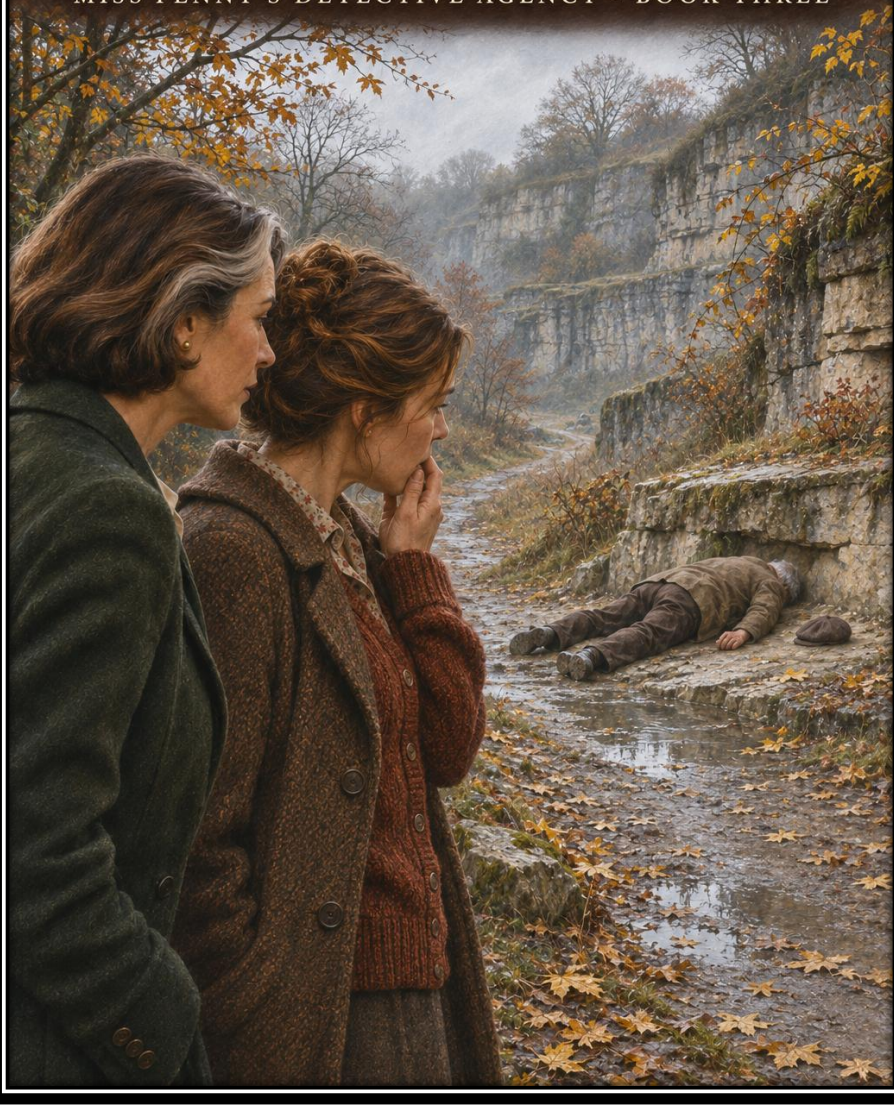
THE DEADMAN'S QUARRY

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY · BOOK THREE



The room with the kettle

“Where is he?”

Penny opened her eyes. Watson was sitting opposite her on a wooden chair. She had her coat on, but one of her shoes was missing. Behind her, a kettle was coming to the boil.

“Where is who?” Penny asked.

“Sir James Bond.”

The kettle clicked off. The man made no move to take it from its stand.

“I have no knowledge of James’ whereabouts, or for that matter if he is even alive or dead.”

“You call him James.”

“I’ve called him worse. That won’t help you find him.”

Watson looked down at her stockinged foot. “Where’s my shoe?”

The man glanced towards the door. It was the first time he’d taken his eyes off Penny.

“Thank you,” said Watson. “I wondered which way we’d come in.”



Penny remembered the fish and chips. Watson had asked for extra vinegar, and the woman behind the counter had wrapped both portions in the same parcel to keep them warm. That had been less than an hour ago. By then they'd already solved the murder.

The man who came early

On Tuesday, 10 December 1996, three days before the man asked about Bond, Watson put the electric fire on under the agency desk and took turns warming each foot. The telephone rang twice that morning.

The first call was Diana. She wanted to know if Penny had time for lunch before Christmas. Somewhere at her end a door kept opening and shutting.

"I thought we might eat in the kitchen," Diana said.

"Can you get us in?"

"I know where they keep the biscuits, if that counts."

Penny wrote LUNCH in the diary. Diana promised to ring back when she found an afternoon to herself.

The second caller said his name was Hobb.

"Len Hobb. I used to work up at Deadman's Quarry. Would you and Miss Penny meet me there at nine tomorrow? I want to show you what used to be written on a wall."

"Has somebody painted over it?"

"They've put up a cupboard."

"Can the cupboard be moved?"

"I moved it yesterday," he said. "That's why I'm ringing."

The last of the boards

Ellen Shaw had made a list on the back of an exhibition programme. There were five boards to take down, four to return to the parish store, and a fifth which had belonged to somebody before it belonged to the hall. She had written a question mark against that one.

“It’s been here since the photographs,” she told them. “I thought if I left it out, somebody would come in and say it was theirs.”

Watson held the ladder while Ellen took the last drawing pins out. Penny stood at the table putting the pins into an old toffee tin. She had offered to get up the ladder and been told by both women that she was needed where she was.

A man came in to collect two folding tables. Ellen ticked them off her list. He asked whether they had anything for a Mrs Penny. His employer had been asked to collect a board from her at half past two. Penny looked down at the board with the question mark on it.

“I’m Miss Penny. I haven’t asked for anything to be collected.”

“Must have the wrong hall,” the man said. He took his tables and left the board.

“People keep trying to make that somebody’s property,” Ellen said. “I think that’s how we got it in the first place.”

Penny went back to the toffee tin. She remembered being called Mrs Penny once on the telephone by a dentist who hadn’t read his own notes. She supposed the man had got two instructions tangled up. It did not occur to her to ask what his employer was called.

At four, when the board was still unclaimed, they carried it into the store with the others. It would have gone in without fuss had Watson not discovered it was two inches too wide for the door. Ellen went looking for a screwdriver. Penny tipped it sideways and found they could get it through after all.

Ellen wrote their names on the sign-out sheet and did not ask what they’d been doing there so long. She knew perfectly well. She had the

same black mark on her cuff as Watson, where both had put a hand against the hall wall.

At nine on Wednesday morning the quarry track was wet enough to show where the pheasants had crossed. Watson had just said they would have to charge for new soles when Penny stopped.

A man lay below the limestone ledge. His cap was a foot or so away. He was wearing a shirt clean enough for Sunday and one of the thin shoes men wear to funerals. The other was under him. When Watson called out, there was no answer.

Penny went down to the track, knelt beside him and told Watson to get help. A few minutes later a woman in a blue raincoat came round the bend, then stopped as abruptly as the two of them had.

“That’ll be Len,” she said. She made it sound like an answer to a question someone else had asked.

By lunchtime a constable had taken Penny’s statement and the ledge had been marked off. People in the village said Len had always walked too close to the edge. They said it with the conviction of people who could think of several occasions when they had told him so.

What Len meant to do

The young constable took Penny back over what she had seen. He was called Lucas, and when he wrote he held his notebook almost under his chin. He wanted to know whether Len had made any arrangements with her about the meeting besides the time.

“He said he wanted to show us something on a wall.”

“Did he say which wall?”

“No. We expected him to tell us when we got here.”

Watson came back from the road. She had found somebody who could ring for help, then seen the ambulance go straight past the turning. She’d had to run to the bend to wave it back. The result, she said, was that the only person on the site whose shoes owed anything to the quarry was herself. Lucas asked if she would show him the route she’d taken.

While they were gone, Penny stood where she had first noticed the body. Across the haul road a wire fence leaned towards the quarry, weighted with a bundle of dead stems. Somebody had hung a new sign on it telling visitors the site was unsafe. There was a small figure at the bottom of the sign, falling with both arms out. Penny wished it had been drawn a little less cheerfully.

When Lucas came back she asked whether anyone had reported a vehicle on the track that morning. He said nobody had mentioned one. She took that to be the end of the conversation until he asked why a vehicle would matter.

“It might not,” she said. “But he expected to meet us somewhere he could show us a wall. I don’t think he meant to meet us on a ledge.”

Lucas took that down too. He read it back word for word. It was the first thing anybody had said that morning that took account of what Len had meant to do.

The woman in the blue coat was Len’s wife, Nora. He had told her he’d be home by half past nine and she’d gone looking for him. She came to the agency after dark, still wearing the coat.

Watson took Nora's coat, which she surrendered only after checking both pockets. Out of the left one came the key to her back door and a mint wrapped in paper. Out of the right came the slip Len had left by the telephone. The paper was still flat. Nora said she had picked it up that morning to make sure she wouldn't forget to ask why he'd needed to meet anybody so early.

Watson asked what made her go after him.

"He left the front door on the latch. He'd have locked it if he thought he'd be gone all morning. At half past nine I stood there looking at it for quite a while."

She looked at the little slip again.

"I could have brought it up to the quarry," she said. "I don't know why I put it in my pocket and left it there."

Penny took the slip only when Nora held it out to her. Under the time and the word *office* there was a small ruled line. Len had apparently used the back of a household list. On the other side was *wash blue shirt*, in Nora's hand. Penny gave it back and asked if Nora would let the constable see it. Nora said she wanted to be sure first that he'd understand what she was asking.

"What is it you're asking?" said Watson.

Nora sat down. "I want him to stop telling me Len went out for a walk."

The words came out more sharply than she intended. She looked down at her hands and flattened the paper over her knee. "I went out of the house in such a hurry I left the kettle full. I could do with somebody coming back with me."

"Would you look at his boots?" she asked.

Nora’s kitchen

The boots stood by the kitchen stove with newspaper stuffed into the toes. Their leather was still damp. On the back of a chair Nora had laid out a clean shirt. It was the second one she’d ironed that week. She’d meant to wear him down into taking her to supper on Friday.

“He wouldn’t go near that ledge in his good shoes,” she said. “He’d have walked up to the weigh office in them. It’s paved all the way from the gate.”

“Why the good shoes?” Watson asked.

“He wore them when he wanted someone to take him seriously.”



Len had worked at the quarry until it closed. In its last year, a young labourer named Billy Searle had been hurt when a loaded trolley was sent down a line he was working on. The report said Billy had gone onto the line after the warning bell. Billy never went back to quarry work. He spent the years afterwards repairing radios, some of them for men who had signed the report.

“Len used to say he’d heard the warning,” Nora said. “On Tuesday he came in and said he’d been thinking about what he’d actually heard.”

“What was it?” asked Penny.

“Somebody shouting to send the trolley through. Len knew whose voice it was.”

Nora set three cups on the table and walked back to the sink for a fourth. She stood with it in her hand for a second before putting it back in the cupboard.

“He spent most of yesterday practising what he was going to say to Mr Dace. I said if he was going to keep saying it in my kitchen, he could at least peel the potatoes.”

Dace had been the foreman. Nora had seen his name on a slip by the telephone. Under it Len had written *8.15, office*. He’d called Penny and Watson afterwards. Nine o’clock was meant to give him time to speak to Dace alone.

Penny looked at the boots again.

“Did he take anything with him?”

“His second tracing of the wall,” Nora said. “He tore the first one leaning on it. That one stayed at home.”

What Nora signed

Nora brought out an envelope of papers Len had kept from the quarry. When Penny reached for the nearest one, Nora closed her hand over it. There were things in there, she said, that she had signed without reading closely. Len would put a finger on the dotted line and say it was only a receipt or something for the social club. She had never asked him to read anything out.

Penny went to take her cup off the table and found that the tea was still too hot.

“Which one are you worried about?” Watson asked.

Nora drew out a collection card for Billy. Every man at the quarry had put in something after the accident. There were two household names on the first line, Len’s in his own writing and hers alongside it.

“He said they’d looked after him,” Nora said. “I thought he meant Billy. Now I wonder who he meant.”

The card gave them a place to start. A name made twice in different ink could be checked, and there was a date at the top although nobody had bothered to put the year. Watson copied the list and handed it back. Nora slid it into the envelope again. She had taken all the papers out to show them and seemed glad to have one object back exactly where it had been.

Outside, Penny waited until they were out of earshot before she spoke.

“Do you think she’d have asked anybody to look into Billy if Len were still alive?”

“No,” Watson said. “I think she’d have expected Len to get on with it. He’d had years.”

Penny put her gloves on. It had been her first thought, too, and she had been rather hoping Watson might say something kinder.

Behind the cupboard

On Thursday the police let them look at the outside of the weigh office. Its front step was badly worn, but the stones between the gate and the step were level. An old haul road ran from the office past the foot of the ledge, a good hundred yards away. The way to the top was up a separate footpath. Watson went far enough to see that it was steep and slick with clay.

“His good shoes were wet,” she said. “I remember that much.”

“Were they muddy?”

“I didn’t see mud. We can tell the police what we remember.”

The key on the string

A man in a wool cap stopped at the quarry gate and lifted a key from under his jumper. It was threaded on a bootlace. He introduced himself as Albert Peake, caretaker for the site, and said that if they were looking for the foreman they were a good few years late.

“We’re looking for anybody who was here yesterday,” Watson said.

“I’ve told the police where I was.”

“I’m sure you have.”

Peake looked at her. “At the dentist. They put a thing in my mouth that went all round my head. I didn’t have much choice about staying.”

He had once been the man who kept the line clear. His was one of the names Watson had copied from Nora’s collection card. On the day of Billy’s accident he’d been sent for a bearing and had brought the wrong one back. Dace made him go again. He had reason to remember the morning, he said, even if nobody had got hurt.

Penny asked him what he’d found when he returned from the first trip.

“Men standing about. Nobody on the line. I had the bearing in my coat pocket and I knew from the way they were standing somebody was going to ask for it.”

“Who asked?”

“Len. Dace was in the office.”

At the mention of the office he put the key back under his jumper. Watson asked what it opened.

“The gate.”

“And the weigh office?”

“That’s another key. Mine’s in the tin at home. Mr Dace used to have one. He never brought it back.” Peake looked down the haul road at the new sign. “I used to think he’d lost it. Never had much reason to ask again.”

Penny thanked him and let him go to the gate. She could have asked to see the other key, but he had just been to the trouble of telling her what he ought to have told the police. She asked instead if he would tell Lucas when he came round again. Peake said he supposed he could. He went through the gate and locked it behind him, although Watson and Penny were still on the other side.

They found Dace in the Farmers Arms after the lunchtime trade. He was turning a beer mat round in a little circle on the table. When Penny asked whether he’d seen Len, he said he hadn’t stepped inside the weigh office since it closed.

“Did he ask you to meet him there?”

“He asked. I told him it was all water under the bridge.”

“What did he want to show you?”

“Something he’d written on the wall. Len always wrote things down in daft places.”

“Did he tell you what he’d written?”

Dace stopped turning the beer mat. “You’d have to ask him that.”

They left him to his pint. At the door Watson went back for the scarf she’d left on the seat. When she came out she said Dace had asked her whether Nora had found any papers.

“Did he say which papers?”

“He said Len had liked to keep a copy of everything.”

Sixpence for Billy

In the Farmers Arms Dace had talked like a man giving them the time of day. At the door the landlord stopped Watson and asked how Nora was doing. Watson gave him an answer short enough for the room.

“Mr Dace been in much lately?” she asked.

“Only when the racing’s on. He likes somewhere to put the paper down.”

Behind the bar was a photograph of a darts team. Dace stood at one end, holding a cup they’d all had a claim to. Len stood at the other. Each seemed to be waiting for the other to smile first.

“Did they quarrel?” Watson asked.

“They’d come in together and go home separately. I knew men who quarrelled a lot more than that.”

When she told Penny, Penny asked how much Dace had put on the collection card. Watson found the amount against the name.

“Sixpence.”

“That seems rather little.”

“So does putting on a coat and standing by the quarry gate to collect it. It depends who else puts in.”

Penny folded the copied list in half. They knew Dace had access. They had no witness who could put him inside the office. And unless Nora found the tracing, they had no reason for Len to have taken his good shoes out to an abandoned quarry beyond the word of a woman who had put them on his feet all the years they’d been married. Penny thought that was a good beginning. She had to remind herself it was only a beginning.

The blue line

Peake had given Watson a telephone number. It belonged to a retired surveyor called Margaret Rook who lived in Oxford. At the quarry she had kept the original plans from which the foremen marked up their working copies. Peake said she could tell you where a ditch had been in 1960, provided you were prepared to hear why it had been put there.

Watson telephoned from the pub. Mrs Rook was expecting somebody later in the afternoon to repair a window sash. She told them to come before him if they could, and to knock hard. The sash was in the kitchen and she couldn't hear very well when she was trying to put it back.

They drove east out of the Cotswolds. Beyond the first few villages Penny stopped looking automatically at each door they passed to see whether she knew who lived behind it. By the time they reached Oxford she was watching for cyclists. Watson asked whether she should guide them in from the map.

"If you can find a parking place on it," Penny said.

Mrs Rook opened her door wearing a jumper flecked with putty. A model of a stone arch stood on her dining table. When Penny asked whether she had made it she said she had repaired it. It had been made by somebody who believed stone could bear a great deal more weight if it was painted grey.

She brought the quarry papers out in a cardboard tube. On the oldest plan there were two lines from the office to the lower workings. One was blue, the other broken into little dashes.

"The dashed one is the path men used when the quarry was working," she said. "The blue is the old haul road. We stopped showing it on the later drawings because the trucks went out another way. I expect you can still get a vehicle down it."

"We stood on it this morning," Watson said. "It looks wide enough."

Mrs Rook ran a finger round the ledge. "There was room to back a trailer in here. We used to turn our survey van round there. Is that of any use?"

Penny looked at the bend. On the ground it had seemed to her that a man in good shoes would have gone no farther than the office. On the plan she could see that a vehicle could have brought him to the ledge and got back to the gate without going anywhere near the upper path.

Mrs Rook took the plan from her.

“I’ll make you a copy of that corner,” she said. “The rest isn’t yours to show anybody. There are notes on it I made for the men who had to work there.”

While she was getting the paper, Watson noticed the other name on the label round the tube. Mrs Rook had shared the surveying contract with a man called Seaton. Watson asked whether he still had papers.

“If he does, he’ll have kept them in a better order than I did,” said Mrs Rook. “He used to work for the government. He spent a good deal of time explaining that the Crown didn’t mean the Queen personally. I’m sure the Queen would have been relieved to hear it.”

Mrs Rook offered them a lift back to where they’d parked, on the condition that they help get the sash onto the kitchen table first. Watson took the heavier end. It was while they were standing with it between them, waiting for Penny to move a chair out of the way, that Mrs Rook asked what had brought Len back to the quarry.

“He wanted to correct an old report,” Penny said.

“Was it the report on Billy Searle?”

Penny set the chair down. “Did you see it?”

“I saw what they gave our office. It had a little plan attached. Dace had drawn the warning bell in the wrong place. I wrote and asked him whether it had been moved. He sent a clean plan back without any bell on it.”

“Did you keep the first one?” Watson asked.

Mrs Rook put the sash down on the table. “I used to assume that once I’d posted a correction, somebody put it where it belonged. I wasted a great deal of time thinking that.” She wiped her hands on the side of her jumper. “I did keep my letter, though.”

She gave them its date and the initials at the foot of the reply. Penny copied them for Lucas. It was a small piece of corroboration. A woman in Oxford had asked about the bell years before anyone had asked her what she knew.

At the door Mrs Rook said she could probably locate the surveyor who had marked the new haul route. She looked past Penny to ask Watson whether she'd come again with a little more notice. Watson said she would. The sash repair man was at the gate, carrying a tool bag. Mrs Rook waited until he was close enough to hear before saying that she might have mended it herself by the next time he turned up.

On the way back to Guiting Power, Watson put the copy of the old plan between the seats. She folded it once, so that the blue line was still visible.

"Did the Crown mean the Queen personally when you worked for it?"

"Occasionally," Penny said. "Usually it meant somebody whose name you weren't supposed to ask."

Watson left the question there. They still had time to see Billy before he closed his workshop, and he was a man whose name they could quite reasonably ask.

At the agency they rang Billy Searle. Billy answered on the fourth ring and said he could hear them perfectly well, which suggested he had spent a fair part of his life telling people they needn't shout. He agreed to see them if they didn't mind him finishing a repair while they talked.

Billy's workshop was warm and smelled faintly of hot dust. He laid a radio dial on a towel before he told them he'd gone onto the line because someone had sent him to clear a jam. There had been a warning bell in the weigh office until it broke. For a while afterward the foreman had sent a man down on foot to make sure the line was clear. That morning the man had been sent to collect a spare part instead.

What the bell sounded like

Billy's radio made a short bark of static. He turned a screw, listened, and turned it back. Watson asked whether she could sit in the chair by the workbench. He moved a box of valves with his foot to make room for her.

"You can stop me when you want," he said. "They never liked to do that at the quarry. They'd wait till I'd got all the way through and then ask me something I'd said five minutes before."

Watson asked him what the warning sounded like. He told her that when the bell worked it had been loud enough to stop a man with his tea halfway to his mouth. After it broke, the man sent down the line used a hand bell. You could tell how near he was by the change in the sound as he came off the slope.

"And the day you were hurt?"

"I heard somebody call my name. I can tell you who I thought it was, but I never saw him."

"Tell us what you know you heard," she said.

Billy put the screwdriver down. "My name. Then the wheels."

Penny resisted asking about Dace. If she put the name in Billy's mouth now, they'd never know whether it had been there before.

He opened a shallow drawer and lifted out a folded copy of the accident report. A corner had gone soft from handling. The original account was signed by Dace and countersigned by Len as the man who kept the records. Somebody had underlined the words that said Billy entered the line after the warning was given.

"Len came round with the collection," Billy said. "He stood where you're standing. He wanted me to count it while he was there."

"Did you?"

"He'd have been up all night if I hadn't."

Penny asked him whether he ever told Len he'd heard no bell. He said he had. Len had looked at the clock and said the last bus was going in

ten minutes. Billy must have thought it was a strange thing for a man with a van to say, because he remembered it after all that time.

Watson asked if they could borrow the report. Billy read the page once more before he gave it to her. She said she'd bring it back in a clean envelope.

"Keep the envelope," he said. "If you've got anything to put in it, I'd rather have that."

"Len used to chalk up the jobs where anybody could see them," Billy said. "Ask him where the man with the bell was, and he'd point you at the wall."

"Would he still have written it there if the bell had broken?"

"He'd have written where he'd sent the man. He'd have put the time by it as well. You can't tell when someone's due back if you don't know when he went."

Billy had a visitor while they were there. A schoolgirl brought in a clock radio that had lost its alarm. He asked her whether it had stopped working entirely or only when it was meant to wake her for school. She said entirely, though it hadn't been tested on a Saturday. He turned it over, wrote her name on a label, and told her to try again on Saturday before she spent her money.

After she left, Watson asked what he wanted from the quarry company now.

"Nothing I could name on an invoice," he said. "When the foreman came to see me in hospital, he wanted to know why I'd gone past the bell. He asked me before he asked how I was. I remember thinking there was a right answer and I'd better find it or I'd be in there all week."

Watson asked how long he had been there.

"Six weeks."

He reached past the radio for a biscuit tin and held it out to them. It contained rubber bands of different sizes. He took it back and offered them the other tin. Penny ate a biscuit. The ordinary favour seemed to matter to him.

“Did Len ever tell you why he signed?” she asked.

Billy looked at the open drawer. “I wanted him to. I never asked.”

Penny thought of the names on the collection card. Len had come round to give him money and waited while he counted it. Billy had talked to him about the bell. There had been time for the question. There had even been an opening for it. Sometimes an opening could be recognised only afterwards, when it was too late to go through.

As they left, Billy asked whether Nora was eating. Neither of them knew. Watson said she would ask next time she saw her. He nodded and closed the workshop door most of the way. It would have been easy, from the road, to think he had closed it altogether.

When they got back to the agency Nora was waiting. She held a sheet of tracing paper by the edges.

“The first tracing,” Nora said. “I found it under a pile of newspapers. The one he made afterwards went with him to meet Mr Dace.”

It had torn across one corner, but a row of three entries was still readable. Against the third, in Len’s uneven pencil, was the name of the man sent to collect the spare part, the time he went, and the initials of the man who’d sent him. A fourth entry, written lower down, gave the time the trolley was dispatched.

Watson put the paper beside the copy of the accident report Billy had lent them. According to the report, at the time the trolley was dispatched the man with the bell was already back on the line. Len’s entry showed that he had barely had time to reach the gate on his way out.

“Did Len write this down because he knew there’d be trouble?” Nora asked.

“Billy says he wrote it down every day,” Penny said.

Nora thought about that. “Of course he did.”

The cupboard

Lucas met them at the gate when they brought the tracing. He had spent most of the morning trying to find somebody in the district who could tell him how far a man could walk down a signal path in four minutes. Watson said Albert Peake was probably the person he wanted, but that he might have to hear about a bearing first.

Lucas took the paper without folding it. That much, Penny thought, was worth walking back to the agency in the rain for.

“If this came off the wall, there ought to be something there to compare it with,” she said.

“There’s a cupboard in the way.”

“Mr Hobb moved it. He told us on the telephone.”

They waited beside the gate while the officers went to look. From the road Penny could see the office window and a square of darkness beyond it. She expected them to be back in a moment. Instead one of them came out for a torch. When he went in again he pulled the door nearly shut.

Watson slipped a mint out of her pocket and gave it to Penny. The mint was broken in two. Penny took the smaller bit. It was something she did when she was thinking well of Watson and did not particularly want to say why.

“What happens if we’re right?” Watson asked.

“About Billy?”

“About why Len came here.”

Penny watched the office door. “We’ll still have to find out what happened after he got here.”

A man on the track

The police found the marks on the wall where Billy said they would. Len had written the times with a carpenter's pencil. The cupboard, bolted over them after the accident, had kept the writing dry. When the police moved it again, they found a button on the floor behind one foot. There was a fresh mark on the cupboard door where it had struck the stove.

On Friday morning the constable came to the agency. A dog walker had seen a van leave the quarry at twenty to nine on Wednesday, pulling an empty trailer with one red mudguard. She remembered it because she'd had to wait for it to pass while her dog ate a sandwich somebody had thrown away.

Dace admitted he had collected the trailer. He said he'd left Len in good health at the weigh office. Penny asked to see the button the police had found behind the cupboard. It had a nick at the rim. In the constable's photograph of Len's jacket there was a pale circle where a button had been and a short black thread still hanging from it.

Watson asked the constable to show them where he'd found it. At the office he laid the button, folded in paper, on the sill. Penny crouched by the cupboard. A scrap of dark cloth was hooked on the latch, just above the pale scrape where the door had struck the stove.

"That door was open when something drove it back," Penny said. "Look where the cloth caught. Len lost his button here, with his jacket still on."

"And he reached the foot of the ledge in clean shoes," said Watson. "He never climbed that clay path. The trailer would have passed right by where we found him. Ask Dace what he had in it before the dog walker saw him leave."

The constable took them back to the track. A tyre had left a broken tread in the soft edge just below the ledge. Later the police found the same break in the tread on Dace's trailer, and a length of striped sacking on its floor. A strip of that weave had caught under a buckle on Len's coat.



Lucas showed Dace the photograph of the damaged tyre tread and the strip of sacking found on Len’s coat. Dace asked for a solicitor. After speaking to one, he changed his account. Len had intended to take the tracing to Billy. Dace grabbed for it. Len’s jacket caught the open cupboard door as Dace drove him back against the stove. Dace struck him when he tried to get up, then took him in the trailer down the haul road and left him below the ledge. The second tracing was still folded in Dace’s coat when the police went to his house.

The earlier statement

By the time Lucas brought word of Dace's new account, Penny had read the old accident report so often that she could find Len's name without looking at the bottom half of the page. Watson had typed out the relevant times from both documents on a single sheet. She had left enough space below them for Billy to write anything he remembered after he saw them side by side.

"Will that do anything?" Penny asked.

"For the murder, I doubt it."

"I meant for him."

Watson took the sheet out of the typewriter. "We can ask him."

Lucas said that when he had shown Dace the copy of the wall record, Dace had said it was years ago. Lucas looked tired, and Penny offered him tea. He said he ought to be getting back, then sat down in the chair nearest the stove and drank the cup she brought him.

"Did he ever say why he wanted the tracing so badly?" Watson asked.

"He said Len was the one who signed the report."

"So was he."

"He did say that too," Lucas said. "Just took him longer."

After Lucas left, Penny put both signatures back in the envelope. It would have been easy to think of the men who'd signed that report as the good one and the bad one. She knew too much about the afternoon now to do that. She wrote Billy's address on the envelope, then left it open. Nora might want to say something of her own.

Penny went to see Nora. Nora said she'd been expecting Len to ring from the quarry with some excuse for not coming home to supper. She'd cooked enough for two on the night he died.

"Will anybody tell Billy?" she asked.

"Would you like to?"

Nora looked down at the clean shirt on the chair. “I think that was what Len was trying to do.”

She rang Billy while Penny was there. Penny went out to the gate when he answered and waited until Nora opened the front door and waved to her.

A word for the record

Nora told Penny that Billy had asked for a copy of Len's tracing when the police could spare it. He wanted to see how Len wrote the numbers. He could remember how he wrote a five. The top stroke always stood away from the rest, leaving it looking as though it had lost its hat.

"Do you think it will make him feel better?" she asked.

"I'd ask him when you take it round," Penny said.

Nora considered this. "I might ask him when I get there. On the telephone I felt I had to talk all the time because I couldn't see what he was doing."

She took the clean shirt off the back of the chair at last. She folded it and set it in the basket by the back door. It was the first thing of Len's she had put away since they'd found him. Penny turned to look out of the window while she did it.

Out in the lane Lucas had stopped to speak to a neighbour. When he saw Penny he came over. They were still collating the quarry papers, he told her. The original accident report and the two tracings would have to stay with the case. He could arrange for a copy once the exhibits had been logged.

"Would you put Billy's name on the request?" Penny asked.

"I was going to put Mrs Hobb's."

"Put both."

He took out the notebook he had used at the quarry. This time he wrote without holding it so near his face. Penny could see him add Billy's name underneath. No one at the quarry had thought to ask Billy to sign the report before they sent it in. It pleased her to see him get a line of his own, even on such an ordinary piece of paper.

"Do they know what they're going to do with Dace?" she asked.

"He'll be charged. We can get him to court. I wouldn't promise Mrs Hobb more than that."

Penny said she hadn't. It was something she'd learned when she worked for the Crown, that the exact words of a promise were often the only part a person could rely on. She had always thought it was a pity that she'd had to learn it there.

She waited while Lucas went back to speak to the neighbour. Then she went down the hill to find Watson.

Watson was waiting at the foot of the hill.

"Fish and chips?"

Penny hadn't eaten since breakfast. "It's the best thing you've said all day."

The chips

The chip shop window was misted above the level of a child's head. Inside, Watson and Penny took their places behind a woman buying supper for four. The woman had brought her own bag and was arguing about how many portions of chips four people actually needed. Penny looked at the reflection in the glass while she waited. For a second she thought she saw someone by the kerb. Then the door opened and the reflection swung away.

Watson was still holding the envelope for Billy. She had not posted it because Nora had asked to take it round herself the next day. Watson had said she'd leave it in the agency overnight so it stayed dry. Penny took it from her while she counted out the money.

"Your change," said the woman behind the counter.

Watson put it in her coat pocket. Later she'd find the coins still there.

Vinegar

The woman in the chip shop gave Watson extra vinegar. She folded the two portions into one parcel and told them to keep it flat.

They stepped out together. Across the road stood a grey car with a strip of trim missing above the back wheel. Watson had written down its registration outside the Farmers Arms during the fête photograph case. Penny had seen it again outside Ruth Bell's. Watson was reaching for her notebook when Penny noticed that the passenger door was open.

A man spoke from behind them. Penny didn't recognise his voice. A moment later the parcel was on the pavement. She remembered being absurdly annoyed about the vinegar.

In the room with the kettle, the man asked where Bond was for the third time.

"I told you," said Penny. "What made you think I'd know?"

The man unfolded a slip of paper. He read it once and looked at Penny again. "It says you went to see him on Tuesday, at half past two."

“She was with me that afternoon,” said Watson. “We went to the village hall. Ellen Shaw asked us to help take down the last of the boards from the fête exhibition.”

“Where?” Penny asked. The man turned the slip over. The back was blank.

The man looked towards the door again. Until that moment Penny had supposed he was checking that they couldn’t get out. Now she realised he was listening for someone to come in.

“How sure are you they said *Penny*?” Watson asked.

He looked down the page again. “They gave me the surname,” he said. It was the first answer he’d given them without looking at Penny.

The man went out and shut the door behind him.

There was a short scrape outside, then a clang that ran through the iron stair rail. Watson stood up. The man didn’t call out.

“He’s left my shoe,” said Watson.

It lay just inside the threshold. The door had not latched. Penny picked up the shoe when they went out. She was still holding it when they found him at the foot of the steps.

“Is he dead?” she asked.

Watson knelt beside him. After a moment she said, “Yes.”



On the top step a clean arc cut through the grit. Penny could see the toe of a shoe had made it, sideways across the step. Beside it was a wet heel mark pointing up towards the door. The dead man's soles were dry. Watson showed both marks to the officer before anyone came up the steps.

Beyond the steps was an empty yard and a light in the upstairs window of a house. Penny went towards the light. By the time the police arrived, Watson had put her shoe back on. She had been sitting on the bottom step, keeping the dead man company.

The woman in the upstairs room had let Penny use her telephone. When Penny told her what had happened, she pulled the curtains closed. She said she'd been about to do the same thing when she saw a light on the steps.

"Was it the light over the door?" Penny asked.

"It moved," the woman said. "Up the wall. I thought someone was looking for a key."

Penny asked if she'd tell the police. The woman said she would, then drew one curtain back a little way to see whether Watson was still outside. She was. Penny could see her sitting with her hands inside the sleeves of her coat. The woman brought a blanket down. Watson let her put it round her shoulders, though she kept one hand out as if there were still something she might need to point to.

The station

At the station nobody could find the right size of slipper for Watson. She said she had her shoe and was perfectly happy with it. The woman making the tea said that was all very well, but she'd lost a shoe herself once and never felt entirely comfortable in it again. Watson had no answer to that. She went on wearing both shoes.

Penny was asked three times whether she had heard a shot. She said no three times. She remembered the scrape, the rail ringing, and the man looking at the back of the slip as though there ought to have been an answer there. A sergeant asked whether she could remember the slip's size. Before she could answer, the officer who had attended the yard came in holding a clear evidence sleeve. He'd found the paper lying on the lower treads, clear of the body, after they'd brought up another light.

He let Watson look at it through the sleeve and copy what she could see. She had thought it was just a note when the man unfolded it. It was ruled, with an hour printed on the left. The top outside corner was missing. She copied the line that contained the name, then indicated the shape of the missing paper. The officer carried the original away and brought them two cups.

Penny said they should ring Diana. Watson asked what Penny meant to tell her. Penny set the cup down. It was after ten. Whatever Diana had planned for her evening, it had probably been sufficiently difficult without Penny adding a dead man to it.

"Tomorrow," Penny said. "I'll ask her about lunch."

Watson folded her copy once so that the name was inside. A different officer asked whether she really wanted to walk home in those shoes. She said the shoes were fine. She would rather have a lift.

The other Tuesday

Late that Friday, back at the agency, Watson put away two plates she found in the draining rack. Penny took out the appointment book and found Tuesday.

Village hall, 2.30. Beneath it, in Watson's hand, was *Return ladder, if borrowed.*

"I wrote that before we went," Watson said. "I thought Ellen might let us bring it home."

Watson brought over a sheet she'd written out at the station, while the officer still had the slip they'd found by the steps. The original was a leaf from an appointment book. She'd drawn the ragged corner in pencil. It ended above the surname, where a first name might have been.

Penny looked through the pages that followed. The appointments were exactly as she remembered them. Len Hobb was dead. So was a man whose name she had never heard. Of the two of them, the dead quarryman was the one for whom she could account.

"Somebody gave him a day, Watson. Why give him a day?"

Watson sat down. "Perhaps the day was right."

From the street a car slowed as it came round the green. They waited to hear whether it would stop.

CASE FILE 01 · M. PENNY

> *Quarry inquiry. Dace's account received. The second tracing recovered.*

Penny's movements, Tuesday 10 December. Ellen Shaw confirms that Penny and Watson were at the village hall that afternoon.

> *Separate Tuesday appointment. The leaf was recovered at the steps. The time is 2.30. The surname is Penny.*
>
> *The forename has been torn away with the corner of the page.*



To be continued…