

Kerr arrived to find the customers standing outside. The man in the passage was dead. Watson saw the back of his coat when Kerr went in. The neck was

broken, Kerr told them later. That was the most she was willing to say that night.

The man was Vincent Hale. In an inside pocket the police found a folded sheet bearing both women's names. Underneath, in block capitals, were the words *BOTH OF THEM*. Kerr sent it away with the letters. In due course someone might be able to tell her whether one person wrote all three. Nothing on the sheet told her who else had been in the passage.

“Was Alec behind the bar when Hale came in?” Kerr asked Penny.

Penny started to say yes. Then she remembered the cups. She remembered looking up at the noise and seeing Alec. Until Jean had asked where he'd been, Penny hadn't thought of him having left.

“I looked up when I heard the cups. He was behind the bar then,” she said.

Kerr waited to see if she would add anything. When Penny did not, she closed her notebook.

In the Morning

Unaddressed on the shelf upstairs was the letter Penny had written to James. Watson found her standing in front of it after the police had gone.

Watson sat on the end of her bed. “Why do people keep turning up dead?”

Penny turned from the shelf. Watson had asked much the same thing back in Guiting Power. That time she’d got out a map.

“Redd by the tracks,” Watson said. “Reid under the arch. Now there’s a man at the foot of our stairs.”

“You think they’re connected?”

“I keep hoping the next one will tell us. Then there’s a next one.”

“I keep thinking something very stupid,” Penny said.

“What is it?”

“That I ought to thank somebody.”

“You might find out who before you do.”

“I suppose I might.”

From below came the sound of crockery being put away. Penny went down to offer to help. Alec was at the kitchen dresser, putting the broken toast rack on a high shelf. He took down the good one and set it where Jean could see it in the morning.

“You'll have to use that one now,” he said.

“Will you bring it up?”

“If you want me to.”

Penny stood awhile at the door. She had come downstairs to ask a question. She could still have put it to him, if she could find a way of making it sound like a question she'd ask a friend. Upstairs there was somebody who would make her say exactly what she knew and no more. Penny thought she had never been so grateful to have somebody waiting.

“Yes,” she said. “I'd like that.”

She went up. The two cups were still on the stair. This time she brought them with her.