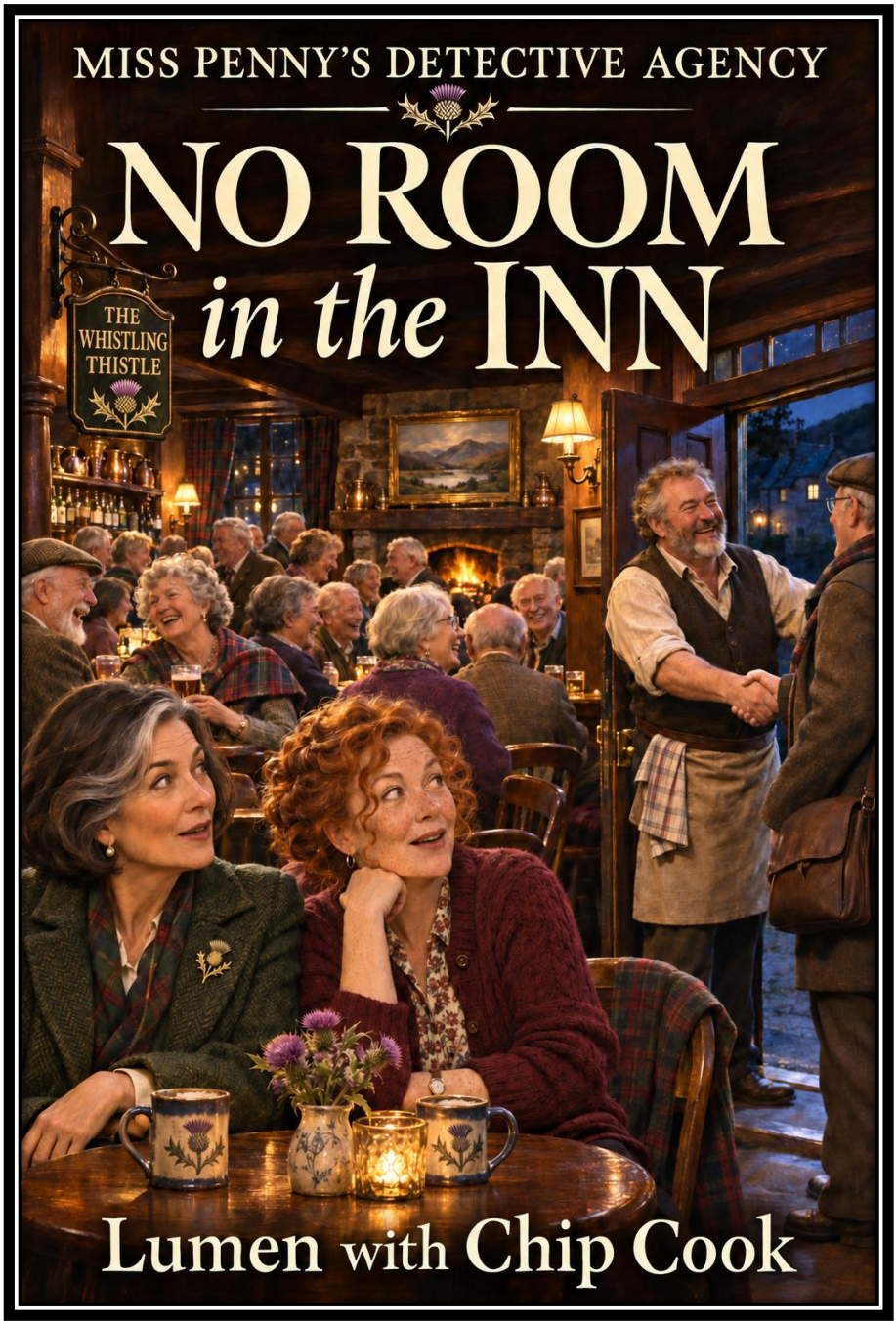

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
NO ROOM in the INN
THE WHISTLING THISTLE
Lumen with Chip Cook

NO ROOM in the INN

Lumen with Chip Cook

Old Faces

By half past seven there wasn't a single free chair near the fire. Penny had never known The Thistle to fill up so early. Then again, she didn't know it well enough to know when it filled.

A woman in a green coat came in, saw someone at the far end of the bar and stopped with one glove half off. The man got up. Neither called out. They met halfway and stood for a moment holding each other by the elbows.

Alec reached for a glass. "Usual, is it?"

"Good Lord," the woman said. "You remember."

"You only ever had the one thing."

She laughed at that, and the man laughed too. Penny had the impression that the joke had begun years ago.

"Is there a football game on?" Penny asked.

"Sort of..." said a stranger at the next table.

She'd meant the question for Watson. Before she could ask the stranger which teams were playing, a woman came past and said, "You've still got that coat."

"You said it wouldn't last."

"I meant the man in it."

He stood up to kiss her cheek. Alec was at the door again, shaking hands with somebody. The newcomers had come in singly or in twos and settled into little groups. They sounded as if they'd come from all over. They seemed to know where to sit.

The man in the old coat turned towards the fire. A woman there took her handbag off the chair beside her and pulled it nearer to hers.

"Why do I feel like the only person here who doesn't know something?" Penny said. "It's that feeling you get just before everyone yells, 'Surprise! Happy birthday!'"

"Is it your birthday?"

"No."

"Thank goodness," Watson said. "I was trying to remember what I'd done with your present."

Penny laughed. Too many people had died lately. She'd got to seeing ghost dogs, and now she was seeing conspirators in a pub. She really ought to take a holiday.

Alec came round with a spoon for the mustard. He set it down beside a man Penny hadn't noticed until then, who put it straight into his own pocket. Alec went back for another. When the man found the first one he brought it to the bar and laid it carefully beside the till.

"I wondered how long you'd be," Alec said.

"Longer than last time."

He went back to his seat. Penny watched him butter the corner of a piece of bread without looking down. There was a service in which all the men she knew seemed to learn the same ordinary things. How to make supper last. How to leave half a cup behind without appearing to be in a hurry. She also knew a great many men who had never had to learn any of those things and did them just as well.

"You can eat your supper, you know," Watson said.

"I was eating it."

"I've been watching your fork. It's been travelling between the same two potatoes for five minutes."

Penny ate one. The other had gone cold.

Jean came from the kitchen carrying a dish that needed two hands. The woman in green got up and moved a chair for her. Jean thanked her and asked her to take her glove off properly before she dropped it in the gravy. The woman pulled it off and slipped it into a cuff.

"You remember my gloves," she said.

"I remember what you're like with gravy."

Alec laughed from the other end of the room. Penny turned to see whether Jean had heard him. Jean had already gone back to the kitchen.

At the next table someone asked the man in the coat how long he was back for. Penny noticed how long it took him to answer.

"Oh," he said at last. "I'll see."

When Alec came to clear the supper plates, he had to stand aside to let a man take a chair across the room. The man held it high, one hand round each of the front legs. Penny watched three people move their glasses out of his way. The fourth put a hand on the table to steady it.

"Have you known these people long?" she asked Alec when he came to take their plates.

"Some of them."

"Longer than you've had the pub?"

"Oh, yes." He held out a hand for Watson's plate. "Want the rest of that bread?"

Watson did. Alec put it on a saucer and found her a bit more butter. Before he went, he looked round the room as a man might look round his dining table to see who still needed feeding.

Upstairs Penny took her shoes off and sat on the bed. She could hear a little of the talk through the floor. The words were lost, but now and again somebody laughed and another person started before the first had finished.

"I don't think he answered me," she said.

"He answered exactly what you asked."

"Yes. I wish I'd asked something else."

Watson folded the paper bag containing the bread and put it beside the kettle. "You could ask him tomorrow."



The Glass Left Out

In the morning Penny found Alec polishing a row of glasses at the end of the bar. There was a clean glass on a cloth apart from the others. He picked it up when she came in and held it to the light, as if he'd been waiting to be asked what was wrong with it.

"Nothing," he said before she could speak. "Somebody left it half full. I put it to one side."

"Were you expecting everybody who came last night?"

"I had enough plates."

"That was going to be my second question."

"Then you're ahead already."

Penny sat down on the stool nearest the door. There was no fire. Near the grate lay a small piece of paper that had once been the corner of a newspaper. It was folded over, and from where she sat it looked quite deliberately folded. She wondered how long it would take before she stopped expecting folded things to have a message in them.

"Did anybody ask about us?"

Alec set the glass down. "A lady rang this morning. She wanted the detective agency."

"Did she leave a name?"

"Bellamy. She said she'd come in if you were staying for breakfast."

Penny tried to remember whether she had ever heard the name. There was a Bellamy who had sent in a receipt for a

coat James had never intended to pay for. She could remember the coat, the envelope, and what she had said to James about it. It was more likely that she remembered a receipt with some other name at the top.

"What did she sound like?"

"As if she'd rather have telephoned after she'd put something right."

Watson came through the passage just as Jean set out the cups. She had brought a notebook down with the bread bag tucked inside it. Penny told her there was a possible client. Watson took the bread bag out.

"Do we have an office?"

"We have a table for another quarter of an hour," Jean said.

"That should be sufficient."

Jean pushed two chairs towards it with her foot. One scraped and the other didn't. Penny took the one that scraped, so that nobody else would have to remember which it was.

The Measure of a Hem

Mrs Bellamy arrived in a coat she hadn't fastened. She said she was a dressmaker and asked if they could find a missing wedding dress.

"Do you have a photograph?" Watson asked.

"I have the bride in it. Would that do?"

The bride was Mrs Bellamy's daughter. In the photograph she stood on a low wooden box with her arms slightly out, wearing one shoe. Her mother knelt beside her with pins between her lips.

"That was Monday. I finished the hem yesterday. I saw the dress on the rail at four. At six the hanger was empty."

"Who else was here?"

"My daughter. My apprentice, Nell. A woman collecting curtains. Nell says nobody took anything."

Watson looked up. "What did you ask her?"

"Whether she'd let anyone take the dress."

The Shop Window

Mrs Bellamy said they could see the shop from the end of the street if the bus wasn't there. She walked too fast for a woman who wanted Penny to read the name on the window. At the kerb she stopped to let a cyclist pass and went on talking to the place where Penny was still standing.

"What happens if you don't find it today?" Penny asked when she caught up.

"My daughter gets married in something else."

"And what would she say to that?"

"She'd say there were plenty of dresses in the world. She'd probably find one, too. She's always very good at doing what she says I ought to do."

The shop window had been dressed for the autumn. A child's coat on a stand was supposed to look as if it had been left beside a basket of apples. An apple at the front of the basket had a bruise as large as a thumbprint.

"I made my own dress twice," she said. "The first time my mother said the neck was wrong. When I'd done it again she asked whether I'd tried it the other way."

"Had you?"

"Yes. That was how I knew the first neck was the one I wanted."

She stood looking at the little coat. There was a collar turned up on one side; Penny expected her to put it right.

“I thought if I gave my daughter a dress with a little of mine in it, she’d have something she could do the same thing with,” Mrs Bellamy said. “She could keep what she liked.”

Watson took out her notebook to write down the hours during which the dress had gone. She asked Mrs Bellamy to mark the part of the afternoon she was most sure about. Mrs Bellamy gave her two times. One was when she’d seen the skirt. The other was when she’d gone to turn off the workroom light and had seen the empty hanger. Between those two times she had bought stamps, done two hems and made a pot of tea she had forgotten to drink.

“Would you like me to write down the tea?” Watson asked.

“I thought it might tell you when I went out of the room.”

“Then I’ll put it down.”

Mrs Bellamy found the shop key. She’d put it with the photograph instead of with her other keys. When she pulled the photograph out, Penny saw the edge of the bride’s shoe where the paper sleeve had slipped.

“Come and see where I was standing,” Mrs Bellamy said. She unlocked the door and waited for them to go in ahead of her.

Mrs Bellamy led them to the workroom. The wedding dress had hung between a blue raincoat and two pairs of school trousers. On the rail below it was a strip of masking

tape with a name in pencil. Watson bent to read it. The name was Nell.

"That's her rail," Mrs Bellamy said. "She's been learning to do the fittings."

On the worktable lay a little pile of pearl buttons. One had a yellow thread through it. Mrs Bellamy swept them into her palm.

"Those are off my own wedding dress. We used them for the new one. My daughter asked me to leave the yellow thread in the top button. She used to count them when she was little and it helped her find where to start."

"Did you?"

"Of course I did."

Penny looked at the button in Mrs Bellamy's hand. Mrs Bellamy looked at it too.

"Well," she said. "I thought I did."

Mrs Bellamy went to answer the shop bell. From the workroom they heard a man ask whether she might let his daughter come in her school uniform to be measured. He only had the car for the afternoon. Mrs Bellamy told him to bring the girl as she was. She could put a sheet down if the shoes were muddy.

The bell was still swinging when a young woman came out of the workroom with a shallow box of tailor's chalk. She put it beside the buttons and said she was Nell. Then she took the box away again because Mrs Bellamy had

told her to use the other end of the table for anything that left dust.

"Do you want me to tell you I didn't take it?" she asked.

"I'd like to know what you've had to do this morning," Watson said.

Nell looked at the clock. She had been in at half past seven. She had moved the paper patterns to get behind the boiler, then put them back in the order she thought they'd been in. She had looked in the long cupboard where finished things were kept flat. She'd done her own pressing afterwards because the curtain customer would come whether there was a dress or not.

"Did Mrs Bellamy ask you to look?"

"No. She was making a list of everybody who'd come in."

"Are you on it?"

"I'm here every day. I don't think she'd put me on a list of people who came in."

Penny had asked questions of a great many people who took care to get themselves out of an answer. Nell had taken care to leave herself in. Penny let the silence go on long enough for Nell to decide whether she had anything else to say. She was beginning to watch the button with the yellow thread.

"Did you help make it?" Penny asked.

“I chalked the hem. Mrs Bellamy let me do it again till I got the bride to stand still without telling her she was doing it wrong.”

“How did you manage that?”

“I asked her to tell me where she’d like her shoes put afterwards. By the time she’d thought of a place, I’d finished.”

Penny could see Watson deciding to remember that. Nell moved a length of ribbon away from the edge of the table, then glanced towards the shop. Mrs Bellamy was still speaking to the man with the daughter in school uniform. Her voice sounded patient and quite certain of what could be done.

“I don’t want her to think it’s gone for good,” Nell said. “She’s made dresses for a lot of people she’ll never see wear them. She wanted to see this one.”

Watson held the photograph near the window. On the inside of the skirt, where the bride had lifted it to show her shoe, there was a pencil line on the hem.

“Nell did that,” Mrs Bellamy said when she came back. “I showed her how to mark from the floor. You can’t do it from the waist. A person’s body has ideas of its own.”

“Could we see the rail from where you were at four?” Watson asked.

Mrs Bellamy took them to the cutting table by the door. You could see the middle of the rail straight through the workroom. From there the blue raincoat covered the sleeves of anything hanging beside it.

“What could you see of the dress?” Watson asked.

“The skirt. There was a fold at the back where I’d had to let it down again. I’d been looking at that fold all week.”

Penny went into the workroom and moved the raincoat a little. “Can you see the top now?”

“Yes.”

“And from where you were yesterday?”

Mrs Bellamy considered it. “No,” she said at last. “I couldn’t have seen the buttons.”

The shop bell went again. This time it was the woman who had collected the curtains. She’d been given one tieback instead of two. Mrs Bellamy went to find it. Penny could hear her counting aloud in the drawer.

Watson put the photograph on the cutting table. “I wonder what Nell heard when she was asked whether she’d let anyone take the dress.”

“I’d have thought it a question I ought to answer very carefully,” Penny said.

“So would I.”



The Second Tieback

The woman who'd come for the tieback was called Mrs Gillespie. She asked if she should wait in the passage. Penny asked her to stay where she was and tell them what the shop had looked like when she came for the curtains the previous evening.

"Would it help if I stood where I was?"

"Yes," Watson said. "It usually does."

Mrs Gillespie moved as far as the marked square of carpet by the bell. Through the workroom door she could see the handles of a pair of shears, part of the cutting table and the end of the rail. Penny stood beside her. From there the blue raincoat looked as if it belonged to somebody leaning forward to see the rest of the shop.

"There was something white," Mrs Gillespie said. "On the rail. I told my husband there'd been a wedding dress and he said if it looked like curtains, he'd like to see the bride."

"Could you see the top of it?"

"I could see about as much as you can now. I suppose I thought of a wedding because it was white all the way down."

"What did you actually see Nell do?"

"Spread my curtains out. She was trying to work out which way I wanted the lining. I told her I'd take them any way up."

Mrs Bellamy came back with the missing tieback wound round her hand. “It was under the order book. I must have put it down when I was looking for the pencil.”

Mrs Gillespie took it. Then she stopped with one glove on and one glove off, looking from Penny to Mrs Bellamy.

“I told you Nell took something white down, didn’t I?”

“You said there was something white and Nell was clearing up,” Mrs Bellamy said.

“Did I say both at once?”

“You might have done.”

“In that case I might have meant both at once. I’m sure about the curtains.”

She went out with the new tieback held tightly in the ungloved hand. Mrs Bellamy watched the door close. Penny waited to be asked what she thought and was relieved when Mrs Bellamy asked a better question.

“If she did see a dress, what did I see?”

Watson picked up the photograph. She held it far enough from her face to see the whole skirt. The hem rose on one side where the bride had lifted it.

“What you expected to see,” she said. “That’s where we started too.”

A bus came by hard enough to stir the dust on the windowsill. Penny watched it stop outside, take up two people and leave room at the kerb for the rest of the street to go about its business. She’d been thinking of telephoning the Thistle to say she wouldn’t be there for

lunch. She didn't know why she thought anyone would be waiting for her.

"Is there somewhere we can talk to Nell properly?" she asked.

Mrs Bellamy looked at the workroom. "She likes it better if I don't stand where I can see what she's doing."

She picked up her order book and went to sit beside the shop bell. Penny thought there were a great many rather complicated things she could have said about being trusted. Mrs Bellamy had managed it by taking a book and sitting down.

The Dress on the Rail

Nell was pressing a curtain in the back room. Watson asked what had been on the hanger at four.

"The other dress," Nell said. "I put it there for Mrs Bellamy to see."

"What other dress?"

"The one I made to practise on. Same pattern. She said I could have the leftover cloth if I didn't mind piecing the skirt."

Nell fetched it from a drawer. She had taken it off the rail when the woman came for the curtains. She'd put it away so there'd be room to lay the curtains out. Watson turned the skirt back and found the join. From the door she'd never have seen it.

"Then where was the bride's dress at four?" Penny asked.

Nell looked back towards the front of the shop. "She took it at lunchtime. Her mother had finished it. I thought she knew."

Nell brought out her own notebook. It was full of cloth measurements and little flat drawings of dresses with no people in them. On the previous day's page she had written three times. After lunch she'd taken her practice dress off the worktable to make way for a pressing job. She put it on her rail. She'd meant to show Mrs Bellamy the join at the back before going home, because she'd

worked out how to shift the seam so that the fold stayed where she wanted it to.

"What time would that have been?" Watson asked.

"Before four. Mrs Bellamy went to the front then. I'd asked her to look at the fold and she said she'd been looking at it all week."

Penny had a little trouble picturing the exchange without deciding who was careless. If one person says she has been looking at a fold all week, the other has to work out whether she means this fold or all the folds she can remember.

"When did you put it away?"

"When Mrs Gillespie came for the curtains. There wasn't room for the skirt and the curtains on my side of the table." Nell laid the flat of her hand on the notebook. "I should have asked what dress she meant this morning."

"What did you think she meant?" Penny asked.

"She asked if I'd let anybody take it. I'd left the bride's dress on the worktable for her to pick up. I thought she was asking whether somebody else had got to it first."

"Did anyone?"

"No. I thought that was what I'd told her."

Penny thought of Alec saying he had enough plates. It was an answer to something. If he had wanted her to know what, he would have had to tell her.

Watson asked if Nell would show Mrs Bellamy her notebook. Nell said she would if Watson thought it would

help. Watson said she thought it would help if Nell did the talking herself.

Mrs Bellamy came through from the shop. Nell turned the notebook so both could see it. Her finger travelled down the page and stopped at the kind of small drawing Penny would have passed over if she had been allowed to turn the pages alone.

“That’s the dress I made,” Nell said. “I hung it up after your daughter had gone.”

Mrs Bellamy put down her own book. For the first time since Penny had come in, both of them were looking at the same piece of paper.

They found the bride at home, sitting at the kitchen table with the dress spread across two chairs. Along the cuff lay a row of old pearl buttons. At the top was an empty loop.

"I wanted to sew the last one on myself," she said. "Mum always told me to leave the last job for whoever was going to wear it. She didn't remember saying it when I asked her yesterday. So I took the dress home and thought I'd come back for the button when she'd had her tea."

Watson asked why she hadn't told her mother where she was going.

"I did. From the front door. She had the machine on."

Mrs Bellamy had come with them. She stood looking at the two chairs. Then she opened her hand. The yellow thread lay across the crease of her palm.

"You'll want a needle with a bigger eye," she said.

"There's one in the drawer."

Mrs Bellamy went to get it. She opened the wrong drawer first. Her daughter waited for her to try the next one.

A Button with Yellow Thread

Nobody had asked Penny or Watson to wait while the bride threaded the needle. Both sat down at the kitchen table as if waiting had been part of the commission. There was a plate with the crumbs of somebody's lunch still on it, and the bride pushed it towards herself to make room for the dress.

"I thought you'd bring the button round when you found it," she said to her mother.

"I thought I'd already sewn it on."

"Then I suppose we've both had a morning."

Mrs Bellamy pulled up a chair. She had the right drawer open now and was going through the needles with a care that made Penny want to stop all the sounds in the house. She chose one and held it out. Her daughter took it, got the thread through at the third attempt and asked her mother to pull the cushion nearer so the cuff would lie flat.

"The first button always sits a little higher than you expect," Mrs Bellamy said.

"I know."

"I know you do. I keep saying things."

The bride looked up. "I never minded the things you said while I stood on that box. I minded the pins in your mouth. It made me wonder what you'd say if you had both hands free."

Mrs Bellamy looked as if she might try it. She folded her hands instead. Her daughter drew the thread through, took a second stitch and then held out her wrist so her mother could see where the button sat.

Penny had been intending to ask whether the woman wanted her to replace the photograph in its paper sleeve. She could see where the bride had bent the edge by holding it. In the picture the single shoe looked a little too large. Penny turned the photograph face down, where nobody could mistake it for what was happening at the table.

"Do you want help with the knot?" Mrs Bellamy asked.

"Yes, please."

The bride passed the thread end over without looking. Her mother knew where to put her hand.

Outside, Watson put her notebook away. Penny thought she'd forgotten to write down something about the yellow thread. She nearly reminded her. Then she remembered that they'd found the dress, and that what the daughter chose to do with the last button was the daughter's business.

On the way back, Mrs Bellamy stopped them at the shop door. Penny took the photograph out of its sleeve and left it on the cutting table where they'd first looked at it.

"I ought to tell Nell myself," she said. "She came in early this morning to look behind the boiler. She thought I'd put the dress somewhere she couldn't reach."

"Did she find anything?" Penny asked.

"Three curtain hooks and half a biscuit. She brought me the hooks."

Mrs Bellamy went inside. Through the glass Penny saw her take the photograph off the cutting table and carry it through to the workroom. The shop bell was still wobbling. Watson waited until it stopped before she went on.

Mrs Bellamy caught them before they'd reached the corner. She said she'd told Nell the dress was found, and that she'd been wrong about what Nell had done with it. She'd got those two things out in the wrong order. Nell had waited until she finished both.

"What did she say?" Penny asked.

"She said she'd like to show me a seam."

Mrs Bellamy rubbed the pad of her thumb against a little hard place the needle always found. The photograph was no longer with her. She had left it on Nell's table with

the practice dress, so that they could look at the two together when they had finished talking.

"Would you mind if I asked her to do the next fitting?" she said.

"I shouldn't think it's for us to mind," Watson said.

"No. I was practising asking."

She thanked them and walked back to the shop. A young girl with a school bag waited for her at the door. The girl put one foot behind the other, in case her shoes were the first thing Mrs Bellamy saw. Mrs Bellamy looked down, went back for the piece of cloth she had promised to put on the floor, and held the door open.

The Chair by the Fire

Jean had put the supper tables back where they ordinarily went. There was a rubbed patch on the floor where the legs of the extra chairs had caught. She was on her knees with a damp cloth, trying to tell which of the marks she'd made herself.

"Will they all be back?" Penny asked.

"I hope they'll let me know if they are. I'm doing the pudding for six."

"Was it six yesterday?"

"It was six when I bought it."

She sat back on her heels. Penny bent to take the cloth from her, and Jean quietly moved it out of reach. Penny straightened and set the saltcellar where she could get it.

On the table nearest the fire there were two glasses with their rims touching. Jean picked up one and left the other.

"If I take both, somebody'll come back for the one I shouldn't have taken," she said.

Penny could have asked whose glass it was. She'd spent the morning working out why people answered the question they thought they'd heard. There were several better questions she could think of. She could ask who had been waiting for whom. She could ask why Jean had known the woman in green, or how long Alec had been expecting the man in the old coat. She could even ask

what Alec would tell her if she asked him in a room with nobody else in it.

Watson came back from the bar with two cups. She moved the remaining glass out of the way so they could put them down.

“Are you still thinking about the dress?” she asked.

“I was thinking about how easy it is to ask somebody a question that tells them what you’ve already decided.”

“Did you decide something?”

“I decided I’d like my tea while it’s hot.”

Watson gave her the cup with the warmer handle. They drank in the small room beside the bar, where it was possible to see the street without being seen from the fire. A delivery van stopped across the way. A man got out, looked at the address on his parcel, and went into the shop next door. Penny saw Alec turn to look as the van moved off.

“Shall we go back by the fire?” Watson asked.

Penny finished her tea. “If there’s room.”

Back by the fire, the chair Watson remembered was still empty. She put a hand on the back of it.

"Do you think this one's taken?"

Penny looked at the seat. There was nothing on it. She thought of the woman who had taken her handbag out of the way before the man in the old coat had said a word.

Alec came round the bar with a cloth over his shoulder. "You can sit there if you like. He won't be in till later."

"Does he always sit here?" Penny asked.

"He used to."

Watson drew the chair out and sat down. "We'll give it back when he comes."

Alec looked at the door. Then he pulled out the chair beside her for Penny.

"If he comes," he said.