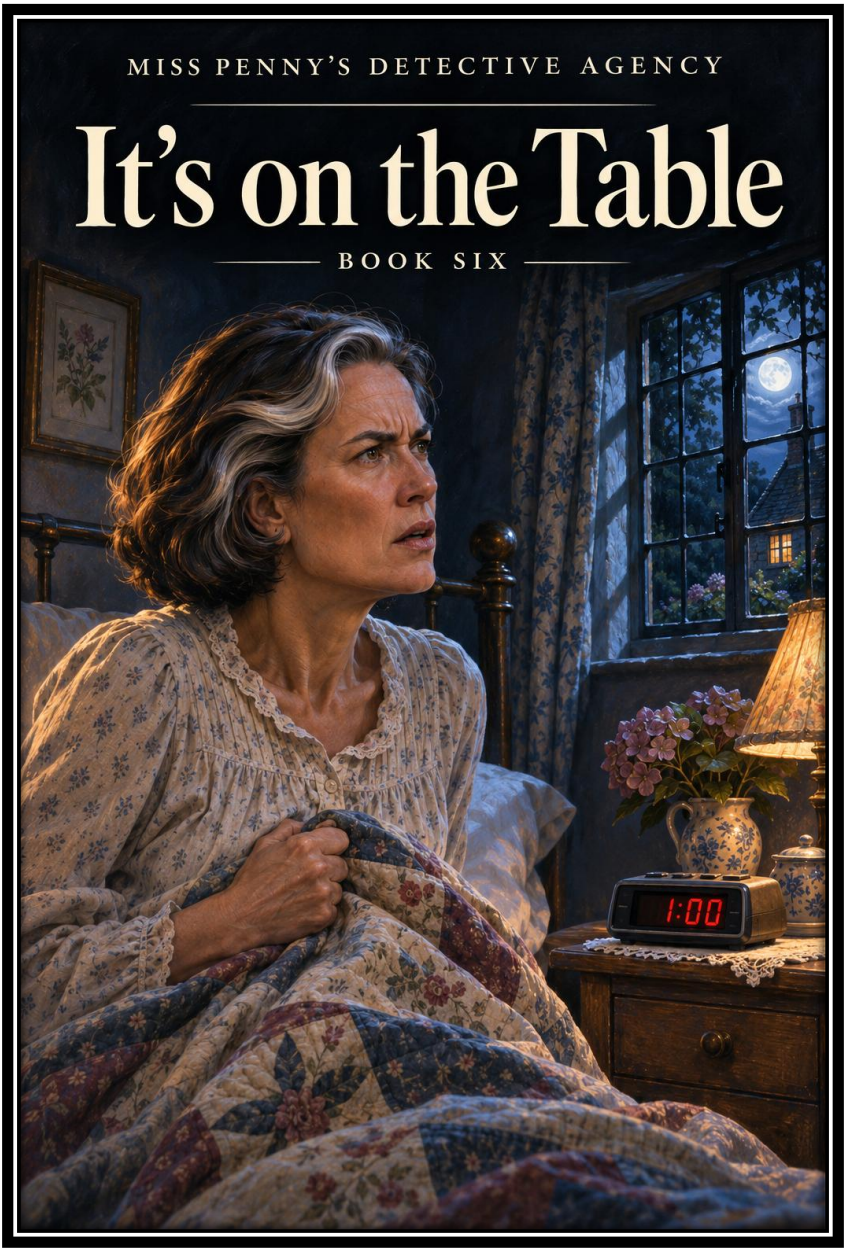

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
It's on the Table
BOOK SIX
1:00

One in the Morning

“It’s on the table,” Penny said.

She opened her eyes. She was sitting bolt upright with the quilt gathered in both hands. Across the little bedroom the clock read 1:00.

“It’s on the table.”

She said it again deliberately, hoping the rest of the sentence would come back. There was no rest of the sentence. There was no dream she could put before it, either. Outside, rain had begun again, a little at a time against the sill.

Penny waited until the clock said 1:03. Then she put on her dressing gown and went downstairs to see what was on the table.

A bowl with two apples in it. The morning post, already opened. Watson’s sewing basket, with a sock draped over the edge. Penny picked up the sock and put it down again. She had been awake in the night for worse reasons. Still, she went to the kitchen window and checked the gate.

In the morning she told Watson while Watson was making toast.

“What was on the table?”

“I was rather hoping you might tell me.”

Watson moved the marmalade. “Well, it isn’t under that.”

They ate at the kitchen table because there was no reason to take anything into the sitting room until the agency opened. The repaired window had stopped looking new. It had collected the same damp in the corners as the old one, and a faint print from where Watson had last moved a vase.

“How did you know it was what you were saying when you woke?” Watson asked.

“I could hear myself finish.”

“Do you ever talk in your sleep?”

“I’ve never stayed awake to find out.”

Watson scraped a black bit off the toast. She pushed the less burnt slice across the table. At nine there was a knock at the agency door, four taps followed by a fifth, as if the caller had heard herself knock and thought it too loud.

The Supper

Rose Vale had brought a photograph in a library book to keep it flat. She took it out at the agency table with

one hand underneath it. Watson put a clean sheet of paper down so they could all lean over it without touching the print.

It showed a village supper. A long trestle table filled half the room, with a little square window just above it. There was a cake at the near end and a silver teapot halfway down. The pot belonged to somebody who polished it before letting it out of the house. It shone even in the old photograph. Against the wall stood a man in shirtsleeves with an apron folded over one arm.

“That’s my father,” Rose said. “Daniel.”

Penny waited. In the photograph he appeared to be watching the person taking it. The rest of the room had found something else to look at.

“I was nine when he left. Monday the sixth of May, 1957. My mother called it the sixth even when she’d forgotten what year it was. He had an early train to catch. I used to wake up early and think I might catch him coming back by the same train.”



“Did you see him leave?” asked Watson.

“No. I was with my aunt. She told me he’d gone, and when I asked my mother she said there was nothing more to say.”

Rose pointed to the cake. Her mother always put candied violets around the edge of her birthday cake. Even in black and white, Rose said, nobody else she knew had left quite so many bare patches between them. That year her mother’s birthday fell on Thursday the ninth. She’d looked it up in an old calendar, twice, because she thought she must have made a mistake.

“Where did you get the photograph?” Penny asked.

“My mother’s friend left me a few things. This was tucked in the back of an album. I don’t think the friend knew my father was in it.”

“Did you know the supper was at the mill?”

“My mother used to say the floor was so cold they kept their coats on to eat. I remember being told I could go when I was old enough. It closed before I was.”

Watson made a note of the dates. “What would you like us to find?”

Rose took her hand off the photograph, leaving a pale place where she had been holding it.

“I’d like to know if he had those three days. I thought they were mine to be angry with him about. If he was here all that time, I’ve been angry about the wrong thing.”

Three Days

At the Farmers Arms, Ellen directed them to Bert Finch, who had helped carry tables down to the mill as a boy. Bert was eating a pickled egg and asked them to wait until he had finished with it.

“Anybody could go to a supper if they brought a plate,” he said. “You didn’t have to work there. You did have to fetch your own plate home. Some of them turned up weeks later.”

Watson showed him the photograph. Bert knew the table because his father had made its top from old bench boards. He pointed to a dark crescent at the near corner where a paraffin stove had scorched the grain. Someone had tried to sand it away.

“It still caught a rag when you wiped it,” he said. “We always turned that end to the wall.”

“Was the room on the lane side?” Penny asked.

“Everyone went in from the yard. There were all sorts of little rooms. If you’d been carrying a table down there half a century ago, you’d remember the man on the other end never took his share of it.”

He remembered very few faces. On the silver teapot he could offer an opinion. The mill owner’s wife brought it out only when somebody had to be thanked. Penny asked whether Rose’s mother had been thanked.

“For what?”

“I was hoping you’d know.”

Bert thought about it. “She baked the cake.”

Outside, two vans tried to pass in the lane and a woman with a dog held a gate open to let Watson step back. By the time the vans sorted themselves out, Penny had got the photograph out again.

“The cake doesn’t tell us who the supper was for,” she said.

“And a coat doesn’t tell us who wore it,” Watson said. “We’ve had that lesson.”

Penny glanced down at the table in the picture. She put it away before she had to explain why she kept looking there.

Rose’s aunt had died, but the aunt’s neighbour, Miss Tandy, still lived in the house next door. She told them she remembered Rose coming to stay. A little girl could create a lot of washing, especially when she was running out to the gate every hour in wet weather. Miss Tandy remembered seeing Daniel’s suitcase in the aunt’s hall where it stayed for most of the week.

“His suitcase?” asked Watson.

“It had a torn strap. His wife asked if I could mend it. When I took it back, there was a loaf of bread in it. Her sister said it saved carrying a shopping bag.”

“Did you see him take it away?”

“I saw her sister take it up the stairs. It might have been an extraordinarily useful suitcase. I wouldn’t take it as evidence of a journey.”

Watson drew a line through the word luggage in her notebook. Underneath she wrote the word twice, smaller each time, until she decided she could remember it without writing it at all.

The Birthday Cake

Rose went with them to see the old baker's daughter, who kept three albums of receipts and photographs. She made Rose wait while she found the right one. There was a photo of six of the mill women outside the bakery, with a large cake brought out on the flat of a bread board.

"That's my mother's cake," Rose said.

"It is. She brought the violets in a paper bag. I put two of them in my mouth and nearly got sent home."

On the facing page, under 9 May 1957, the bakery had recorded an order for two dozen rolls for the mill. In the space for delivery the baker had written Vale to carry. Clipped to the page was a second print of the very supper photograph Rose had brought them. On the back the baker had dated it that Thursday evening and noted that the rolls had all gone.

"Any Vale could have carried them," Penny said.

“Yes, but I watched Daniel drop one.” The baker’s daughter went on shifting her finger over the paper, looking for something else. “He picked it up and said he’d have that one himself, as nobody else was to be expected to eat it. I’d forgotten that till you brought it up.”

Rose was sitting on a high stool with her feet gone still on the rung.

“What did he say about going away?”

“To me? Nothing at all. I was a girl measuring out rolls.” The baker’s daughter looked at her. “If he’d been going, he’d have asked my mother to put one by for the train.”

Before they left, Rose asked if she could see the photograph of the women once more. She studied her mother’s face until Penny thought she might be trying to work out whether she was happy.

“She must have known he was there,” Rose said.

“She might’ve been trying to tell you something she thought you could bear at nine,” the baker’s daughter said.

Rose closed the album carefully. “She went on telling me at thirty-nine.”

Outside she said she'd like to walk home by herself. Penny watched her take the longer road.

"We can tell her he was here on Thursday," Watson said.

"Yes," said Penny. "I think we can."

The Name on the Back

Rose came back to the agency the following morning without an appointment. She had brought the empty album in a string bag and said over the threshold that she was afraid she might be wasting Penny's time.

"That would make two of us," said Penny. "Come and have some tea."

Rose turned the album over. In the back, stuck beneath an elastic loop, was an envelope she'd taken to be empty. The envelope had been addressed to her mother in the handwriting of the woman who had owned the album. Inside was a draft of an invitation, two names crossed out at the bottom. Daniel Vale was one. The typing had worn almost through the cheap paper where somebody had rubbed at the date.

"Do you think they took his name off because he'd gone?" Rose asked.

Penny looked at the list. The letters beside each of the other names had been written in pencil. Some had a C, some a P, one a T. Penny asked whether Rose knew what the letters meant.

“I thought they were initials.”

“Then we’d have to explain why Mrs Cross has a P.”

Rose looked round the room. “She kept a pantry. It was part of her house. She let the village keep things in it when there was a jumble sale.”

“Who was the other crossed-out name?”

“Mr Finch. Bert’s father.”

They borrowed the paper, with Rose’s permission, and found Bert outside the pub with one foot on its doorstep. He knew the invitations. The list was for people bringing things and the letters were for the things they had to bring. P was plates. C was cups. He’d forgotten T until he saw his father’s name. “Tables,” he said. “My father delivered that one in the afternoon. Put him in a bad temper for an hour because nobody thanked him. He was always putting himself out and hoping somebody would notice.”

“Why cross him out?”

“Because it was done, I expect.”

Penny showed him Daniel's name. Bert rubbed his nose. "Daniel used to carry things on foot. I never saw him with a lorry. I remember how far back he used to lean to carry something with both arms."

"Rolls?" asked Watson.

"He might have carried rolls. I can tell you who picked up the crockery afterwards. My mother did. She complained because two of the cups stayed on the stairs for a week."

"What stairs?"

"The ones to the office." He folded the paper before he remembered it wasn't his. "They used to put a cup on a stair when there was nowhere else to put it. I don't think you'll find a straight answer in what we left behind for you."

Watson gave Rose the folded invitation and told her what they had. One record put Daniel at the bakery on Thursday. A witness remembered him there. The photograph put him in the supper room. Rose said all right, as if she had promised herself she would say exactly that when the moment came.

"Do you want us to stop here?" Penny asked.

Rose put the invitation into her bag. "It's the first time I've wanted you to go on."

The Key on the Hook

Crowther had been caretaker at the mill since the days when it still had an office. He now looked after it for owners who came down twice a year and never wore the right shoes. He gave Penny and Watson a tour of the yard without going inside. Somebody had knocked out an old dividing wall and put up a newer one. He couldn't say which room would have been called the supper room.

"Plans?" asked Penny.

"The parish archive has all that. Some of it is just the name of the thing they were keeping in the room. A room that was a store one year might be somewhere the women had their tea the next."

Watson asked how much of the building had come down.

"Only the little lean-to on the lane side. Its window came down with it. The main mill's still standing. We blocked the opening where the lean-to joined it."

Penny looked at the patched stone. From the lane she could see nothing of the ground behind the mill, where the old wheel channel ran below the yard.

Crowther took them into the office while a shower passed. He had written the names of things on white

card above a row of hooks. The spare key to the supper room, which might once have been stores, hung on one. A far newer key with a red tag was for the outer door.

“You can still get into the room then,” said Watson.

“There’s a room we call that, yes. I dread to think how many names it’s had.”

A photograph of the mill hung over the old desk. From the lane nobody could see much of its wheel. From downstream it stood out against the stone. On one of its spokes there was a bright patch where somebody had put a plate over a split in the timber.

“You’d know that wheel anywhere,” Crowther said. “My father fitted that plate and made it too big. He didn’t like doing anything twice.”

As they went back to the car, Crowther gave Watson the office number in case she wanted him to open up another day. At the yard gate he pointed out a slab in the grass. The old wheel channel ran under it and fed a low grating in the main building. In wet weather the flood board was supposed to keep the race out of the ground floor.

Penny fetched the photograph out for half a minute on the drive home. Watson, who was driving, asked what she was doing.

“Looking for a room with a window.”

“Look for a person who knows the building as it was. The stone won’t tell you as much as it thinks it will.”

The Open Door

There had been a woman trying the agency door while Penny was out with Rose. Ellen reported it in a call from the village hall. The woman had read the hours off the card and asked which of the two detectives normally worked in the afternoon. Ellen told her they kept their own hours, which was true of almost everyone she knew who had tried to keep proper ones.

“Was she looking for either of us in particular?” Penny asked.

“I thought she was looking for both of you. Then she said something about having hoped to catch you alone.”

“What exactly did she say?”

“‘I had hoped to catch her on her own.’ I thought she meant you.”

“Why?”

“She was looking at your name on the door.”

Penny asked Ellen how she knew the woman had tried the handle. Ellen said she'd seen her walk up to it and put her hand out. She could have been reading the little words at the bottom of the card. Ellen had been across the road in a car at the time. Everything she could say for certain came down to one sentence and a hand raised halfway.

"Perhaps she had a case," said Ellen.

Penny thanked her. Afterwards she went round and looked at the card. Under the name of the agency, where the woman's hand would have been, was the telephone number. It was in the village directory, too.

She left the card where it was. When Watson came in, Penny said a woman might call again, and that she was to take a message if the woman wanted to speak to just one of them.

"Did she leave a name?"

"No."

"One day," Watson said, "someone's going to give us the information we actually need."

Penny went to the side gate with the rubbish and found it standing open. She remembered leaving it that way herself. She carried the rubbish through and

came back without closing it. It took considerably more effort than it ought to have done.

The Reading Table

By the next afternoon Watson had worked through a box of transport records at the parish archive. Mrs Kersey brought her a pencil after she saw Watson starting to write in ink. Then she brought a cushion for the chair, because the chairs had been given by the parish office for people to sit in until somebody could get them out.

Watson found flour sent out in fifty-six pound sacks and bags of sweepings sold at a discount. She found a lorry repair followed by a note about who was to pay for the time lost. Halfway through a bundle of ruled slips she found one with nothing in the column headed Weight.

The collection was for six on Friday the tenth. It named the mill, gave the room as Stores, and ordered that Daniel Vale be released into the driver's care. There was a signature below the instruction. Watson could make out a capital E. She drew the rest as well as she could, in case her own handwriting began to tell her what to see.

In the next chair a man in a dark coat had folded a sheet of maps along the crease. As he reached to set it down, Watson noticed a repair just under one of his pockets. It was beautifully done in thread a shade too light.

She asked Mrs Kersey for the telephone. Mrs Kersey showed her to the desk and said she could dial for her if she wanted. Watson said she had the number. The man in the coat turned a page while she waited for Crowther to answer.

She told Crowther she'd found a release order in the mill papers and asked if she could look at the old supper room. He said he'd leave the outer door open. The room was the first door beyond the stairs, he told her. She repeated the directions to be sure. She asked if Crowther would be there. When she glanced back, the man in the coat was still holding the same page.

"Somewhere about. Give us a ring when you've finished, will you? I don't like leaving it open overnight."

She put the slip back with the others. Mrs Kersey had put a little lead weight on her notebook to stop it closing. Watson lifted it off, thanked her for trusting her with the archives and promised to return the pencil next time.

She reached the pavement before remembering the pencil. When she went back to return it, the chair beside hers was empty. The man's request for maps was still on the corner of the desk.

The Other Copy

Penny had taken Rose's photograph to a camera shop to order a copy. She asked the man behind the counter to show her where the window was. He pointed politely to the window. She asked if the shop could make it any larger without losing detail.

"I can make a copy of the whole thing today," he said. "For an enlargement I'd rather have the negative."

She chose a copy and asked him to tell her what he saw on the table.

"Plates. A jug. There's a teapot, by the looks."

She asked for the copy in a cardboard sleeve.

The man who did the photographs let Penny look through the camera shop's magnifier while he made up her bill. By then she'd spent long enough on the picture to have an opinion about every person in it. The child in front with one button undone was probably being told to be still. The woman laying

down her knife was the only person who seemed inclined to help her. Rose's father had the face of someone who expected to be called away from where he was standing.

"See anything?" the man asked.

"I've been looking at it all day. I've probably begun seeing things I brought with me."

He handed over the bill. On the back he'd written the number of the negative in case she wanted another print.

"You made a negative from the photograph?"

"Certainly."

"Then I don't have to leave it with you to get another one?"

"It's yours to take wherever you want."

She had meant to take the original to the agency. On the way out she changed her mind and went to Rose's. Rose answered with an old jumper on over an apron. She asked Penny to come through to the back, where she'd put a coat out to dry.

"Mine this time," Rose said. "I thought I'd better tell you."

Penny gave her the photograph and said she had a copy. Rose looked at the cardboard sleeve under Penny's arm and asked whether she was to keep the album hidden away.

"Where did you put it before you thought it was evidence?"

"On the top of the chest. Where I could see it when I came down."

"That sounds all right."

Rose took the print upstairs and left Penny waiting by the coat. When she came back she was carrying a small framed photograph of her father at a beach. The tide was out, and he had the bottoms of his trousers rolled up. There was a little girl beside him. Penny knew which question rose to her lips and took an instant before she asked it.

"Is that you?"

"I was looking at my feet because he said the shells might cut me. That's what I remember. My feet. I don't remember holding his hand."

She set the photograph on the dresser while she took Penny's cup to fill it again. Penny wondered how long it had been in a drawer. When Rose brought the tea back, neither moved the picture.

“I think I wanted you to find he couldn’t have gone,” Rose said.

“He was there on Thursday. We can put that much right.”

“And if he went on Friday?”

“Then Friday’s where we’ll start looking.”

Penny let Rose sit with that. There was no agreement they could come to about whether a search would make things better. They could agree to look a day further. When Penny left Rose was still at the table, with one foot hooked round a leg of her chair. The photograph was still on the dresser.

When Penny got back to the agency, there were two messages on the answering machine. She pressed Play. The first was from Rose, whose voice sounded stronger on the tape than it had across the table.

She said she’d remembered something about her mother’s account of the train. Her mother had always said it was the early train because she knew Daniel would have hated to get up for it. It was the sort of detail that made you believe somebody had been there to see it. Rose had never been able to remember which station he was meant to have left from. Once she’d asked and her mother said she thought she was being tiresome.

Penny replayed Rose's message. Just before Rose hung up, somebody closed a door. Looking at that photograph all day had made Penny quick to give every little thing a meaning. She wrote herself a reminder to ring Rose in the morning, then let the tape run on.

The Telephone Call

The second message was from a woman who didn't give her name. She asked whether Penny had found the book she meant to lend her. There was no message from Watson. Penny dialled the number she knew and waited for Diana to answer.

"Hello," said Diana.

"I found the book. It was there all the time."

"Aren't they generally?"

"I'd put a pile of papers over it."

"Well, it can wait. You sound as if you've had a day."

Penny looked down at the photograph. "There's a girl who was told her father left her. She's getting on for fifty now. She still wants to ask him where he went."

Diana didn't say how sad it was. She asked whether the girl had anybody she could ask who'd known both her parents. It was the first question anyone who hadn't met Rose had asked Penny that she thought she could use.

"I'll ask her," she said.

When she hung up, the light had faded from the sitting room. She put the photograph on the table and turned on the lamp.

The Room Called Stores

Watson pushed the outer door at the mill with the flat of her hand. Inside there was a passage lined with old whitewash and a strip of levelling plaster. Rain tapped the top of a tin bin somebody had left to catch a leak.

She called Crowther's name. At the foot of the stairs a man held a door ajar, his back half turned. He had a map folded lengthways under his arm, just as the man at the archive had. In the gloom she couldn't see his face. Then she saw the trestle table beyond him and the dark mark at one end. A narrower stair rose to another door at the far end of the room. The wood caught at the tissue she took from her pocket. Bert had been right about the rag.

She took out her notebook and wrote stores beside supper room, with a line between the two. Out in the passage there was a sound like an empty drawer being dropped. She called again.

A man's voice said, "You can leave it with me."

She turned to collect her folder and ask whom to thank.

The key turned.

At first she thought he had simply got hold of the wrong door. She went across and called through it. When he didn't answer she pulled on the handle. It had been painted so often she could see the marks her fingers left in the dust.

Watson used the telephone she carried when Penny insisted on it. She had to stand at the little square window to hear Penny answer.

"I'm at the mill. I think he's locked the door."

"What man?"

"I don't know. I thought it was Crowther."

Penny asked which room. Watson said she could see the table from the photograph. She started to say something about the stairs. Behind her came a rush louder than the rain. Water was forcing its way through a low iron grating at the bottom of the wall.

"Watson?"

The water came across the floor. Watson took the telephone up the steps with her. There was a locked door at the top. She tried it twice, then came back down to the window where she'd last had a signal. By then she could no longer hear Penny.

What's on the Table

Penny got through to emergency services and told them a woman had been locked in a room at the mill. She rang Crowther next. He'd gone home after his wife rang to say the road was flooding. He would come back, he said, but from his side of the village he didn't know how far he'd get. He told Penny where the main entrance was. She already knew.

By the time she reached the yard the first crew was there. A man in a heavy waterproof was walking out from an open door. There was water in the passage, he said. He wanted to know where else they might get in. Penny said if they could find the room with the little square window they would find her friend.

They could see the whole of the lane wall from where they stood. Nothing broke its surface above the dark strip of water. A man in a council jacket told her the old room with a window was gone. He gestured

towards the blank stone as if it proved what he remembered.

“She was in a room with a table,” Penny said.

There were men coming and going now. She was asked to wait just where she was, which was beside the door of her car. She got the photograph out of the cardboard and held it under the light inside the car. At first she tried to count bricks. Then, with the photograph so close to her face that the edge touched her nose, she heard her own voice from the night she’d woken at one.

It’s on the table.

She stopped looking at the window. Halfway along the table was the silver teapot. On its side, stretched in the curve of the metal, was part of a circle with straight lines coming out of it. At the end of one line, a little bright rectangle. A small, square frame of daylight surrounded it.

She’d seen the plate on that spoke in the photograph in Crowther’s office. The square of daylight in the teapot was the window itself. The wheel was outside it, so the window had to face the millrace. They had been searching the wall on the lane.

She caught a firefighter as he passed the car. He looked where she pointed, then put his hand to his

radio. From the bend farther down the bank, somebody called that he could see a window.

“Watson!” Penny shouted.

She watched a pale hand appear on the sill. Below it was a strip of checked sleeve. The man with the radio told her to stay where she was. She did. It was the most difficult thing she’d done all day.

Inside, Watson had climbed onto the trestle table. It had shifted once under her weight. She had got her fingertips over the sill and waited, first for the table to go and then for the ladder to come. When somebody shouted her name from outside, she thought it was the first time she had ever been glad to hear Penny sound cross.

The Far Bank

The ladder left a blue scrape on the stone. A firefighter wrapped Watson in a borrowed blanket and set her down on the bank. Penny took her shaking hand and kept her eyes on Watson.

On the far side of the millrace, beyond the reach of the firefighters' lamps, a man stood among the alders. Nobody on the bank turned his way.

He'd known about the window. He hadn't counted on the table.

A key shone once between his fingers before it struck the water. He turned towards the lane. Beside the ladder, Watson loosened her grip.

"You can let go now," Watson said.

"I know," said Penny.

