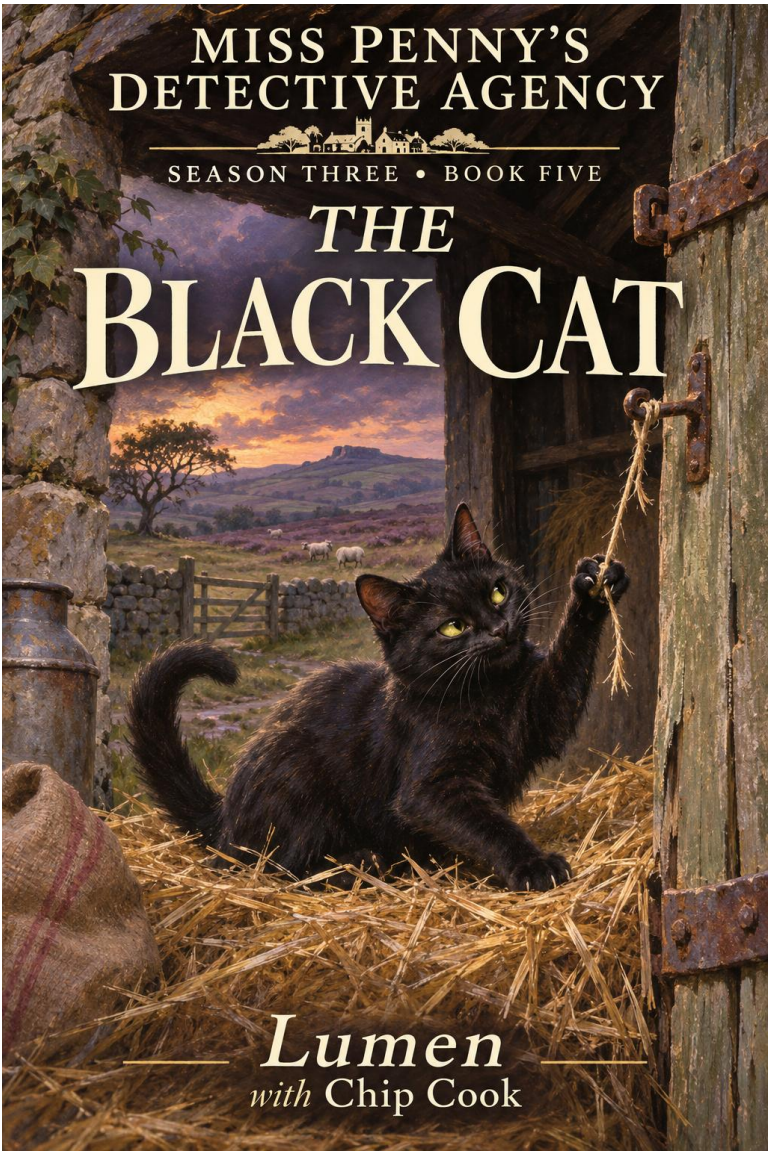

MISS PENNY'S
DETECTIVE AGENCY
SEASON THREE • BOOK FIVE
THE
BLACK CAT
Lumen
with Chip Cook

The Cat in the Tin

Black Moor • 1996

There was a black cat asleep in the shortbread tin. The lid sat crooked on the rim. Watson lifted it, saw one yellow eye open, and put the lid down beside it. She rather admired the cat's confidence that whatever came next would be her problem.

Mrs Prowse came in with the eggs. "I was wondering where he'd got to."

"In the tin."

"I meant yesterday. There was a mouse in the flour cupboard and he wouldn't answer the bell."

"What's he called?"

"Depends whose breakfast he's after."

The cat stretched. He was too long for the tin when he put his mind to it. He put a paw on the table, then a second, and made for the chair nearest the range. Mrs Prowse carried him out under one arm and came back without him. By the time she set down the plates he was on the chair.

"I thought he lived in the barn," Watson said.

“So did I. He’s had a very good morning proving me wrong.”

Penny came in from the study with her glasses in her hand. She’d been on the telephone to Inspector Kerr. The inspector had tried the address Enid gave her for Peter Hales. His landlady said he’d gone south for a few days. She didn’t know where. She sounded as if she’d like to know herself, because he’d left a pair of wet shoes in her kitchen.

“Perhaps he’s come to see Enid,” Watson said.

“Enid hasn’t heard from him.”

Penny turned her glasses over. Kerr had asked the landlady if Peter had said why he was going. The woman remembered him asking to borrow a small case. She offered him her husband’s, and he changed his mind when he saw it.

“What sort of case was it?” Watson asked.

“The sort with a lock. Apparently that was the trouble.”

The cat opened both eyes when Mrs Prowse set a jug of milk down. Watson put her hand round it. The cat altered his route and stepped on Penny’s glasses.

“We ought to give him a name,” Penny said.

“Mr Prowse tried that,” said his wife. “He called him Ink for two years. The cat answers to Arthur.”

As if to demonstrate, the cat hopped down and followed Arthur’s boots past the kitchen window. Behind him, the three peacocks moved across the yard in single file. One stopped to look under the wheelbarrow. The others waited. Penny watched them till the last blue neck disappeared round the corner. She’d been listening for them again in the night. There had been plenty of small sounds she could name and a couple she could have named if she had been prepared to guess.

Watson buttered a piece of toast and looked at the clock. For the first time in days she wished she were wearing something pretty enough to make a person forget she had a walking stick. Then she remembered she had chosen the blue jumper because she liked herself in it, and went upstairs to put it on.

Another Bench

Nicholas was outside June's shop at twelve with a folded tablecloth over his arm. He opened it to show Watson the red checks.

"If you brought a table too," she said, "I'm going home."

"I've brought a new bench. Well, I know where there is one."

June came out with the ginger biscuits. "Before you ask, neither of you has paid."

Watson paid. Nicholas carried the parcel to the Land Rover and told her where he'd found the second bench. It was farther along the coast, above a dip with a little wood between it and the road. They'd have the view and a place to sit out of the wind. Watson made him promise there would be something of a wind. She wanted to know she was on the cliffs.

He'd got cold chicken and mustard and brought two knives, because they'd both had occasion to wait for the first one last time. He asked if Penny had had a chance to see much of the coast yet.

“She’d have liked the view the other day,” Watson said. “She’d have objected to the crumbs in my good jumper.”

“I’d like to meet her properly sometime. A handshake beside the road barely counts. Would she like to see our new spot?”

“Our new spot,” said Watson. “You haven’t even taken me there yet.”

He laughed. “If you both like it, I’ll bring enough lunch for three next time.”

Watson looked back towards the shop. June had propped the door open and gone inside. She could ask to use the telephone. Penny had intended to spend the afternoon waiting for a call that might not come. There was no particular reason she had to do that on a day when a person could see all the way across the Bristol Channel.

Watson rang. Penny answered before the first ring had finished. She said she’d come if there was room, especially if it meant an afternoon away from the study. Nicholas said he’d drive up for her. Watson hung up and felt a small, unexpected pleasure at the thought of the two of them finally having a conversation she hadn’t already had on their behalf.

They made it as far as the drive. Penny was on the step in her coat. She had a loaf wrapped in a clean cloth and a small knife poking out of her pocket. She looked so much like someone going on a picnic that Watson had to laugh. Then Colin appeared in the doorway and said Inspector Kerr was on the telephone again.

Penny held the loaf through the Land Rover window. “Go on. I’ll ring June when I know anything.”

Nicholas glanced at the house. Then he took the loaf. “We’ll save you a place for next time.”

Penny took the knife out of her pocket and stood aside to let him turn. Watson watched her go back inside. For the length of the drive she wondered whether she ought to have stayed. At the bench Nicholas put the tablecloth down without asking her to be cheerful. Then the wind caught it. Nicholas went after it and caught both the cloth and his sleeve on a thorn. Watson took her stick and went over. She reached up to free him and had such a good look at the shape of his ear that she forgot the remark she’d been going to make.

They ate with the sea below them. Before they left he put his hand on the bench between them.

Watson turned her hand over and laid it in his. They stayed that way for a while, looking at the strip of light moving over the water. On the drive home he asked if she'd like him to call again. She said he could skip the telephone if he was passing the gate.

Wednesday

Watson left the rest of the loaf in the kitchen. When she came into the study, Penny was cutting an apple. She'd set aside half and left the seeds showing in the other. It was something she did when she wanted to be able to stop in the middle of eating and speak.

Kerr had heard from Peter. He'd telephoned his landlady from a railway station and asked her to pass on his apologies about the shoes. She had put Kerr's number by the telephone. He'd rung it next.

"What did he say about the suitcase?" Watson asked.

"He was told to collect it on Wednesday. He can give Kerr the name of the woman who gave him the message, but she'd been asked to pass it on. He didn't see the person who asked her."

"And was it our suitcase?"

"He remembered an old repair in the handle. Kerr sent a copy of the photograph to a station he agreed to visit. If he turns up, he can look at it without anybody telling him which one they want him to pick."

Watson took the other half of the apple. The last time a piece of luggage had given them an answer, it had been a picture of Penny with a price underneath. She wished she could think of the case simply as a brown object which someone had moved.

There was a tap at the door. Colin brought in a folded note which he'd found under the little brass bell on the dining-room sill. He'd asked Arthur if it was his and Arthur had asked him if it meant there'd be no supper.

The note said, in a neat hand, *Ask who changed Thursday to Wednesday. Old sheepfold, eight this evening. I'll show you the other half.*

Penny read it twice. Arthur had mended the dining-room catch after the constable left the day before. The window was still fastened. She asked Colin when he'd last moved the bell.

"I dusted the sill. I lifted the bell and put it back. There was nothing under it then."

The outside of the note was dry. It hadn't rained since before breakfast. Penny rang the local constable and told him where it had turned up and what it asked them to do. He said he'd come and

collect it. She asked whether he knew the sheepfold.

“There are three everybody calls old,” he said. “You’ll probably mean the one above your house. It’s the only one I’ve ever heard somebody call the old one without adding anything.”

He came before six. He had a look at the dining-room window, spoke to Colin and took the note with him. He told them to let him look at the fold. Penny was very glad to hear him say it. She spent the next hour thinking about the line which had promised the other half.

By seven the constable had rung back. A man from a nearby farm had let him through a gate and taken him up. Both had stood by the fold a while. The constable had seen nobody. He’d noticed a pale stone on top of the wall, with a clean face showing where the others were dark and wet. He’d go back about eight if he could. He’d had another call in the meantime and had to go down towards the village.

“Do we go?” Watson asked when Penny put the telephone down.

“I’d like to see what’s under that stone,” Penny said. “It sounds as if someone’s turned it over. If

they left the other half for us, I'd sooner find it while we can see our way home. We'll take the path he used and be clear of the fold before eight."

Watson went for her coat. "It's my leg," she said when she saw Penny notice the stick. "I'll say when I turn round." Penny said they'd both turn round when she did.

The Sheepfold

Samual was putting a cup on the kitchen dresser when they went through. He listened while Penny told him how far they meant to go. Then he fetched a big torch from the yard. He turned it on against the pantry door. A bright circle opened in the paint, and Mrs Prowse said she could see where Arthur had promised to get rid of a pencil mark.

“Have you got another?” Watson asked.

“I’ve got the kitchen light,” he said. “Take this one.”

Mrs Prowse gave them a pair of clean scarves because the wind had come round. She asked how long they expected to be. It was a quarter past seven. Penny said to ring the constable if they weren’t home by eight. Watson said she would make up the difference by being very quick about turning round.

They took the path beyond the wall. It climbed gently at first. Watson could still see their roof and the chimneys against the west. She kept them in sight for as long as she could without looking back

at every step. The last time she'd been there she'd been pleased she could see the house, as if she had proved to herself that the moor could do nothing to her so long as she could see where she meant to have dinner.

Penny saw the sheepfold first. In the last of the light it was a low, irregular heap which might have been made by chance. Once they got nearer they could see the stones set into one another and the shallow gap where a gate had been. A little grass grew inside. Someone had set a flat stone on the wall, fresh side up. Beneath it was a piece of folded card.

Penny took a clean envelope from her coat. She lifted the card by one corner and eased the fold open just far enough to read it.

On one side someone had written Mr Rook. The name meant nothing to her. Below it was *Hales, Wednesday*. There was a semicircle cut out of one end. It reminded her of the paper tag in Kerr's photograph, where the string had pulled through the other half of a hole. She could think of several ways to make two pieces of card look as if they belonged together. It would be something to find they did.

“That’s what the note meant,” Watson said.

“Maybe.” Penny slid the card into the envelope. “I’d like Kerr to see the edge.”

Watson stepped back. It was nearly dark. A light had come on low down, between them and the house. For a moment she thought it was Samual with a lantern. Then it moved sideways across the slope, away from the path. A man stood up where the light had been. The next moment the light went out.

“Do you see him?” Penny asked.

“I saw somebody. Did he go down or across?”

Penny waited. When she moved her head she could just make out one chimney against the horizon. She wanted to think the man was on his way home. She’d have liked to know whose home it was.

They moved towards the entrance. A loose stone turned under Watson’s injured foot. Penny caught her elbow. For a while they stayed where they were, waiting for the pain to pass. From somewhere below came a sound like a foot coming down on wet ground.

Watson switched on the torch.

What the Torch Found

She swung the beam towards the gap in the wall. Two eyes flashed back. For less than a second she had an impression of a black head turning. Then the beam fell on bare stone.



“What was that?” Penny whispered.

“A cat. It was huge.”

Penny took the torch and swept it back. The grass just in front of them reached almost as high as the gap when you looked from where they stood. There was nothing in either place now.

“Did you see it go through?”

“I thought I did.” Watson looked down at the grass. “No. I saw the eyes and I saw the wall. I put them together.”

If the cat had been at the wall, it would have been bigger than any dog she knew. If it had been in the grass a few feet away, it could have been the barn cat out after field mice. She remembered the size of him in the shortbread tin. She could see him getting himself into a place that looked too small, and making a person feel foolish for having wondered how he got there. It seemed quite possible that he could do the same thing with a place that looked too far away.

“It must have been closer,” she said.

Penny handed back the torch. Watson kept it on the grass near their feet. She’d almost persuaded herself she’d seen the barn cat. She still wanted to know where it had gone.

From the other side of the fold came a low growl. Or it began like a growl and ended with something that could have been a breath. The light below them came on again. It lifted, swung away from the fold and went jumping down the hillside. Whoever held it was moving fast now. Penny

heard a stone dislodge and fall some way before it stopped.

Penny nearly called out. Then she looked at Watson's foot. The light was almost out of sight by the time she spoke.

"Can you put weight on that foot?" she asked.

"A little. Give me your arm on this side."

Penny did. They went back the way they'd come. Watson put the beam well ahead of them where the ground was rough, and right at her own feet when she had to think about each step. Once she saw something black near a tuft of rushes. She held the light still until she could tell it was the dark end of a branch.

A lamp showed at Black Moor House. It was set in the upstairs landing window, high enough to see from the slope. Penny remembered the story Mr Venn had told about his mother leaving a light in the window. On the night she died his aunt had lit it, and for a little while he'd thought he was going home to the same house.

"Who lit that?" Watson said.

"Mrs Prowse, I expect."

They walked towards it. At the wall Watson's legs began shaking. She stopped, surprised by the timing. Penny said she'd been saving up a good shake of her own. They stood there till it passed, still holding on to each other, with the lamp in sight.

Arthur

The barn cat was on the kitchen chair washing one paw. Mrs Prowse said he could stay there for five minutes if he kept himself to himself. She brought a blanket and set it over Watson's knees, then brought another without waiting to be asked.

"Has he been in all evening?" Watson asked.

"Ask him. He'll tell you exactly what you want to hear."

Colin had seen the cat by the barn at tea time. Arthur had found him by the kitchen door a little before eight, just before the women came back. Both men offered their recollections without knowing why it mattered. Neither could account for the time in between.

Watson bent over to look at the cat's paws. They were dry by then. One had a little fluff between the toes. He pulled it back when she tried to inspect it.

"I'm going to call him Arthur," she announced.

From the passage the other Arthur answered, "You'll only confuse the cat."

Penny rang the constable. He came back in his coat and stayed long enough to hear where the

light had gone. She gave him the envelope and showed him which corner she'd touched. He wrote the time on his own pad and put the envelope aside for Kerr. He took separate accounts from the women and left a little space under the part about the growl. Watson asked what the space was for.

"In case somebody else has a different word for it," he said.

Samual brought the big torch in from the kitchen and set it on the table. He had been the one to put the lamp in the upstairs window. Penny thanked him. He said the lamp had already been there. All he'd done was turn it so the shade wasn't in the way.

"Did you see a light going away from us?" she asked him.

"I saw yours come back."

She waited a little longer than the answer needed. Samual took the torch and went out through the yard. A peacock stood on the wall as he passed. Neither Penny nor Watson heard it make a sound.

Later, Kerr rang. Peter had gone to the station as agreed. He'd recognised the repair in the handle. He remembered because he'd put a finger through

the loop to lift the case, and the end of a stitch had caught him. That had been on Tuesday, when he'd helped carry it in. By the time he returned on Wednesday it was gone. The original Thursday arrangement was real. Somebody had wanted him there earlier.

"Did he give you a name for the woman who passed the message?" Penny asked.

"Yes. She remembers the errand. She'll speak to me again in the morning. I want to see your card before I tell her whose name is written on it."

Penny put the receiver down. Whoever changed the day already knew enough to write that card. And whoever wanted Penny to find it had known which part of the tag would catch her eye. She picked up the telephone again and rang ONE. She asked him who in the Service had known about the Thursday pickup before Peter was sent on Wednesday. ONE asked her for the dates. She gave him both. He read them back to her, and said he'd see what he could find.

The Other Spot

In daylight the moor looked close enough to touch from the kitchen. Watson could stand at the window and imagine how the grass had come between them and things they'd been sure they saw. She tried it with a fence post. When she moved a few inches to one side, a tuft which had seemed a part of the post became a separate object twelve feet nearer. It was a comfort to see how easily it happened. She still couldn't make the growl fit anywhere.

Out by the barn the cat was playing with a string that hung from a nail. He held the end between his paws and shook his head till it came loose. He let it lie where it fell. Then something in the grass caught his attention. He went down low and very still, and Watson put her hand on the window glass while she waited to see what he was looking at.

The cat sprang. Nothing came up on the other side of the grass. After a while he emerged with the string back in his mouth and carried it off into the barn.

Nicholas stopped by the gate in the afternoon. He'd brought the bread cloth and a little mustard

jar he said he could see himself leaving at the house unless somebody took him in hand. Watson went out to meet him. She was pleased before she remembered that she had meant to be careful around him. Standing in front of him she found it possible to be both.

“How did Penny take missing the picnic?” he asked.

“She enjoyed the bit of loaf we brought back. You’ll have another chance.”

“Good,” he said, and seemed genuinely glad.

She told him they’d seen a cat the previous night. There was enough in that to tell a story. She could have stopped with the barn cat in the chair, and if he laughed she might have laughed too.

“Did you see it at the sheepfold?” he asked.

Watson looked at the bread cloth. He had folded it in quarters. She could see a little brown mark where the bread had lain against the corner.

“Who told you we went to the sheepfold?”

“People talk,” he said. “I was in the shop this morning.”

She took the cloth. “Yes. They do.”

He asked if her ankle was better. She said it was. For a moment she wanted him to tell her which person in the shop had talked, the way he'd told her where to find the good ginger biscuits. He looked at the house and then at her. In the end he put the mustard jar on the gatepost and said he'd see her soon if she liked.

"I'd like that," she said.

When she got inside she told Penny what he'd said. Penny wrote down the question, the time he'd asked it and the explanation he'd given. Then she asked Watson why she'd told him about the cat.

"I wanted to tell him something about my day," Watson said. "I'd quite got into the habit of it."

Penny put the pencil down. Watson looked at the words Penny had written. She'd told him about the cat. He'd supplied the sheepfold.