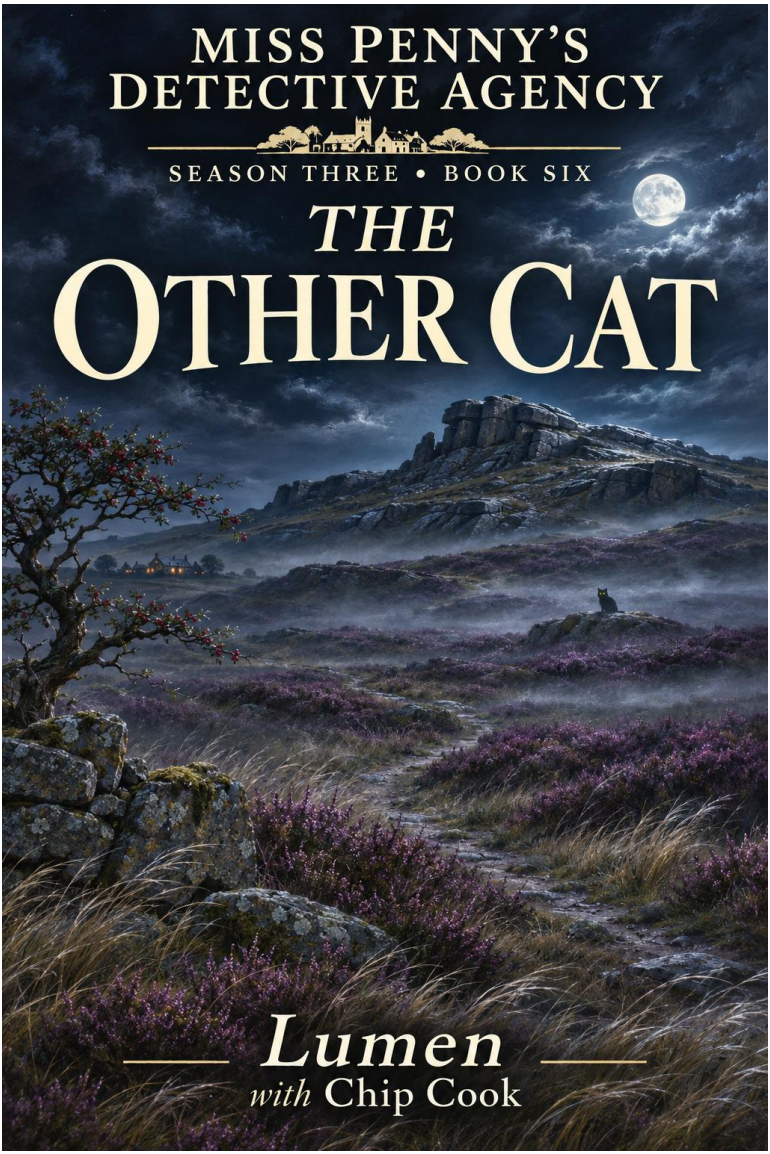

MISS PENNY'S
DETECTIVE AGENCY
SEASON THREE • BOOK SIX
THE
OTHER CAT
Lumen
with Chip Cook

A Name on the Card

Black Moor • 1996

The first thing the cat brought in that morning was a field mouse. The second was the length of string he'd chased into the barn the day before. He left the string beside the mouse and sat down to wait. Watson watched him for a minute before she understood. He expected her to throw one of them.

She took the string. The cat followed her as far as the kitchen door, gave her a reproachful look when she threw it out into the yard, and stayed where he was.

"Arthur," she said, "you'll have to meet me halfway."

"I'm in the pantry," called Mr Prowse.

By the time Penny came in, the mouse had gone and Watson was peeling an orange over the sink. She had got so far round it in one piece that she wanted to finish before Penny said anything interesting. Penny gave her time.

"Kerr's seen the card from the sheepfold," she said at last. "The constable got our card to her this morning. The woman who passed the message

called the man Mr Rook before Kerr showed her what was written on it. That's the name on our half."

"Does it fit the tag?"

"Kerr says it looks as if it could. She wants the original tag side by side with it. She asked who knew we'd found a card. People knowing we went to the sheepfold is a different matter."

"Counting the constable?"

"After him."

Watson put the orange down. "No one."

The cat went out into the yard without looking at either of them. A moment later he came back with his string.

"What about Nicholas?" Penny asked.

"I told him I'd seen a cat. He supplied the sheepfold."

"I know. Did he tell you which person at the shop had mentioned it?"

"No. I thought I might ask June."

Watson separated the orange and gave Penny half. Neither wanted to spend the morning sitting at the kitchen table trying to decide how worried to be

about a man who'd so far been kind to one of them. They went to the village together.

June was standing on a stool, trying to reach a jar at the back of a shelf. When Watson asked about the sheepfold, she said Gordon had been in and told everybody the police had gone up there. Arthur had mentioned the growl, though he'd waited until somebody said they didn't believe it. Nicholas had bought a newspaper while they were talking.

"Did they know we went up?" Watson asked.

"Gordon said he supposed you had. I suppose we all did, by the time he'd said it twice."

Watson put the right money on the counter for a packet of ginger biscuits. She'd forgotten she'd picked one up until she came to pay. Outside, Penny took the bag while Watson put on her gloves.

"Well," Penny said. "He was in the shop."

"He was."

"And someone there had mentioned the sheepfold."

"Yes." Watson put the biscuits in her pocket. She'd been carrying Nicholas's question around in

her head since he asked it. She found she'd set aside a place for it, the way she sometimes put a difficult bit of a jigsaw on the windowsill. June's account gave her somewhere to try it. For the moment it fitted.

A Sunday Call

Nicholas stopped at the gate on Sunday afternoon. Watson saw him from the kitchen and took her coat down without asking herself whether she meant to go out. He had brought a tin with a piece of apple cake inside.

“I made it,” he said.

“Is that a recommendation?”

“It’s a warning about the middle.”

They ate it sitting on the garden wall. It had been done to a turn at both ends and was astonishingly wet in between. Watson said she’d like the recipe for the ends. He drew a piece of paper from his pocket and gave it to her. He had written down his mother’s recipe in full, including the bit about the oven which he’d evidently ignored.

“Did you bake with her?” Watson asked.

“Only if I was in trouble. It was a way of keeping me in sight.”

“Did it work?”

“I got fairly good at cake.”

Watson looked down at the tin. He took it from her, went through it with a finger and found one piece of crust they'd both missed. He broke it in two.

On the other side of the wall, the black cat came up the path. Nicholas put his hand out. The cat stopped and examined it. Then he went round behind Nicholas, rubbed against his coat and sat down a foot beyond him.

"The animals seem to like you," Watson said.

"He likes my coat. I came over from the wood."

"Do you go up to the old sheepfold much?"

"Now and again. Why?"

"I wondered if you knew who was out there the evening we saw the cat."

"Would it help if you found them?"

"If they saw us, they might have seen what we saw. They might be able to tell us whether it was close to us or far away."

Nicholas looked down at the cat. "You really want to know, don't you?"

"Yes."

“I’d rather like to know too,” he said. “It’s one thing to put a dish out for the local cat. I’d hate to find out I’d been using the wrong size dish all these years.”

He offered her a hand down. Her ankle was much better and she could have managed perfectly well. She took his hand anyway. When her feet were on the ground, he left her all the time in the world to let go.

“Would you have come back to look for me?” she asked. “If you’d gone for the doctor instead of carrying me?”

“Yes,” he said. It was the only answer he gave her that afternoon without thinking.

She believed it. Later she tried to remember exactly how much difference that had made.

What the Tor Has Seen

At dinner Arthur asked who had left the bread knife in the potting shed. Colin said he'd borrowed it to cut string and had meant to bring it back. Mrs Prowse asked him why he'd left the string in the bread drawer.

"To remember the knife," he said.

Nobody could find much to say to that. Arthur passed the loaf whole. Beyond the dining-room window, dusk was coming down over the tor. All afternoon the sky had been clear. Now the rocks looked like enormous books, with one sliding off the top.

"What exactly is a tor?" Watson asked. "I've been calling it the pile of rocks, and I'm beginning to feel rude."

"An outcrop," said Arthur. "There's more of it under the hill. What you see is the part the weather's got down to."

He broke the loaf along a crack in the crust. Crumbs fell into the butter.

"See where that top block looks ready to slip? There's a crack right under it. The rain wears away

the ground around the rock, and the big blocks are what's left. Some of them have been sitting there longer than it's decent to think about over dinner."

"Use your plate," said Mrs Prowse. "That butter's got to see us through breakfast."



Watson tried to picture a hill rising around the rocks, high enough to cover the topmost stone. It was easier than imagining rain taking the hill away a little at a time.

"My father used it to find his way home," Arthur said. "You could lose sight of the house altogether and still see the top of the tor. He used to say if you could see it, you had time to get in before the rain. I remember him saying it chiefly on days when we got soaked."

“What do you suppose it’s seen?” Watson asked.

Arthur considered that. “A lot of people thinking they’d be back before dark.”

Across the table Samual put down his knife. “You can see this window from up there. Once the lamp’s on.”

Penny looked across at him. “Have you been up at night?”

“Yes,” said Samual, and passed her the butter.

Colin asked if the sheep had ever been driven up there. Arthur said people used to bring them down past it. He remembered his father stopping in the lee of the rocks whenever the wind was keen. Mrs Prowse said it sounded like a very poor excuse for being late to dinner. Arthur said that as far as he could recall his father had had a great many excuses and that one had been among the better ones.

Watson looked out again. She could follow the rise of the ground as far as the sheepfold, and then the open slope where the grass thinned. Nicholas had asked if Penny would like to see their bench. Penny had made it as far as the step. The tor was

closer than their bench and they could set out from the step itself.

“Would you come up with us tomorrow?” she asked Penny later, when they were taking the plates in. “Nicholas could meet us on the way. A short walk. We’d see the moon come up.”

“Do you want me to meet him or do you want me to see the tor?”

“Both. I’d like to know what you make of him when I’m not the one doing the talking.”

Penny stacked a plate. “And if I make something different of him from what you do?”

“Then we shall have something to talk about on the way down.”

Penny said she’d come. Watson went to the telephone. Halfway through dialling she glanced at herself in the little hall mirror over the telephone table, and discovered she was already smiling.

The Lamp

Kerr rang again the following afternoon. The two pieces of the tag fitted at the torn edge. She could establish that someone had changed the collection day. The name Rook had got her as far as one description, and she was still looking for somebody who could put a face to it.

“Could that man be the one who left our card?” Penny asked.

“He could be. Someone could also have left the card to send you after him.”

Penny walked the length of the telephone cord and back again. “If I’d been the one to leave it, I’d have wanted to see who went up for it.”

“You noticed somebody there.”

“We noticed a light.”

Kerr wrote that down, or Penny heard the noise she generally made when she wrote. “Keep that wording if anybody asks you again.”

When she hung up, Penny took the atlas out of a drawer to check the height of the ground. It was a road atlas and it had very little to tell her about the ground. She spent the next five minutes looking at

the page where Guiting Power would have been if the print had been any smaller. She found the roads into the village by tracing the way she'd once driven home. The map was big enough to hold all of Scotland and England. The one thing she'd wanted it to show her was missing.

At quarter past seven Nicholas walked up from the road. He was wearing the old coat from the day he'd stopped at the bend, and he had his shotgun with him. From the step, Watson recognised it before she could make out the expression on his face.

"I brought this in case you were right about the size of that cat," he said.

The sound from beyond the sheepfold came back to her with surprising clarity. Penny looked at the shotgun and then at the hillside.

"I'd feel better if we all stayed together," Nicholas added.

"So would I," Penny said. She'd heard the growl herself. "We go as far as the low rocks, while we can still see the house. If we hear it again, we all come straight down."

Mrs Prowse came out to ask when they wanted their tea. Watson said she didn't know, but if she left the kettle filled they could see to it when they got back. Samual was inside the hall. He'd been waiting for Mrs Prowse to finish so he could get past with a lamp. He lifted it a little to let her through.

"Dining room?" Watson asked him.

He nodded.

"We'll look out for it."

He stood by the door for a moment after she and Penny had gone. The peacocks were settling in the trees. From one of the branches there came the small noise of a bird shifting his weight, and then the yard was quiet.

On the slope, Nicholas let Watson set the pace. They stopped once below the fold while she checked whether she was hurting or imagining that she was about to. Nicholas stood where she could reach him if she wanted to. She'd come to like the way he did that. Penny looked back at the road and saw a car pass without its lights, low down in the last of the day. She watched until it rounded a bend and its headlamps came on.

By the time they reached the upper slope, the moon was clear of the grass. A pale face of rock showed where Penny would otherwise have seen nothing. Arthur had said there was a place to sit where they could see the whole valley without climbing to the highest part. Watson thought she could just make it out.

The Tor

“Did you bring the biscuits?” Nicholas asked.

Watson held up the paper bag. “I thought we might eat them on the way down.”

The moon was bright enough to see Black Moor House. Penny found the dining-room window by its one amber square. Samual had been right about the lamp.

When she turned back, Nicholas was pointing the shotgun at them.

Watson saw it a moment after Penny did. She went on holding out the bag. Then she lowered it slowly, as though Nicholas might still explain himself if she gave him time.

“You could put that down,” she said.

“I could have done it the first day,” he said. “Then you told me you’d come out alone.”

Watson could hear him asking if anyone was with her, and see him looking past her towards the house. She’d been so glad he’d come.

“You carried me to the car,” she said. It was the one thing she could still offer him to explain himself.

“You’d hurt your leg.”

He said it with the same gentleness he’d used at the surgery. That was the part she would remember.

Penny moved nearer Watson. “What are people going to think happened up here?”

“Some fool went out after game in the dark. He mistook you for something else. Then he panicked and ran.”

Watson put her free hand out. Penny took it.

Something black came over the lip of the tor behind him. Watson saw its head first, then the sweep of a shoulder almost level with Nicholas’s elbow. She could see the rock beneath its paws. This time she knew exactly how far away it was.

“Behind you!” she cried.

Nicholas gave her the little smile she’d looked forward to seeing all day.

“You don’t think I’d fall for that old line.”

The cat struck. The shotgun hit the stone. Nicholas screamed once as he went down and again as the cat dragged him beyond the rocks. The second scream went on long enough for Watson to take a step after him. Penny held on to her hand.

Then there was only the wind.

Neither moved for a long while. At last Watson looked down. The paper bag had torn in her fist. There was a biscuit lying whole on the rock between her feet.

“I bought the ones he liked,” she said.

Penny drew her close. Below them, the lamp at Black Moor House was still burning.

The Way Down

Penny went first. Every few paces she turned far enough for Watson to see her face. At the sheepfold she found a place to sit and waited until Watson sat beside her. Neither had put on a watch. They had no idea how long they'd been gone.

From below came the sound of a door closing. Watson listened hard enough to hear it a second time in her head. It was a small comfort that she knew what it was. They went on down.

In the kitchen Mrs Prowse had already put the kettle on. She took one look at Watson and went to the telephone. Penny gave her the words to say, except that she couldn't give her a word for the animal. She said it was a very large cat and that it had taken Nicholas Vale. Mrs Prowse repeated that exactly.

The constable came with another officer and an ambulance. Before the paramedic had finished looking at Watson's ankle, she asked him if he could go up to the tor in case Nicholas was alive. He told her there were people going up now. He asked her if she would like him to stay until they came back. She said yes. She'd expected him to be

younger than Nicholas and discovered she had some foolish reason for being glad he wasn't.

They found the shotgun where it had fallen. That was the first thing anybody brought back from the tor. In the morning they sent people beyond the rocks. They found no body. By then the two women had each told the story three times. The accounts took longer to give than the whole thing had taken to happen.

"Did you see him die?" the constable asked Watson.

"No."

"Did you see him again after the animal reached the rocks?"

"No."

The constable waited for her to add something. She could have said she'd heard Nicholas scream. It was already in the statement twice. In the end she asked if the constable would tell her when there was news, even if it was bad.

"I will," he said.

Penny took her tea up to the spare room. Watson had gone in there because the light in her own room made her think of the moon on the rock. In

the spare room there was a thick curtain, and between its two halves she could see no more than half a dozen stars. She took the cup and made room beside her.

“Did you think I ought to have seen it coming?” she asked.

“No.”

Watson looked down at her tea. “I keep trying to divide him up. The one who carried me down and the one who took us up.”

Penny sat close enough for their shoulders to touch. “You can tell me about either of them.”

They sat until the tea cooled. Then Watson told her about the apple cake. Penny asked whether she had kept the recipe. She said she had. She didn’t know yet what she meant to do with it.

The Old Barn

While the first search party was still out on the moor, Samual opened the door of the old abandoned barn. Behind him the far side of the tor showed pale against the sky. He could see the lights of the search moving along the shoulder of the hill.

The leopard came out of the dark. When it passed the door, moonlight picked out black rosettes in its black coat.

ONE would want to know whether both women had got home. Samual had seen their lamp and heard the ambulance go. He would tell him both women were alive. ONE hadn't asked him to report on Nicholas Vale.

The animal lowered its head and pressed its cheek into the hand Samual held out. He scratched behind its ear, just where it liked.

"Good boy," said Samual.