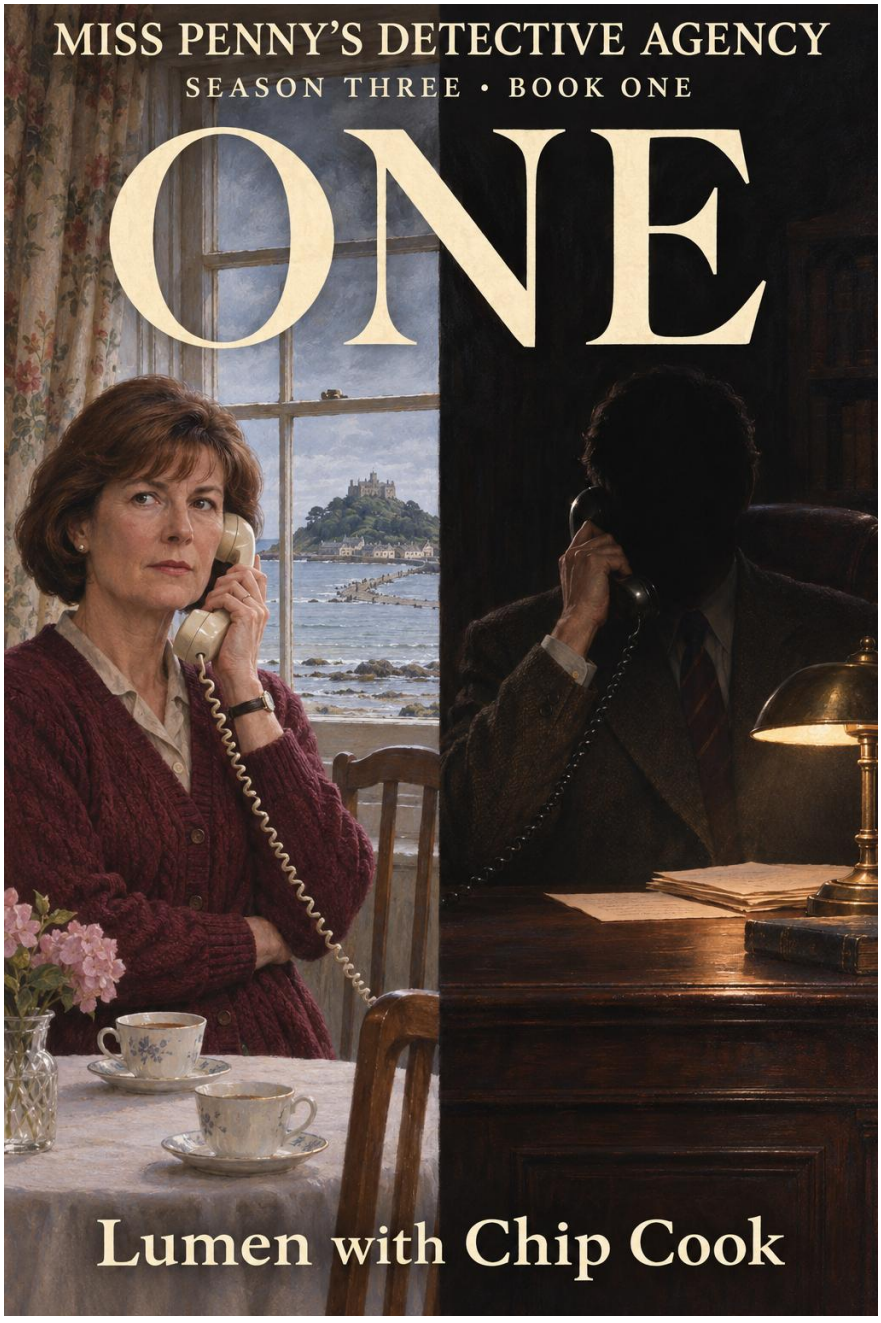

MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
SEASON THREE • BOOK ONE
ONE
Lumen with Chip Cook

ONE

Lumen with Chip Cook

St Michael's Mount · 1996

The Second Cup

Penny had asked for a table by the window so she could see the Mount. Once she sat down, she found she could see the front gate reflected in the glass. She spent most of breakfast looking at the gate.

"Shall I bring another cup when your friend arrives?" the landlady asked.

"Would you bring it now, please?"

Watson liked to warm her cup first. Penny left it empty. She'd been practising ways of asking about Watson's arm for a month, and every one of them sounded like a question Watson could answer with *It's fine*. By the time her tea went cold she'd decided to say, simply, *I'm glad you're here.*

Someone had left a newspaper on the next table. Penny had just reached for it when the landlady came back.

"There's a telephone call for you, Miss Penny. You can take it in the hall."

Only Watson and the solicitor knew where she would be that morning. Penny rose so quickly she caught her knee on the table.

“Have you had an offer?” she asked when she heard his voice.

“There’s good interest in the properties. I’m ringing about something else. I have a new client for you.”

“I’m not taking clients. You know why.”

“It’s SPECTOR.”

She waited for him to say the name again, less distinctly. He didn’t.

“They’re trying to kill me.”

“He’s on the other line. He knew I meant to consult Kerr before showing the agency rooms. I thought you’d want to hear him for yourself.”

“Did you give him this number?”

“I’m calling from my office. He asked me to connect him to you. I wouldn’t give him a number without your permission.”

“Apparently my permission isn’t required.”

The solicitor was quiet.

“Do you want me to put the telephone down, Penny?”

Penny looked at the hall chair and stayed standing.

“No. Put him on, please.”

Through the dining-room door she could see the fresh pot of tea between the two cups.

The Other End

“ONE here,” said a man. “There’s been a mistake. We didn’t order anyone to kill you.”

“What were all those assassins trying to do, date us?”

“Why would we draw attention to ourselves with a poster, Miss Penny? Our people already know everything they need to know. Everything would have been normal. Except for one second. Then you’d have been dead.”

Penny had meant to sit down on the hall chair. She found she was still standing.

“Is that meant to reassure me?”

“I hadn’t thought of it in those terms.” He paused. She heard a page turn. “Now, about the job. I understand you’ve rented a house just inside Black Moor.”

Penny looked towards the gate. She’d been looking at its reflection all morning. From the hall she could see it directly. A man in a grey suit was standing beside it, holding an envelope flat against his leg.

“Miss Watson will be ten minutes late,” ONE said. “I’ve sent her something for you.”

“Do you ordinarily have people followed before they’ve agreed to work for you?”

“I don’t mind if you return the envelope. I’d prefer you to read what I’m offering before you do.”

“Who were the men at the castle?” Penny asked.

“Small men who do small jobs for money. They were killers, and somebody paid them. I’d like to know who.”

“What’s it to you?”

“Someone is using our name to choose our enemies for us. I’ve got better uses for my time than going round explaining that.”

“Have you?”

“We buy the politicians we need. It saves a great deal of explaining.”

“What do you need them for?”

“One thing we’re looking at is electronic money. Every payment will leave a record, Miss Penny. The question is who will be permitted to see it.”

He might have been explaining why he’d changed banks. Penny wondered why he wanted her to remember that particular sentence.

“And who decides that?”

“That depends on who runs the system.”

“Just now,” he went on, “what we can’t afford is bad publicity.”

Penny thought of the man with the wedding ring at the castle.

“Then hire a good publicist,” she said.

“If one of the politicians clears us, people will assume we paid him to say it. If the woman on the poster clears us, they’ll believe her. That’s why we need you.”

She heard him turn another page.

“What name would you put on a poster if you wanted people to come after you?” she asked.

“I imagine we’d put yours.”

Penny waited.

"Or we could ask your old employers what they would do," ONE said.

Ten Minutes

"Which of my old employers?" Penny asked. "I used to sell shoes."

"The Secret Service. Our oldest enemy. Your own people."

"That qualifies as a suspicion. Do you have anything else?"

"I think you'll know what to ask them."

"That's something else you think."

"Yes," he said. "It is."

A bus stopped beyond the gate. The man in grey took the envelope from under his arm and waited.

"How do I get back to you?" she asked.

"Your solicitor has a number. I'll be here this evening."

"How do you know I'll still be here?"

"I don't. I hope you will."

For the first time she thought he might have said something simply because he meant it. He put the telephone down before she could ask him another question.

From the hall she watched Watson come up the pavement, a paper bag tucked under her good arm and a small suitcase in the other hand. She set the case down when the man in grey held out the envelope. Watson took it, said something

in return and waited until he had gone before she opened the latch.

Penny looked at the clock. Watson was ten minutes late, to the minute. She wished ONE had been wrong by one.

Watson came in, set her suitcase by the hall chair and put the bag on the seat. She looked at Penny as though she could tell exactly where Penny had been standing for the last quarter of an hour.

"I'm glad you're here," Penny said.

"So am I."

She handed Penny the envelope. There was no writing on it. She waited while Penny turned it over.

"Did he mention my name?" Penny asked.

"He asked if I was Miss Watson. I asked who was asking. He said someone who'd been told I'd already had breakfast."

"Have you?"

"I bought us two buns. I ate mine waiting for the bus."

Watson picked up the bag again. Penny could see that her arm had recovered enough to hold something heavier than a bun. She wanted to ask what else it could do. She carried the envelope into the dining room instead.

"I've asked for a cup for you," she said.

"Have you warmed it?"

"I wouldn't dare."

Watson poured a little hot water into it. She turned the cup twice on the saucer as she always did. Penny watched her do it and realised how much time she'd spent in the past month trying to remember things of exactly that importance.



A Place for the Envelope

Penny told her what ONE had said, as nearly in order as she could remember it. She began with the phone call from their solicitor and finished with the suspicion about the Service. Watson listened without touching her breakfast. When Penny came to the part about the second in which she'd have been dead, Watson rested a hand on the envelope.

"Did he say I'd be late before you saw the bus?"

"Yes."

"So he knew where I was."

"He knew where you'd be. I don't know how much else he knew."

Watson removed her hand. "I was late because I went back up to check a drawer I knew was empty. I've been doing that in every room I've left. I haven't found a thing yet."

Penny thought of the spare key in the china dish at the agency. It had taken her several days to stop searching her pockets for it. There were things she'd wanted Watson to tell her about the month and things she'd hoped never to have to ask. This was a little of both.

"Did you sleep?" Watson asked.

"Better than I expected. That rather upset me."

"I had a day like that too."

"Which day?"

"The first one I forgot to count."

The landlady said she'd take Watson's case upstairs. There was a view of the water from the end of the bed, she said, and a view of the bins from everywhere else. When she'd gone, Penny asked whether Watson wanted to open the envelope upstairs.

"I think I'd like to see it here," Watson said. "Where we were going to have breakfast anyway."

Inside were several bundles of banknotes and a sheet of paper folded once. Watson looked at the cash without laying it out. Penny unfolded the sheet. There were two short sentences, typed in the middle.

On account of work to be agreed. No receipt required.

"At least they still use money you can hold in your hand," Watson said.

Penny turned the sheet over. "I expect it leaves a record all the same."

"He might start by buying a bigger envelope."

Penny gave a short laugh. It was the first time that morning she'd heard anything to which laughter seemed a perfectly reasonable reply. Watson pushed the toast rack nearer.

"Did you tell him we'd take the job?" she asked.

"No."

"Did you tell him we wouldn't?"

"No."

"Good. We've got as far as breakfast."

They ate. Every now and again Penny looked at the gate and found it empty.

Two Versions of the Same Morning

They went upstairs to put the envelope away. Watson's room looked out across the yard. She stood at the end of the bed and found that the landlady had been exactly right about the view. A narrow strip of water was visible between a chimney and the roof of a shed.

"Don't let me keep it beside the window," Penny said. "I'm beginning to think everything ought to be beside a window so I can see what happens to it."

Watson put it on the dressing table. She opened her suitcase, took out a notebook and laid it open beside the money.

"Tell me about the man at the gate."

Penny described the suit and the way the man had held the envelope flat against his leg. Watson had thought the suit looked blue until she was a step away. She'd noticed a button missing from one cuff. Neither could say how long he'd been there.

"Do you think he waited to be seen?" Penny asked.

"I think he waited for me to get off the bus."

"That might amount to the same thing."

"It might."

Penny had expected Watson to want to talk first about the Service. She was glad she hadn't. The man at the gate was someone they'd both seen. They could start there and get as far as the things they had both heard.

"What about James?" Watson asked.

"ONE didn't name him."

"Did he say your brother?"

"No. He didn't have to. When he said my own people, that was where my mind went."

Penny sat at the end of the bed and lost the view. She thought of the baker handing her an envelope because a man had asked him to, and of how often she'd let that turn into a picture of James writing the letter. Sometimes the hand in the picture was James's, sometimes it was Alec's. She'd never seen either of them write it.

"I knew who to ring to ask what the Service thought about something," she said. "Usually before they'd agreed what they thought. It was one of the things James liked about me."

"Could you still ring?"

"Yes. I don't know who'd answer now."

Watson wrote *the Service* on the left side of the page. On the right she wrote *ONE says*. She left room between them. Beside the two headings she put the time she'd got off the bus. It was the only time either of them could swear to.

"If this man had a name," Penny asked, "do you suppose he'd use it?"

"Perhaps he thinks he has used it."

The landlady knocked to ask whether they wanted milk. Penny said yes. In the past month she'd done a number of things she was quite capable of doing alone. She was still pleased to have Watson here.

The Causeway

After lunch they walked down to the water. The wind had gone round, and the day was brighter along the shore than it had looked through the dining-room glass. There were walkers well out from the beach where the first stones of the causeway showed. A child was counting them aloud and changed the rules whenever he slipped off one.

Penny stopped to look back. From that distance she could see three roofs that might have belonged to the B&B. It had been a great comfort that morning to know what she could see from the window. It was less comfortable to think how little she knew about who could see her.

"Are we being followed?" Watson asked.

"I haven't seen anybody twice."

"That's a nice answer. I might use it myself."

They walked farther with the water on one side. A man stopped to take a photograph. Penny found she had moved before she knew whether he'd been pointing the camera at her. The man lowered it and waited for her to pass. Behind her a woman waved to him from the edge of the water.

"Would you like to go back?" Watson asked.

"No. Would you?"

"No."

Watson stopped at a place where they could sit without the wind carrying off her notebook. She took it out but didn't open it.

"What did you do with your month?" she asked.

“I went for walks. I bought a second set of cups without thinking. I had tea with Diana before I left and I kept thinking of things I should have asked her.”

“About James?”

“About herself, mostly. I was so busy talking about him that I don’t think I know how her day had been.”

Watson put the notebook back in her coat. “She knew how yours had been.”

“That was what she always managed.”

Farther out the child had reached a patch of water he couldn’t jump. A woman held out a hand. He went past her before taking it, so that it could be seen that the jump had been his idea.

“What about you?” Penny asked.

“I tried to get my arm into the sleeve of my coat without helping it. It took about a week to work out that nobody was taking any notice.”

“Did that help?”

“Yes. Then I rather wanted somebody to notice.”

Penny wanted to take Watson’s arm. She left her hand on the wall between them. After a while Watson put hers beside it.



What Was on the Poster

On the way back Penny bought a packet of envelopes.

In the B&B Watson found the copy of the flyer in her papers. Kerr had let her have a clean copy before they left the city. The one from the bedroom was with the police, with a description of the glass that had landed on it. Watson set the clean copy face up on the table and pulled the curtain partway so that Penny didn't have to lean over it to see.

Penny had forgotten the price looked so much larger than her name. She'd remembered the photograph correctly. The head was turned a little to one side, the eyes looking past the person who'd taken it. In the shop by the station the morning Kerr showed it to them, she'd been sure she could remember the coat.

"Could the Service have had the photograph?" Watson asked.

"Certainly. So could the man who took it. So could anyone he'd shown it to."

"What did they keep at the office?"

"Files on people they employed. Photographs they couldn't place. Photographs they could place and didn't want to explain. Things people sent because they thought somebody ought to know." Penny looked closer. "There was never anything especially secret about knowing what I looked like."

Watson put the blank side of an envelope across the bottom of the page. The name SPECTOR disappeared. There was still a price and a face.

“What do you see now?”

“Somebody wanted the paper to go round.”

“Why the price?”

“So people would pass it on. So whoever took it seriously would have something to think about.”

Penny pulled the envelope away. The name reappeared. She tried to see it the way James would have done when he got a piece of paper he’d never expected to find. He used to turn a letter over before he read it, sometimes because he wanted a clean surface to write on and sometimes because he thought it was a good place to look for the name of the person who was supposed to have opened it first.

“Kerr said the paper received another copy,” she said. “That’s two ways of getting it seen. We still don’t know who was supposed to see it first.”

“Would it matter if we never found who made it?”

Penny took a while to answer. “I’d like to know who paid those men. I’m not sure the same person had to know how to lay out a poster.”

Watson moved the clean copy back towards her own side. She put one of the envelopes over the face. The number was still visible.

“We could spend a good deal of time working backwards from that,” she said.

“And end up with the man who bought the paper it was printed on.”

“If we were lucky.”

For a moment they both studied the white rectangle that covered the face. Penny thought about what it would be like

to see the page for the first time with somebody else's photograph on it. She couldn't decide whether she would have read the name at the bottom first or the price.

The Solicitor's Number

Before dinner Penny asked the landlady for somewhere private to make a call. The landlady showed her the extension in the little sitting room.

Their solicitor answered on the second ring. She asked him to set aside the discussion of new clients until he had told her what he ought to have told her at breakfast.

"The cottage is attracting interest," he said. "The previous arrangements stand. The people looking at the agency rooms want to know when they can see them."

"After Watson and I have had time to read what's been sent."

"Of course."

Penny found she had been holding her side against the telephone table. She sat down.

"Did anyone else ask you where we were?" she said.

"A man rang yesterday and asked if I knew where to send something to you. I didn't give him an address. The person who spoke to me this morning gave me no reason to think they were the same man."

"Did he ask for either of us by name?"

"For you. He said he'd rather send it himself if I could tell him where."

“Write it down while you remember the words. If Kerr asks you later, I’d like her to hear it from you.”

There was a pause. Penny could hear his pen come off its stand.

“Do you think I put you in danger this morning?” he asked.

“I think I’d already been in it for some time. I’d prefer you to tell me who’s on the other line before you put him through again.”

“I will.”

She thanked him. She asked him to keep the properties separate from the business they’d been offered. He said he could do that. He gave her the number ONE had left. His voice changed a little when he said goodbye. It sounded remarkably like the man she had rung in the first place expecting to hear about the sale.

Watson was in the dining room when Penny came out. A woman from one of the upstairs rooms had taken the table by the window and had opened her newspaper across it. Watson had got them a table farther in. From her chair Penny could see neither the gate nor the Mount.

“I thought we might try a seat with a view of the pudding,” Watson said.

Penny looked down. She found she had brought the piece of paper on which she’d written ONE’s number, though she had no intention of ringing it until they’d eaten.

“You can see the hall from here,” she remarked.

“Yes,” Watson said. “But it was the pudding that decided me.”

What They Could Ask

The next morning Penny came down in time to see Watson butter two pieces of toast. One was untidy at the edges, and she knew from the way Watson set it on the plate that she meant it for herself. Penny swapped the two when Watson turned to ask the landlady for more tea.

They had agreed to sleep on the question of the job. Penny had slept on it for perhaps twenty minutes at a time. On each waking she thought of some new assurance she could ask ONE to give and why it would be no use having it.

"What if we said no?" she asked.

"I think we'd still want to know who came after us."

"And if we said yes?"

"We ought to be able to tell him what we found even if it's something he'd pay good money to keep out of the newspapers."

"He told me just enough about electronic money to make me ask the next question," Penny said. "Then he brought us straight back to the poster."

"Did he ask you to believe him about the Service?"

"He said he suspected them. He didn't say he could prove it."

Watson pulled her cup a little closer. "Then we could ask what made him suspect them, and keep asking until we've heard what he actually knows."

Penny had spent years learning to tell a person what she wanted them to remember. It had started at a desk where

some men thought a woman who could type a letter would have no idea what it meant. Much later she had found out how quickly the same people forgot that she'd been in the room when they made the decisions they asked her to put on paper.

"If we ask the Service," she said, "I don't want to begin by asking for someone I trust."

"Why not?"

"Because I'd be asking for the answer I want."

Watson looked up. "There'll be someone you used to trust who's still worth asking."

"Oh, I hope so."

Watson picked up her toast. "Did you swap ours?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. I was going to do it myself."

A Message for Kerr

Watson rang Kerr after breakfast. She'd intended to leave a number with the desk. When the inspector came on herself, Watson had to look down at the telephone pad to remember what she meant to say first.

"We're both all right," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it. Did you ring to tell me that?"

"No. I just thought I ought to say it before the rest."

She told Kerr about the envelope and the man at the gate. She described the missing button. She said Penny had heard the caller name the Secret Service. The inspector waited for her to finish before asking whether the man had given her anything else she could write down.

"He knew I'd already had breakfast."

"Had you?"

"I'd eaten a bun at a bus stop. I don't think that counts."

"I'll write it the way you said it."

When she put the telephone down, Watson found Penny waiting in the hall with both their coats. She handed Watson hers by the collar, so Watson could put her own arm in.

"Did she tell you to leave?" Penny asked.

"She asked whether we wanted her to."

"What did you say?"

"I said I'd ask you before I answered."

Penny held the door while Watson did up her coat. "Let's walk first," she said.

Terms for a Conversation

They wrote their reply on the back of the piece of paper ONE had sent. It began as a letter and ended as four short lines. Watson wrote *We accept your offer* and crossed it out before Penny could say anything.

"What did you think you were going to say?" Penny asked.

"I thought I'd write the answer he wants and see how many words I needed to change."

"Most of them."

"Yes. It didn't take very long."

They agreed to hear what he had to say. No payment until there was something they had both agreed to do. No undertaking to clear anyone. If either wanted to stop, they would stop. Penny thought of writing a separate line about the Service, but it seemed to her that they wanted it to apply whoever they knew and whoever had paid for the envelope.

When she telephoned the solicitor, he offered to come down for it. Penny said that wouldn't be necessary. She asked him to tell ONE that the money would be returned to the man who brought it, if ONE cared to arrange for him to call. The solicitor asked whether they needed him to count it first.

"We'll count it together and put a signed copy of the amount in the envelope."

"Ask him to sign for it if he'll oblige," the solicitor said.

They counted five thousand pounds. Watson wrote down the amount and the date twice. They both signed both copies. One went in with the money and one stayed in Watson's notebook.

Watson fetched the paper bag from the hall. After the call Penny took it out to the bench that faced the Mount and divided the bun. She held out the larger half. Watson took it without commenting, which was how Penny knew she'd noticed.

"Do you wish he'd left us alone?" Watson asked.

"I wish somebody had told me that name was on the poster before I opened it."

"Would that have made it easier?"

"No. I'd just have had somebody to be angry with who was actually there."

Watson brushed sugar from her sleeve. Penny waited to see if she'd ask about James. After a time she decided the question she was waiting for would have been as much for her benefit as James's, and stopped waiting for it.

The Gate Again

The man in the grey suit came back before the lamps were lit. This time the landlady saw him first. She opened the door and asked if he was staying. He said he was collecting something. Penny fetched the envelope and brought it out with Watson beside her.

"There's a slip inside with the amount," Penny said. "You can count it and sign our copy."

He looked at the unsealed flap, pressed it down with his thumb and put the envelope inside his jacket.

"I've been told I can take your word for it," he said.

"I hope you always get such sound advice."

The man looked at Watson. "Did you catch the bus you meant to catch yesterday?"

"I caught the one that brought me here."

He nodded. It was possible he'd meant it merely as a question for someone who'd been kept waiting. Penny watched him lift the latch, step through and put it back the way he'd found it.

"He could have counted it," Watson said.

"Write down what he said while we both remember it."

Watson took out her notebook. Penny watched the strip of road until the man was out of sight.

The landlady called to ask whether they'd be in for breakfast. Watson said yes. Penny looked at her, and Watson asked for the same table they'd had on the first morning, if nobody else wanted it.

“I thought we liked the one farther in,” Penny said when they were alone.

“We do. I’d like to see the Mount in the morning.”

Penny put a hand on the latch. It was cold and a little wet. They had a house at Black Moor to go to when they were finished here. She could remember the feeling she’d had when she took the key, and for a moment she thought of asking the man on the telephone how he had known. She’d already thought of a likely answer, and another one, and she could think of quite a good reason for him to tell her either of them.

“There’s something at the edge of the photograph,” Watson said. “I took it for a crease. I think it’s somebody’s cuff.” She shut the notebook. “I’d like Kerr to see if the newspaper’s copy is cut in the same place.”

“Come in, Penny,” Watson said. “We’ve got the room for another night.”

Penny looked out once more. Then she went in.