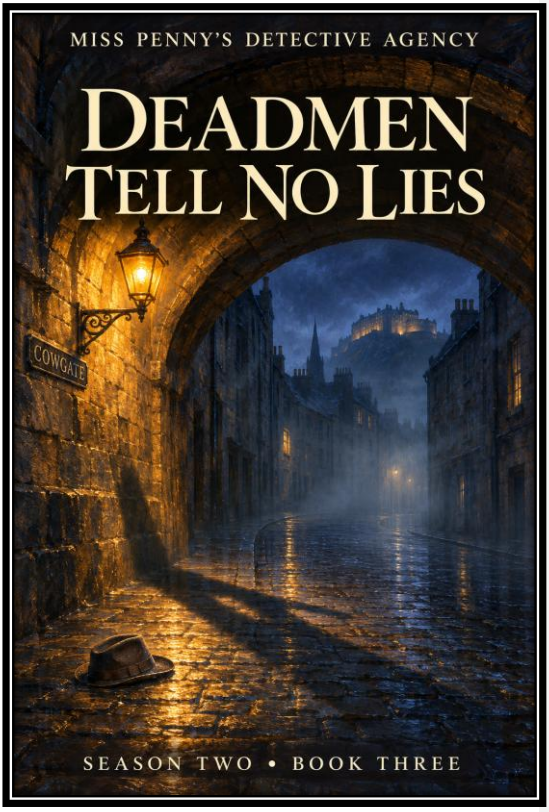

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
DEADMEN TELL NO LIES
COWGATE
SEASON TWO • BOOK THREE

Before Breakfast

By the time Watson had written down what the voice on the stairs said, Penny could think of three men it hadn't sounded like. That was as far as she was willing to go.

"Ask the Hangman," Watson read back. "He knows what people lose."

"I thought it was Sam."

"You thought that before he spoke."

Penny put a shoe on the edge of the carpet. The round mark disappeared under it. When she moved her foot it was still there. She had expected neither result to tell her anything, but she kept doing it.

The door downstairs opened. They both heard Alec greet somebody and ask if he'd come back for his hat. Penny waited for the voice to answer. There was some shuffling, the sound of a bolt being moved, and no reply she could hear.

In the morning Catriona Kerr came to the Thistle before the kettle had boiled. A man had been found hanging beneath the Cowgate arch before dawn. The police had already taken him down. Kerr wanted to know if anyone in the pub recognised a hat the police had found below him.

Commented [ED1]: Series artwork reminder: Whenever the Edinburgh pub's sign is visible and legible, it must read THE WHISTLING THISTLE. Known correction: Book 9 cover. Check the lettering there and on other covers and interior illustrations in later books. "The Thistle" can still be used as shorthand in dialogue and narration.

Alec asked whether the hat was grey. Kerr put a photograph on the bar. It was brown, with a raised seam round the crown.

“I had a man come looking for a grey one last night,” Alec said. “I never found it.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. I asked if he’d come for his hat. He pointed to the hook. There wasn’t one on it.”

Watson had seen the brown hat before. The man who wore it had stood outside the Thistle with Vale one of the first nights after she and Penny arrived. He had taken it off to shake the rain out. She could remember the ridge of cloth catching under his fingers.

“Does he have a name?” she asked.

“Donald Reid,” said Kerr. “His daughter identified him a little while ago.”

There was a moment in which Watson wished Kerr had said he had no name yet. The man she remembered had been able to put his hat on and go somewhere else. Donald Reid’s daughter had already had to turn round and go home without him.

The Hat



Kerr took them down as far as the corner. Overnight the rain had stopped and the stones beneath the arch had dried in patches. A shopkeeper stood beside his door with a broom, waiting for permission to sweep. He'd been waiting since seven. His regular customers had formed an opinion of the matter without seeing anything beyond the broom.

Kerr asked Watson to show her where she had seen the man speaking to Vale. Watson pointed from beneath the arch. At this angle there was no view of the Thistle at all. She had to walk half the length of the street to draw the line between the doorway and the place where the men had stood.

"He took his hat off here," she said.

“When you saw him with Vale, was it Vale who stopped him?”

“I couldn’t say. Vale was standing still when I looked. I thought of him as waiting because I already knew where he was going to sit.”

Penny studied the arch. Last night a man had spoken a word she hadn’t wanted to hear. This morning a body gave the word a meaning before she could ask what had been intended. She told Kerr about the voice.

“Did he say a name?”

“Only the Hangman.”

The shopkeeper set his broom against the door. “That’s what they call the man who does the frames.”

“What frames?”

“Pictures. Try the shop at the end of Candlemaker Row. I don’t know what he charges for hanging them.”

Kerr wrote it down. The shopkeeper asked if he’d be allowed to sweep. Kerr said she would send somebody to tell him. He moved the broom one foot nearer the door, in the apparent belief that she might be more inclined to send somebody if she could see how much remained to be done.

Behind the Glass

The framer had two pictures in his window. One was a watercolour of an empty cricket pitch. The other was a school photograph that curved away from its mount as though the children were leaning back. He opened the door while Penny was still reading the notice asking customers to ring.

“Which one of you wants a picture hung?”

“Do they call you the Hangman?” Watson asked.

“Only the ones who don’t have a picture ready when I come round.”

His name was Nairn. He knew Donald Reid. Reid had taken photographs for years, working mostly for people who needed to be able to prove what something had looked like before they knocked it down. Lately he’d been selling prints of streets to people who remembered living in them. He brought Nairn most of the work that needed a frame made to measure.

“Did he bring you a photograph of a man in a pub?” Watson asked.

Nairn looked at her over his glasses. “If you’re here for a police photograph, I’ll wait for the police to ask.”

She liked him for saying it. Penny liked him for bringing the school photograph in from the window and setting it flat under four little blocks. The children seemed to stand up a bit straighter.

They waited until Kerr had spoken to him. He could then show them the order book and tell them what the police had agreed could be shared. Donald Reid had ordered two enlargements from the same negative. One was to be cut in until it showed just the man at the table and the clock. The second would show the full frame. The cropped print had been paid for and collected. The other was still on order when Reid died.

“Who paid?” Penny asked.

“Cash. I know who came to collect it. It was Donald.”

Nairn laid his ruler along the order book. Reid’s writing was firm and small, except for the word *full*, which he had underlined twice. The man with the ruler asked if the police needed the full print made up even though nobody was now likely to pay. Watson asked how much it cost. He told her he hadn’t meant that.

For the Record

At the station, a constable asked Penny which of them was Miss Penny. Watson held her tongue. It was an excellent question, very politely put, and Penny had dressed that morning with the intention of looking like the answer to it.

Kerr offered them two chairs and then asked Watson to wait outside while she spoke to Penny. They had been solving questions together for long enough that Penny felt briefly put out by this. Kerr slid an empty sheet across the desk.

“Tell me about the stair. Start before you heard the voice.”

Penny told her about the mark on the carpet. Under questioning she decided she couldn’t tell whether it had been made by moisture. It was round. It had been visible from the tread where she knelt. The voice came from farther away than she’d expected, because she’d expected somebody to be standing quite close to her.

“Did you recognise it?”

“I thought I knew whose it was.”

“While he was speaking?”

Penny looked at the empty sheet. “Before. Watson reminded me of that afterwards.”

Kerr wrote it down and read it back. The statement sounded duller than any account Penny had yet given of the night. It also sounded rather more like what had happened. She signed it.

Watson came in afterwards and told Kerr that the photograph of the hat put her in mind of a man she had seen with Vale. She could describe the seam and the way he had taken it off. She couldn’t say she had seen the hat on the ground until Kerr showed her the photograph.

“Would you have recognised the man without it?”

“I’d have liked a second look,” Watson said.

At the end Kerr put them back in the same room and asked whether Donald’s daughter knew who they were. Neither woman had spoken to her. Kerr had asked Morag to come in that afternoon. If she wanted to speak to them about her father’s photographs, Kerr could give her their names. She would leave it to Morag to decide whether to invite them round.

Watson gave Kerr one of the agency’s cards. It had their Guiting Power address on it. Kerr turned it over and waited while Watson wrote the number at the Thistle on the back.

“The bar might answer,” Watson said.

“I’ve rung the bar before.”

“I expect Alec told you the person you wanted would be in later.”

“He did. Did you want to tell me something about Alec?”

Watson considered the question. There were a great many things she could say about him, including the fact that Penny had asked him how he took his holidays and apparently expected an answer. She said he had heard them ask about the cellar steps and offered them another lamp.

“If you find anyone else who’s seen something, give me their name before you tell them what the other witnesses saw,” Kerr said. She gave them her own number. “You can ask for me directly. The desk has got used to it.”

Morag rang after supper. Alec knocked on their door and said the caller sounded as though she’d already tried twice. Watson went down without her shoes and stood on the cold passage floor with the receiver in her hand.

“Inspector Kerr said I’d know whether I wanted to talk to you when I heard your voice,” Morag said. “I thought that was an odd thing for an inspector to say.”

“So do I.”

There was a little silence. Then Morag asked whether she could tell Watson something about a photograph.

Reid’s Daughter

Morag Reid lived over a cobbler’s shop. The steps to her flat were steep enough that she came down to see who was there before calling up to her father’s old dog to sit still. A moment later she told them there wasn’t a dog. She’d been saying it for years even when she knew he was with her father.

“He’s staying with my aunt,” she said. “At least somebody knows where he is.”

Morag let them in. Penny told her what they knew about the hat before Watson asked about the photographs. On the sideboard there was a recent photograph of Donald in a good jacket, holding a wooden spoon and frowning at it as though he’d expected somebody to give him a different award.

“He made terrible soup,” Morag said. “We gave it to him at Christmas.”

She wanted to know why the police kept asking when she’d last seen her father. She knew it had been Wednesday. On Thursday they’d spoken on the telephone. She could remember what he asked her,

but each time she told it somebody wanted to know what it meant. He'd asked if she still had a photograph he'd given her when she moved. She had dozens of his photographs. She asked which one. He'd said, *The one where I left room on the left.*

"Did you find it?"

She took out a biscuit tin. In the bottom, under some old prints of the family dog, was a photograph of a group of people at the Thistle. There was room on the left for two more people and a glimpse of a mirror. The clock on the wall said seven minutes to twelve.

"He lined them up for the darts club," Morag said. "There were prizes. That's Mrs Vale with the cup. She used to say my dad had cut the top off her trophy. He went back afterwards to take it on its own."

Watson looked at the empty space. The photograph Redd had carried on the train came from a different occasion. Mrs Vale's scarf had been on a chair beside her husband. The stopped clock was a feature of the room, as steady as the window. Watson had nearly let it give two different events the same time.

Morag asked if a mistake like that could get someone killed.

"I suppose it could," Watson said. "But we've only just caught ourselves making it."

An Hour That Would Do

Vale was in the bar at the end of the afternoon. He'd been sitting under the clock with an unopened newspaper for so long that Alec fetched him a second glass without pouring anything into it.

Watson told Vale the man with the brown hat had been identified. Vale looked at the clock rather than the women. His wife had known Donald from the darts club. He'd been taking her picture for as long as anybody had bothered to hang pictures of the team.

"What did he want from you outside the pub?" Penny asked.

"He wanted to know when the clock stopped."

"Did you know?"

"The day she won the cup. The landlord said he'd wind it on Sunday. She said to leave it till she played again. That was the last match she played."

Penny remembered the note Alec said he'd found behind the clock. She asked how long ago his wife had died.

"Eighteen months."

Kerr had given Watson permission to ask about a second photograph. Vale waited while she told him

that Reid had ordered a full print and a crop. He wanted to know which one Redd had.

“The crop.”

“Well,” he said, and laid both hands on the newspaper. “It wasn’t me he wanted the picture of, then.”

“Who was it?”

“If I knew that I’d have asked him.”

When he’d gone, Alec took his empty glasses away. Penny asked if he remembered Mrs Vale.

“Anybody would remember her,” Alec said. “She always finished her tea while it was hot.”

Penny looked down at her own cup. There was a little skein of steam left above it. Alec put the other glass under the counter.

“Did Donald Reid come in last night?” she asked.

“He came at half eight. I saw him in the passage. He was gone before I asked about the hat.”

“Then who did you ask?”

“Somebody at the hook. I saw the coat and thought it was Donald until he put his hand up.” Alec paused. “Donald had a finger missing. This man didn’t.”

Penny had spent an evening thinking she could tell when Alec was holding something back. She couldn't tell now whether he had remembered an important detail or simply decided she was the person to give it to.

A Different Door

Watson took Morag to the arch, because Morag had asked to see where he'd been found. She let her choose where to stand. From one side of the street a person could look up through it and see a row of bright windows beyond. From the other the whole opening was dark.

"Everybody says somebody must have seen," Morag said. "I don't think that's the same thing as somebody looking."

At a passage beside the arch, the police had put a man at the entrance and told him to stand on the side of it where the light was best. He saw the women and folded his arms. He wanted to know where they were going. Morag said home and waited while he decided whether to tell her which way that ought to be.

Watson bought two teas and took one back to the shopkeeper with the broom. He was nearly finished. He accepted the cup but continued to sweep with one

hand, doing a bad job in a manner that suggested it was important the job be his.

“Did you see a light below the arch on Thursday night?”

“I saw a light in the window opposite. It was at eleven or a little after.”

“Was that unusual?”

“He’s not meant to be in the shop at night. That’s why I saw it.”

“Who isn’t?”

“The man who owns it. It’s empty. He’s been waiting for a permit.”

She could see the window he meant. The glass was so dirty she couldn’t decide whether there was a blind inside. She asked him where he’d been standing. He brought her to his door and pointed with the broom.

From there the light they could see was not the window. It was the reflection of a small exterior lamp farther along, filtered through the passage that ran beside the empty shop. The lamp came on at dusk. The reflection only appeared when the painted door in front of it stood open.

Watson asked the shopkeeper if he could remember anything about the door. He said it was dark. She

thanked him. He looked worried about the tea, as if he thought she might take it back now that he had told her what she'd wanted to know.

She tried the doorway with Kerr later. It led round to a yard from which there was a view of the rear of the Thistle. A man could pass the window without ever going into the shop. Kerr photographed the view and asked whether Watson could give her anything that would tell them who had passed.

Watson looked at the stone threshold. It had been crossed by too many people. She said no. As they left, Kerr handed her the cup she'd put down and forgotten about. Watson recognised the little mark her thumbnail had left in the rim.

The Man at the Door

Kerr asked Watson to walk the passage with her once more in daylight. Someone had left a board leaning against the wall. The door scraped against it when it opened.

Kerr moved the board and tried the door again. It opened without a sound. Neither woman could see the arch from the yard. They could see a set of steps at the far side and, halfway up them, a delivery entrance

with the top half of a familiar thistle painted on it. The lower half had worn away.

“We could go straight back to the pub,” Watson said.

“We could knock and ask somebody to let us in.”

Watson laughed. She’d already been planning where the stairs went in her head, as though knowing what lay beyond the wall gave her a right to be on the other side of it. Kerr put the board back where it had been and went up to ask.

Jean answered wearing one glove. She had taken it off to turn the handle. She remembered hearing men in the yard as she finished the washing up on Thursday. She had opened the top half of the door, thinking somebody might be waiting for bottles, and seen Donald Reid standing with a man in a light jacket. She knew Donald because he always stood awkwardly when he had set his camera down. She had spent whole afternoons watching him wait for people to stop looking as if they were being photographed.

“Did the other man turn round?” Kerr asked.

“No. Donald did. He said, ‘I’ll tell you again when I’ve had a chance to see it.’ I thought he was talking to me, so I said, ‘See what?’ And he waved, the way people do when they don’t have time to explain.”

“What time did you go to bed?”

Jean showed them the last receipt she’d put through. It was folded in the till drawer to keep it from sticking up. At eleven she had sent the man who cashed up home. She had washed out one more glass. Kerr took her statement in the little room behind the bar while Watson waited outside.

When they went out again, the door latched on its own. There was the little sound of a hook dropping. Watson thought for a moment of a cup striking a wall. She stayed with the sound until she could tell herself which one she had actually heard.

The Full Print

Nairn telephoned the following morning. He had the full photograph. Penny expected to see a person on the right or left, as though somebody had removed a face and the woman's task was simply to put it back. The first person she saw was Vale. He looked unhappy about something in the glass in front of him.

Behind him was the clock. On the left there was a mirror in a bevelled frame. Against it stood a man with his arm raised, trying to get something into an envelope too small for it. A coat hung over an unoccupied chair beside him.

Watson looked at the sleeve of the coat. At the angle of the photograph she could see the right pocket hanging lower than the left one. The man in the mirror wore glasses. She let herself take another breath before giving Kerr his name.

"I think that's Martin Redd."

Kerr looked at it. "Do you think he knew he was being photographed?"

"I think he knew somebody was in the room. That's all I can see."

Nairn let them use a magnifier. The open flap of the envelope was over the man's wrist. From farther away it looked as if he were putting something into it.

Viewed quite close, it looked equally possible that he was taking something out.

“Why would you give him a photograph with himself cut out?” Penny asked.

Nairn said photographers kept the part they thought they could sell. Reid might have thought a man would pay good money not to know what the other print showed. Kerr asked if he had evidence of that. Nairn said he had evidence of a man who’d ordered two prints. He took their cups into the back and left them to look at it.

The photograph put Redd and Vale in the same room before Redd boarded the train. It also showed that somebody had gone to the trouble of taking Redd out of the copy he carried. Watson had assumed it was only Vale who mattered in that picture. Now she wondered which of them the photographer had been watching. When Watson said that to Penny, Penny looked at the envelope in the photograph as if she had seen it lying on her own table.

What the Dead Man Said

The builders told Kerr about a man named Ian Tait. He had use of the yard and a spare key to the painted door. He told the police he’d gone through earlier that

night to retrieve a radio. He had seen nobody. He could remember it had been raining. It would have taken a greater effort to find somebody who didn't remember that.

Watson asked the man with the broom whether he could see the reflection when the builders left at five. He could. She asked if he could remember a radio. He couldn't. He remembered somebody shouting about a telephone. She brought his answer to Kerr exactly as he gave it. She was tempted to tell her he had said it was a woman. All he'd said was that the person sounded young.

Morag found the voice the following day. She was going through her father's messages when she got to one he'd saved. It was her own message from Thursday, telephoning to say she'd found the photograph. After it there was a short, angry message from a man who told Donald to bring the other print to the yard. Donald had written the hour on the order for the enlargement. Morag recognised the voice. It was Tait, who'd once borrowed equipment from her father for a job. She took the tape to Kerr.

The Envelope in the Yard

The police search of the yard turned up a torn envelope wedged behind a drainpipe. There was a

clean line on the paper where it had been pressed against the wall. On the front Donald had written Tait's name and the hour he was supposed to meet him. It contained a blank sheet of photographic paper. The sheet hadn't been exposed. Nairn could tell Kerr what it was, but had no idea why Donald had brought it.

"He might have meant to show him he'd nothing to be afraid of," Penny said when Kerr told them.

"Or he wanted to see what Tait would do before he handed him anything that mattered," Watson said.

Kerr was interested in where the time came from. The saved message said to come after eleven. The envelope said eleven ten. She asked the shopkeeper if he could get closer than a little after eleven for the light he had seen.

"He'd locked his shop at eleven," Watson said. "He was putting the rubbish out. His brother was waiting in the van, and the brother might have another way of placing it."

His brother had one. He had listened to the start of a late radio programme while waiting for the shopkeeper. He heard the shop door shut while the presenter was still halfway through a sentence. Kerr checked the programme time. Together the two men

could place the reflection within a few minutes either way. They still couldn't tell who had opened the door.

Tait had earlier said he was home by a quarter to eleven. Within the hour after Kerr put the witness accounts to him, he admitted he'd lied. He wanted to know who had seen him. She asked him to tell her why it mattered so much whether anybody had.

Watson heard about that part later. Kerr said the evidence gave her a meeting and a lie about it. The question she now took more seriously was why Donald had gone to the yard with the blank sheet.

Nairn telephoned after the police had left. He had found an unpaid order under the counter for an enlargement Donald had put through the previous month. It carried no name, only the word *mirror*. He offered to give Kerr the order number. She asked for the paper itself. By the time she came for it he'd cleared a space on the counter so he could lay it flat, as though it were a picture somebody still meant to collect.

Tait eventually admitted that he had arranged to meet Donald and that he'd been with him when he died. Kerr told Penny and Watson that he would be charged with Reid's murder. She gave them no account of what happened under the arch. She said Tait had

made some claims he could be asked to account for in court.

“Was it for the print?” Penny asked.

“He thought it was going to show him,” Kerr said. “Someone had told him Donald had taken a photograph that would do him a great deal of harm.”

“But it shows Redd.”

“Yes,” Kerr said. “That’s what I want to know.”

When Watson went to see Morag she asked whether the tape had been returned. It hadn’t. The police had let her have a copy, and she was going to keep it. She said it had her own voice on it before Tait’s. For a long time she’d wanted that Thursday to tell her whether she had done enough. What she heard on the tape was herself telling her father she’d call round in the morning.

“Could you leave it there?” she asked, pointing to a shelf.

Watson set it beside the wooden spoon. Morag went to the door to let her out. The dog was there now, waiting at the top of the steps without making a sound. It put one paw forward when Morag asked if it wanted to go out. Morag waited until she was ready to go out herself.

The Cup Again

Penny found Alec sitting at Vale's table after the pub closed. He'd taken the clock down again, this time to tighten the bracket. The old nail had left a mark in the wall that looked remarkably black from anywhere you sat.

"Can you put it back without winding it?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Would you?"

Alec lifted it carefully. Penny moved the chair for him. The two of them stood back when it was straight. Penny knew it would always tell her what time it had been for Mrs Vale, if there was anybody left to tell her the story.

"Who told Tait the picture was of him?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"You were here when Redd and Vale were in that photograph."

"I was here for quite a lot of things that don't make it into photographs."

Penny turned her cup to see whether he had given her the one with the chip. It was an ordinary cup, without

any marks she could use. She drank the tea while it was warm.

Upstairs Watson had written down the whereabouts of both prints. Under that she had left a line for the negative. Nairn said Donald had taken it away. Morag hadn't found it. Kerr was going to ask Tait once more about the man who had first told him there was a photograph. None of that would put Donald back in his chair at his daughter's table.

From the close came the sound of coins in a cup. Penny lifted the window and looked down. The man with the cap stood under the lantern. He set the cup on the low wall. Something moved on the stones near his feet. He stooped in the way people stoop to a dog they already know. By the time Watson came to the window, there was only a shallow saucer beside the cup.

"What was it?" Watson asked.

Penny kept her eyes on the stones. “I thought it would come back if I waited.”

