

*Girl
Hosted*

PENNY WADE MYSTERIES BOOK 3

Chapter One

Username: Penny4YourThoughts

Age: 36

Height: 5'8"

Body type: About average

Hair: Brown

Eyes: Green

Relationship status: Single

Has kids: No

Wants kids: Maybe someday

Smoke: No

Drink: Socially

Ethnicity: Caucasian

Astrological sign: Sagittarius

Seeking: Men ages 33-45

None of us get out alive, so I plan to make my days fun, be as helpful as I can, and find big love before it all comes to an end. I'm a Midwestern girl transplanted to the very best coast city. I don't have a built-in sense of direction, so the Boston Harbor and the Charles River keep me oriented here. I was always lost in the Midwest! I was in high school the first time I saw the ocean, and fell in love for life. I love feeling tiny beside it. The sense of vastness gives me perspective—reminds me that I'm a speck in a huge universe.

To me, a good life is one where I give and receive love and do my best to be a good citizen of the world. But it's not all serious either. We have to laugh our way through, and make each other laugh too. I love long Sunday brunches, drinks outside in the summer, red wine, and jazz.

I'm looking for a partner who's strong but not overbearing, smart but not arrogant, willing to commit, but not desperate to settle down.

My best friends, Gloria and Toryn, wrote this dating profile for me. I wanted to say “I never look for trouble but it has a way of finding me,” but they both insisted that was a horrible opening for a profile and an invitation for more trouble. Given that one of my primary goals was to avoid risk and stay safe, I took their advice.

Last June, after I’d survived some stressful stuff at work and had broken up with a guy named Conner, Toryn nursed me with martinis, then convinced me to go to the Back Bay spa Gloria manages. Gloria was there waiting with a bottle of wine and carryout tacos.

The lights were low in the closed spa, and Gloria had candles burning. The smell of sandalwood calmed my frayed nerves, but even the front edge of relaxation felt disconcerting. I’d been on guard for so long, letting go seemed dangerous. Gloria handed me a glass of wine. As the three of us ate, Gloria and Toryn discussed their plan for my transformation. I tried not to listen, tried to tune in to the sound of the fountain and the flute-and-chime spa music. Maybe they were right, a transformation must be what I needed. It might not be possible, but it had to be desirable. I’d been chasing murderers and stumbling into heartbreak for too long.

After we ate, Gloria gave me a fluffy white robe and I changed. I passed the display of bright shiny nail polishes on my way to the hair washing station. As a little girl, the products of womanhood had held so much promise. I planned to grow up and have pretty painted nails, tame hair, and long dramatic eyelashes. I would have a successful (and safe) career and attract my Prince Charming by the time I was twenty-five for sure. But none of that had happened, and I wasn’t sure getting a makeover by Gloria and Toryn was going to change my fate.

I reminded myself to relax as Gloria washed my hair and massaged my scalp. I wondered if relaxing was the magic cure to my tendency for mishaps. Maybe if I became all mellow I wouldn’t be as clumsy in work, love, and everything, really.

I drank wine as Gloria and Toryn did my hair and makeup. I think it helped me relax for the pictures, although a lot of the shots showed me with a furrowed brow and deer-in-the-headlights eyes. Still, the good pictures turned out to look better than I do. Makeup hid the little freckles across my nose, and Gloria had tamed my overly wavy hair. She

worked her spa magic and somehow made my eyes look extra green and my figure extra svelte. At least in the three pictures we posted, I looked like a put-together woman who was ready to find love.

If getting attention on the dating site was the goal, Toryn and Gloria did a great job. So great, in fact, that after a few weeks on the site and a few lousy dates, I'd closed my profile to recover. I'd spent fall and winter cocooning, sometimes seeing a guy named Marco that I'd dated in the past, and generally just trying to get through the cold dark Boston winter and keep my job. But spring was promised and I was back online, wading through messages and trying again.

Gloria's profile got even more attention than mine, but unlike me, she'd thrived on it and had been dating all winter. She was far more extroverted than I, and seemed to take the bad dates and bumps in the road in her stride. She said she was looking for a husband and to settle down, but you'd never have known that by the way she partied. I don't mean to paint her as slutty or anything. In fact, she really wasn't. She acted like a party girl, but inside she was a good Catholic looking for a husband. Which is why I was worried that night.

Gloria had gone out on yet another first date with some guy—I didn't know his name—and when I woke up at two she still wasn't home. It wasn't like her to stay out all night on a first date. She hadn't seemed especially into him when we talked before she left, so it seemed even stranger.

I tried to go back to sleep but I couldn't; the worry was knotting in my stomach. I told myself I was just being paranoid because my brother, Owen, had lectured me on dating safety. He'd shown me some stats about rapes and abductions and stuff. Were Gloria and I tempting the odds? She must have been on thirty dates over the past six months. Had her luck run out?

Maybe she'd said his name and I'd forgotten. In my mind, I replayed the conversation we'd had as she was getting ready to go out.

"This purple dress is supposed to attract a prince," she said. "But last time I wore it my date was a royal bore. I'm giving it another chance." She sprayed and fluffed her long hair into big loose curls.

“A dress can do a lot,” I said. “But you have to give it good material to work with.”

She slid into four-inch-high navy pumps that made her calves look amazing. “His profile says he’s six feet,” she said. “I’m trusting that’s true with these shoes.”

“A guy who lies about his height deserves a girl wearing too-high heels,” I said.

Gloria’s only five feet six, so she didn’t have a lot to worry about. I’m a little taller, but less prone to wear super-high heels. I teeter more than Gloria.

We’d talked about her grandmother back in Mexico, whom she’d called that afternoon. She just wanted to check in, but called under the pretense of getting her *horchata* recipe, because grandma hated people worrying about her.

“I think she’s losing her edge,” Gloria said. “She said to use two tablespoons of cinnamon for a batch with five cups of water. That can’t be right. More like two teaspoons.”

“I don’t know how you know that,” I said. It seemed like Gloria was a born cook. “But I doubt if it signals dementia. I make bigger mistakes by nine every morning.”

We’d gone on to talk about my most recent bad date, but no, I didn’t think she’d ever mentioned this guy’s name.

I realized I wasn’t going back to sleep. The knots in my stomach were churning. I texted her.

You okay? I’m worried.

I watched to see if it was delivered. It wasn’t. After about a minute, the text turned from blue to green and said “delivered as text message.” Her phone was off.

I texted Toryn.

Gloria didn’t come home. I’m worried.

It said the message was delivered so I waited for a reply. I knew Toryn went on do not disturb at night, so I gave up on that pretty quickly. I could probably call him and get through, but what good would that do?

I got up and paced the apartment for a while. I vowed that I would get contact information for her dates moving forward. I wondered if this was what it felt like to be a mother. No. Being a mother was probably even worse.

I got back in bed and got a little tossing-and-turning half-sleep with bad dreams.

At six a.m. I gave up on sleep, got out of bed, and put on running clothes. I'd taken up running—sort of—a few months before and I was a fair-weather runner. I had only made it to about week five on the Couch to 5K app I'd been using. I ran at about a fifteen-minute-mile pace (when you included the walking intervals) so I only needed a two-mile route for my thirty-minute run.

I checked one more time for a text from Gloria, then decided to head toward Moakley Park. It was chilly starting out, but the sun was coming up and people were just starting to move around the streets.

A lot of stuff had happened since I'd been living in Southie. Just a few blocks from where I was, I'd seen a dead woman loaded into an ambulance. She turned out to be the mother of a girl named Dani, who was assigned to my caseload at work. I'd gotten to know a lot of people in the area, mostly the less fortunate people who came into Community Counseling Services for help.

I paused at a four-way stop to let a car go. I was breathing hard, inhaling mostly exhaust from the junky cars on Old Colony Avenue. I crossed, careful to miss a pothole in the intersection and not trip on the curb on the far side.

My toe hit a raised section of sidewalk and I pitched forward, catching myself before I fell. I'd gotten good at catching myself, which is the next best thing to not constantly tripping in the first place.

My professional life was a lot like my physical life—clumsy and full of trip-ups. But I tended to hang in. Maybe I could start to be like other social workers I knew who never got tangled up in murders. What else was I gonna do? Give up and get a corporate job? No. I may be a lousy social worker, but I was dedicated and sometimes I really helped people.

When the lady on the app told me to turn around and head home I did so happily. I sent up a prayer that I'd find Gloria there.

The sidewalks were getting busier. I had to dodge people heading to work, strollers, and dogs that owners didn't keep on tight leashes. Clearly nobody knew what a challenge it was for me to run without falling down, so they didn't mind complicating matters for me. I heard sirens nearby but didn't see the ambulance. I crossed the street to avoid some men jackhammering the sidewalk.

I squared my shoulders, took a deep breath, and ran home.

A text rang in as I was climbing the three flights of stairs to our apartment. My heart jumped and I wrestled my phone out of its arm holder.

Toryn: Is she home yet?

My heart sank. I ran up the last flight and flung open the door.

No Gloria.

Me: No!!!

It was still only seven and Gloria went to work late on Mondays. I wouldn't be able to call there until noon, but that was hours away and if I didn't hear from her by then, something was definitely wrong!

Toryn: Try not to worry.

Me: I'm very worried.

Toryn: Me too.

Me: I'll text the sec I hear.

Toryn: TY

I put my phone on the back of the toilet where I could reach it and got into the shower. I promised myself she'd text or call or be home by the time I was out.

She didn't and she wasn't.

I got dressed and sat on the end of my bed trying to think what to do. The only thing I could think of was Conner, a sexy broad-chested detective I'd kind of dated. He had a protective masculine vibe that spoke to me, especially when he was protecting me from death threats. It was early to call and he'd probably think I was being dumb, so I texted.

Me: Gloria didn't come home last night. Not like her. I'm scared. What do I do?

I went to the kitchen to make coffee and distract myself while I waited, but a text rang in right away.

Conner: So she had a good date? Do you really have a reason to worry?

I called him. "It was her first date with this guy and she never does that!"

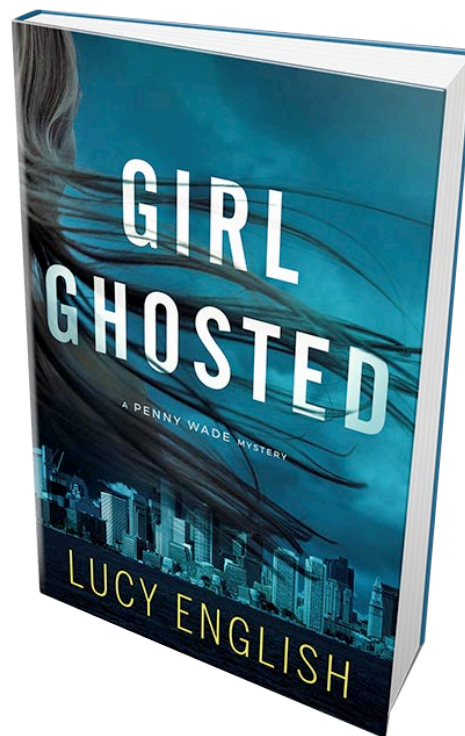
"Never does what?" he asked. "She stays out sometimes, right?"

"Not on a first date! And she didn't answer my text. It went to green so her phone is off or smashed because she's dead or something!"

“Penny, take a breath. It’s okay. We totally need to talk about this dating safety thing for both of you, but the odds are with her. She had a great time, her battery died, she didn’t care, and she’s having morning sex as we speak. Maybe you need more of that so you chill a little.”

I didn’t want him to hear me crying so I just hung up. He was right. There was nothing to do but wait.

TO BE CONTINUED...



I hope you enjoyed this sneak peek of *Girl Ghosted*. The book will be officially released on August 15th. You can [pre-order now](#) OR [click here](#) to be notified when it goes on sale.