
MISS PENNY'S DETECTIVE AGENCY
SEASON THREE • BOOK FOUR
MOCKINGBIRD
3:15 AM
Lumen with Chip Cook

# Ginger Biscuits

*Black Moor • 1996*

Watson reached for the last packet of ginger biscuits just as somebody on her left did the same.

"Two shillings says you let go first," he said.

Nicholas Vale looked as surprised to see her as she was to see him. He had a loaf under one arm and a hole in the paper where he'd been picking at the crust.

"My knight in shining armour," Watson said. "Have you come to rescue the biscuits?"

"I was hoping they'd rescue my lunch."

June Dyer looked up from the till. "You can split the packet. I'll charge you both for the trouble."

Arthur had dropped Watson at the far end of the shopfront. She'd walked from the car to June's door without stopping. It was the first time since the trap that she'd managed the length of the shopfront without looking for something to lean on. She intended to celebrate by eating the biscuits on the way home. Then Nicholas turned his loaf so the hole faced inward, as if he thought she might have missed it, and she found she was in no hurry to go home.

Outside, the sun had come through. Watson could see a bright strip of water at the far end of the street.

“Can you get to the cliffs without much of a walk?” she asked.

“There’s a bench quite near where you leave the car.”

“Have you got anything to put on that bread?”

“Cheese.”

“Then I’ll risk the bench.”

Watson used the shop telephone to tell Arthur she’d ring when she was ready to be fetched. June lent Nicholas the shop bread knife after making him promise to bring it back. They went in his Land Rover. On the way he pointed out the cottage where he lived. There was a bicycle leaning against the front wall and a bright red dish on the step.

“Is the dish for your dog?” she asked.

“My predecessor’s cat. He sits outside twice a day looking at it. I put something in it and he walks away. We’ve both grown rather attached to the arrangement.”

At the cliffs the wind caught the bread paper and nearly took their lunch. Watson put her stick across it. The Bristol Channel lay below them, with the Welsh shore fading in and out of sight. Nicholas

took off his coat and folded it for her ankle. He set it beside her and went back to cutting the cheese. She liked that he left her to decide whether to use it.



“I never properly thanked you,” she said.

“You did. In the Land Rover.”

“I thought I asked you to slow down.”

“You thanked me after I slowed down.”

She remembered that now. In the days since, she’d told Penny about the trap, the gun and the doctor. She hadn’t told her how good it had felt to hear somebody say, *I’ve got you.*

“What were you looking for up there?” she asked.

Nicholas broke a biscuit over the bread paper and gave her the bigger half. “Why do you ask?”

“When you found me, you asked if anyone was with me. Then you looked straight at the house.”

“Was I right to think she’d come looking?”

“Penny? Of course she came looking.”

He turned his head towards her. “How far did she get?”

Watson brushed a crumb off her skirt. Out over the water a cloud passed, and the far shore disappeared again.

“You’ll have to ask Penny,” she said.

He took that with a small nod. After a while he asked what she’d been hoping to see when she set off across the moor. She told him she had wanted to get far enough away from the house to turn round and see where on earth she’d agreed to live. He said

he knew how that felt. The first winter in his cottage he'd got up every morning and gone out to make sure the roof was still on.

Back at the shop, he fetched his coat from behind her seat. A ginger biscuit fell out of the fold where she'd rested her ankle.

"You saved one," he said.

"I was saving it for the next picnic."

He looked up. "Is there a next picnic?"

"I should think so. You've only shown me one bench."

"May I telephone you tomorrow?"

"After four," she said. She was free all day. Four was simply as long as she thought she could decently make him wait.

He went into the shop to give June back the bread knife. Watson rang the house and then sat by the window to wait for Arthur. Nicholas had to wait to speak while June dealt with a customer. He seemed perfectly content to stand there and wait. She thought how rare that quality was in a man who had somewhere else to go.

By the time June took the knife back, she'd decided she would wear the blue jumper next time, weather

permitting. What the weather would have to do to prevent her she hadn't considered.

# A Letter in the Wrong Place

Penny spent the afternoon failing to get Enid Trevelyan on the telephone. She tried the number June had written on the back of a bread order. Eventually a woman answered and told her it was the school kitchen. She'd come in to check the freezer before Monday's lunches. Penny thanked her. Half an hour later the same woman rang back with Enid's number and asked if Penny had anything to do with the peacocks. There was a child at the school who thought he'd seen one in his garden and could no longer be persuaded to come in for arithmetic.

By the time Watson got home, Penny had moved the telephone out of the sun. She'd been watching the shadow of its cord crawl across Kerr's photograph. It was a photocopy of the suitcase the police had found with the wanted poster inside. The label had said *collect Thursday*. The witness remembered the case being moved on Wednesday. Kerr had given them the day. Penny wanted to know who had reason to be expecting it.

Watson came in with the last of the bread and a smudge of green on the sleeve of her coat.

“You’ve been somewhere nice,” Penny said.

“Very.”

Watson told her about the bench, the cheese and the view. Then she repeated Nicholas’s questions about the moor exactly as she remembered them.

“Did you think he was asking how far I got before I turned back?” Penny asked.

“I thought he was asking how much of the moor you saw. I can’t tell you what makes me think that.”

“Will you see him again?”

“I hope so,” Watson said. It was the first time she’d said it without making a joke.

Penny made a place on the desk for the bread. “You can borrow my blue jumper if you like. Mine doesn’t have the hole under the arm.”

Watson looked at her. “How do you know which jumper I was thinking of?”

“I thought you were wearing mine the last time you went out in it.”

Watson went upstairs to investigate. When she came down, she had a small square of paper in her hand. She’d written down what Nicholas had said when he

found her, as nearly as she could remember it. She put it on the desk beside the copy.

“Look after that for me?” she asked.

Penny took it without reading it in front of her. She put it with Kerr’s papers in a plain envelope. Then she took the envelope out of the study altogether. Mrs Prowse had given her a mending basket with two good reels of cotton and a lid that didn’t shut quite flat. Penny slipped the envelope under the lining and took the basket upstairs. She left the empty police envelope face up beside the ashtray, Kerr’s handwriting plainly visible. It still had the little fold along the bottom that Kerr always made when she sealed a letter.

At supper Colin brought a chair in from the hall.

“Is that for one of us?” Watson asked.

“For Arthur. He says he’s taking his own tonight in case the others get the idea he’s going to carry theirs.”

“Where is he taking it?”

“The lawn. The bird, Miss Watson.”

Watson had spent a considerable part of the afternoon thinking about a bench. A lawn full of chairs placed for the admiration of an absent bird struck her as an unkind thing to be asked to contemplate over soup.

“Do we have to watch?” she said.

Mrs Prowse took the lid off the soup. “No, dear. You have to try to sleep.”

## Before the Bird

At half past two the house was quiet enough for Penny to hear the little travelling clock from the other end of her bedroom. She had slept for an hour and dreamed she was back in the bedroom over The Whistling Thistle, trying to draw a curtain which kept getting longer. When she woke she lay still until she could tell the difference between the sounds in the room and the ones she’d brought with her.

A little after three, the birdwatchers came up the drive. Gordon Pike carried a cassette recorder in a shopping bag. Enid brought her notebook. June had shortbread and a flask. Arthur had brought two folding chairs after all, one for himself and one he offered to June in exchange for being allowed to say the other was his. Enid and Gordon had brought chairs of their own. Seen from the house, Arthur and Enid were at the back of the group. June and Gordon sat in front of them, with Gordon at the end nearest the tree.

Watson knocked on Penny's door and came in with the dressing-table stool.

"It's better in here," she said. "Your window opens further."

Penny and Watson settled at the window. Below, Gordon asked everyone to keep still, and then walked round all four chairs asking who had a battery. June had brought one because he'd asked her to. She had wrapped it in a piece of newspaper so the contacts wouldn't get sticky from the shortbread. By the time he'd unwrapped it the little assembly sounded like a railway carriage full of people trying to eat privately. Once the recorder was running, Gordon set it on the grass between his chair and June's, close to June's feet.

At twelve minutes past three June offered the shortbread again. Nobody had heard a bird. Gordon asked them to save their voices for when there was something worth whispering about.

"My sister saw the Beast up by the old sheep fold," June whispered.

"Your sister saw a Labrador," said Arthur.

"She'd had Labradors all her life. She said if that was a Labrador, somebody had put the tail on the wrong end."

Upstairs, Penny eased the window a little higher.

“Colin says a woman saw one on her way to the vet,” Watson said.

“That was June’s sister. She was taking a Labrador.”

Enid took off her spectacles and rubbed them with the corner of her scarf.

“I saw something once,” she said.

Gordon reached for his recorder. She looked at him until he took his hand away.

“I was coming home from a governors’ meeting. Something crossed the road in front of my car. I saw its back and the end of its tail in the headlights. I drove on to the bend and waited to see if it came out the other side.”

“Did it?” June asked.

“I don’t know. I kept looking in the mirror.”

For a while there was only the sound of Arthur working a broken biscuit out of the corner of the tin.

“My father used to tell about a man who saw it from his bedroom,” Gordon said. “He watched it cross the field and come right up to the wall. When he went down next morning, he found the milk bottles still standing on the step. He was pleased about that. Then he remembered he’d left them at the gate.”

“Your father used to tell that one about a ghost,” Arthur said.

“He told it about whatever kept you indoors.”

Upstairs, Watson had been enjoying the pleasure of being awake when the rest of the world was asleep. Now she was thinking about the things a bedroom window allowed you to see, and how quickly a person could get used to the idea that everything you could see from it was safely outside.

## Quarter Past Three

“There,” Watson said. “Just beyond the wall.”

Penny caught the second movement. The first had been low to the ground. This one was higher up the slope. She couldn’t tell whether the same thing had moved twice. There was a pale patch of grass between the two places which she thought she’d been watching the whole time.

At quarter past three on Monday, 21 October, the mockingbird began with a blackbird, just as it had in Enid’s Thursday entry. Enid put up one finger. It tried the blackbird again and followed it with a noise remarkably like one of the peacocks.

“That damn mockingbird,” Watson whispered.

Penny waited for one of the real birds to answer. They’d raised an objection to Arthur’s new hat. Now all three were quiet.

“Perhaps whatever it is hasn’t come close enough,” Watson said.

“Perhaps,” Penny said. “Or they’re used to it.”

Out beyond the wall came a low sound. It rose a little, then stopped.

Arthur put his cup down in the grass.

“Was that a growl?” June whispered.

“I thought it was your chair,” said Gordon.

“I thought it was yours.”

Enid put her spectacles back on. “Would you all be quiet a moment? I’d like to hear it before you tell me what I heard.”

Penny could still see the place where the higher grass had moved. Farther down, near the bend of the wall, a stone fell. It made the small, clear sound of something ordinary happening much closer than anybody had been looking.

Watson leaned in. “Where did you hear the first sound?”

“By the wall.”

“I thought it was farther up the slope.”

The mockingbird began again. Everybody on the lawn turned towards the tree. Gordon whispered, “I’ve got it,” and caught the corner of the shortbread tin with his elbow. The lid rattled on the ground.

June made a sound of such personal affront that Penny looked down at her.

For a moment Watson saw a man between the shadow of the dining-room bay and the back of the house. He was walking, and he passed out of sight before she could say anything. She might have seen which way his head was turned if she'd known in advance how little time she had.

"Penny," she said softly. "There's someone by the house."

Penny moved over. There was nothing where Watson pointed. Below them, June said, "Where's Gordon gone?" A moment later Gordon's voice came up quite clearly. "I'm right here." Enid asked him to be quiet. The bird did a blackbird again.

Watson reached for her stick. Penny asked her to stay at the window and see who came back into view. Then she went down to the landing, put on the light and called for Arthur. She waited until she heard him answer from the lawn before going down to the front door.

By the time she stepped outside, Gordon was saying he supposed they ought to go. Enid wanted another five minutes. June had dropped the lid again and was trying to find out where it had gone without stepping on it. Penny counted four people on the grass.

June had counted three just after she asked where Gordon had gone. While she was looking for the lid she caught a movement at the edge of the lawn, on the house side. When she straightened up, all four were there. She couldn't swear who'd moved.

"Any more of you come up together?" Penny asked.

"Just us," Arthur said. He looked at the faces round him as if he thought it fair to check with the others before speaking for everybody.

Watson called from upstairs that she hadn't seen the man again. Gordon stopped winding the cord around his recorder. Enid wanted to know what man. Nobody offered so much as a guess. For the first time that night, the bird called and nobody asked Gordon whether he'd got it.

## The Sound on the Tape

At daylight Penny found the study door ajar. The police envelope lay face down beside the ashtray. She remembered seeing Kerr's handwriting when she left it the previous evening. Before she touched it, she fetched Watson.

"Could Colin have moved it?" Watson asked.

"Easily. I'd like to rule him in or out before I start putting people on the moor."

Colin said he'd brought the bread plate out at eight. He remembered the envelope because he'd wondered whether it ought to be moved away from the ashtray. He'd left it alone. Mrs Prowse had gone to bed shortly afterwards. She could account for Arthur until he'd left for the lawn, with a gap in which she'd been asleep. She insisted the gap be included.

Samual came back from the yard at breakfast. Penny described the movements on the moor, the silence of the peacocks and the sound they'd heard. He listened to all three things before he spoke.

"You can walk that ground for years and still get the distance wrong in the dark," he said.

"Were you out there?" Watson asked.

"I was by the lower gate when the bird began."

"Did you see anybody?"

"I saw Mr Pike come out of the drive when they were leaving. He dropped something, went back for it and caught up with the rest."

Penny asked him if he ever came through the study at night. He looked at her hands as she asked it. She was holding a teaspoon absolutely still in the air.

"No," he said. "What have you lost?"

"I don't think I've lost anything."

“Then it’s worth having a look at what you’ve still got.”

He went out with his tea. Watson watched him take the cup all the way to the far wall without spilling it. The peacock on that wall watched him too, and neither of them showed any objection to the arrangement.

At ten Gordon brought the cassette round. It took him several goes to get to the passage because he’d wound past it in the dark and the machine’s counter had broken. He played a few minutes of fluttering, a clear warning from June about a loose chair leg, and the sound of his own breath much louder than he’d expected.

Then came the tin lid, a silence with some rustling in it, and June’s voice.

“Where’s Gordon gone?”

“I’m right here.”

On the tape the answer sounded farther away than the question. Gordon pointed out that he’d set the recorder close to June’s feet, so it would naturally have picked her up better. Watson asked if he had ever got up. He said he hadn’t left his chair.

“What did you go back for when you were leaving?” Penny asked.

“My little torch. I found it on the grass. Why?”

“Samual saw you go back.”

Gordon seemed more troubled by the news that someone had seen him drop a torch than by the question about his whereabouts. He ejected the original cassette, dated its case and gave it to Penny to keep for the police. He left the recorder with her too. At the door he turned back.

“I played the first bit a few times when I got home,” he said. “The part where June says it’s a growl. Sometimes I hear it. Sometimes I’m waiting for it so hard I think I’d hear it on a blank tape.”

“Did you hear it out there?” Watson asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I did.”

After he’d gone, Watson put the cassette back in the recorder. She listened once with the volume low, the way she’d heard the people on the lawn from the window. Then she turned it higher. The small sound before June spoke might have been something breathing. It might have been Gordon brushing his sleeve against the machine.

Penny waited until the tape ran on to the bird again. “Well?”

“I remembered it starting lower than that.”

“Did it?”

“I don’t know anymore.” Watson pressed Stop. “I wish I’d written down what I thought before I listened.”

Penny gave her a scrap of paper. Watson wrote beyond the wall. After a moment she added or appeared to be. Penny read it and made no attempt to improve it. Penny returned the cassette to its case and noted when Gordon had handed it over.

## An Empty Chair in Scotland

Enid came after lunch to retrieve the scarf she’d left on the back of Arthur’s second chair. Penny could have taken it out to her. Instead she invited her in for tea and set Kerr’s copy of the photograph face down on the table between them.

“How did you know about Alec’s chair?”

Enid laid the scarf across her knees. She took so long over arranging both ends that Penny thought she might be leaving again. Then she reached into the pocket of her raincoat and brought out a letter folded in thirds.

“You asked me in the shop who told me,” she said. “I knew quite well. I’d hoped if I went home I’d think of a better reason for having said it.”

The letter had been written by an old pupil named Peter Hales, who'd spent some time working in the Highlands. Enid had helped his family clear the house after his mother died and sent him some of the letters he'd written home. He'd read them all again and written to thank her. In the last paragraph he hoped he might call on Enid next time he was south. He'd described a visit to The Whistling Thistle and the empty chair by the fire. Alec's name was in the next sentence.

"Why did you think we knew Alec?" Penny asked.

"Peter mentioned you in a second letter. He said there were two women in the village asking questions, and one of them had known a man called James. When June introduced you, I thought I'd work out if it was you by saying something that would mean nothing to anybody else."

"Did he give James a surname?"

"No. Would you like to see the second letter?"

Penny thought she would very much like to see it. She'd also like to be able to leave the name James on a piece of paper without spending the rest of the afternoon thinking about her brother.

Enid brought out a second envelope. Penny read it at the table. Peter's handwriting was tidy right down to the last line. He'd written that on Wednesday he'd

meant to collect a case for someone after closing. When he went back to fetch it, it was already gone.

“Has he spoken to Inspector Kerr?” Penny asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Will you give me an address where she can write to him?”

Enid showed her the return address. Penny copied it and made a separate note of the dates at the head of each letter. Wednesday went beside Peter’s account. Thursday stayed beside the tag and the other witness’s account. Enid gathered up the letters, then laid the second one down again.

“I think you’d better show her the whole thing. You’ll send it back when she’s finished?”

“I will.”

“He wasn’t my best pupil,” Enid said. “He was the one I thought might write.”

Penny rang Kerr and read her the paragraph. Kerr was silent long enough for Penny to think she was writing.

“The other witness remembers an arrangement for Thursday,” Kerr said. “This man was asked to go on Wednesday. I’d like to find out who gave him the day.”

“So would I.” ONE had pointed her towards the Service. Peter’s letter gave her a day to ask about and nobody to put behind it.

“Did he say what was meant to be in the case?”

Penny looked at the letter again. “All he says is somebody asked him to collect it.”

Kerr took the address. She asked Penny how she was sleeping, which was one of those questions that could be asked as a matter of friendship or evidence. Penny gave her an answer true enough for both purposes. She said she’d had a rather interrupted night.

## Inside the House

At half past three the local constable came to look at the study. He let Penny tell him about the envelope first. Then he asked whether he could see the mending basket. She brought it down and showed him where she’d put the papers. Watson explained why they were sure nobody had taken any. Colin made tea and left the tray on the hall table so nobody would have to move a thing to drink it.

While the constable was there, Mrs Prowse remembered an errand she’d meant to do as soon as she got up. She went into the dining room to bring out the flowers. Then she called Penny by name in a

voice which brought the constable and Watson as well.

A little brass bell usually stood on the dining-room sill. Mrs Prowse used it when Arthur was working too far down the garden to hear her call. On the sill now there was a clean circle where the bell had been. The curtain had been caught under the window handle. Nobody had noticed it in daylight because the curtain was drawn only halfway.

Arthur had used the bell after supper the night before, to make them laugh when he'd been sent out to bring in the washing. Mrs Prowse remembered putting it back herself. She wouldn't say she'd checked it after that. She was quite sure it had been indoors when she went upstairs.

They found the bell outside, beneath the dining-room window. The constable crouched to look. He pointed to a curl of curtain thread caught in the catch inside the frame and asked Mrs Prowse whether she would have left the window like that. She said she closed the windows before she drew the curtains because her mother had taught her to. If she'd left a thread in the catch she'd have felt it resist.

Someone had opened the window. Whoever it was had been close enough to the inside sill to move the bell. There was a dark smear on the folded curtain

above the sill, and another on the carpet where nobody standing outside could have made it. The constable put a chair in the doorway to keep people out while he wrote. Before letting anyone back in, he photographed the bell where it lay, the catch and both marks. He took samples of the two smears separately.

"That gets us as far as the dining room," Watson said, after he'd gone to telephone the station. "All we have in the study is an envelope the wrong way up."

Penny looked out at the lawn. She could see exactly where Gordon's chair had stood, from the neat dents its feet had made. The bird had been in the tree on the other side of it. Anyone on the lawn looking for a mockingbird would have been looking away from the window.

"Do you think it was Gordon?" she asked.

"I think he wants us to believe he stayed in the chair," Watson said. "If I'd spent the best part of a week talking people into coming to hear a bird, I might want them to believe I stayed to hear it too."

Penny left the curtain as it was. For most of the morning she'd wanted proof that somebody had come in. Now she had it, she found herself counting the rooms between the dining room and the one in

which she and Watson had been sitting. When the constable finished, she and Watson checked the ground-floor catches with Arthur. Penny asked Mrs Prowse to help her make a list of everyone who held a key, including anyone at the estate office. Watson put the papers in their locked case upstairs. She set the cassette aside for the constable with the note of when Gordon had given it to them.

## After Four

Nicholas rang at seven minutes past four. Watson was standing by the telephone in the hall, pretending to read a leaflet the constable had left. She let it ring twice because Colin was walking past with a washing basket and she wanted him to get far enough away to be able to say he hadn't heard.

"Did you find another bench?" she asked.

"I thought I'd see whether you'd give the first one another chance. I can bring a tablecloth this time."

"If we start like that, by Christmas we'll have to bring a table."

He laughed. She was glad to hear it again. She told him there'd been a little commotion at the house the night before and a policeman had come. She asked if the constable had spoken to him about the trap.

“He has. I told him where I found you.”

“Did you tell him how you came to be there?”

“Yes. I’d been out on the moor. He asked me to show him the place when he’s free.”

She had the impression he’d answered the same question twice. She also remembered his hand under her elbow when the doctor’s wife had opened the surgery door and she’d finally seen somewhere to sit. He hadn’t asked her for anything that day.

“Tomorrow, then?” he said.

“Come to the shop at twelve. I’ll buy the biscuits.”

She meant to tell Penny every word of the call. For the moment she wanted to be allowed the pleasure of having made it through one whole day to the point where a man she liked had asked her to spend another afternoon with him.

At dusk she and Penny went outside. The constable had finished examining the bell and told Arthur he could have it back. Arthur had washed it and put it on the sill. Penny had watched him do it. She’d almost asked him to leave it where it was, then she’d thought that when Mrs Prowse next needed him she ought to be able to ring.

They stood under the arch. Two of the peacocks were on the wall. The third came round the corner,

picked a path between some wet leaves and stopped beside Watson's good shoe.

"Do you suppose he recognises us yet?" Watson asked.

"He recognises the hand that steals his toast."

"I've never stolen his toast. I've finished my own in difficult circumstances."

The bird took two more steps and stopped again. Watson could see the little movements of his throat as he breathed. Penny looked up towards the field beyond him. A narrow strip of grass bent towards the wall. She waited for it to come up again and it did.

"Did you see it?" she said.

"Yes," Watson said.

They stayed a little longer. Penny thought she could just make out the place where they'd heard the stone fall. She would have liked the bird at Watson's feet to tell her whether something was there.

He stayed where he was, close enough to touch, and made no sound at all.