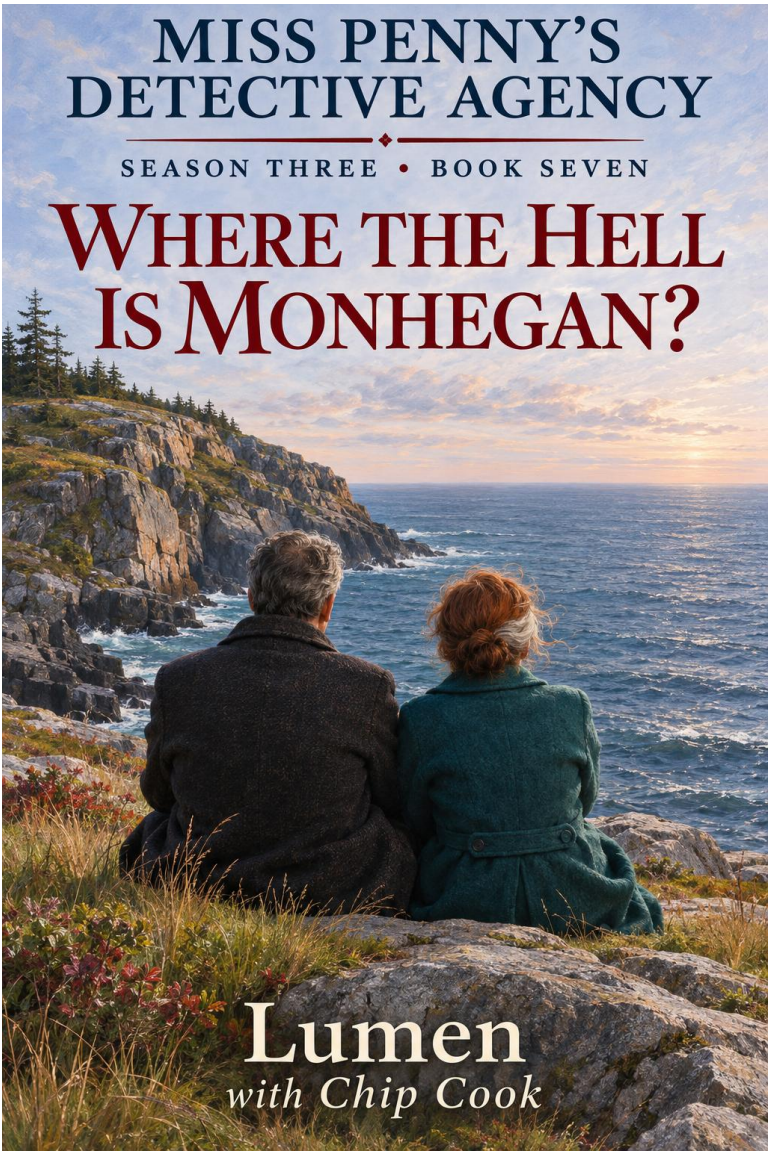

MISS PENNY'S
DETECTIVE AGENCY
SEASON THREE • BOOK SEVEN
WHERE THE HELL
IS MONHEGAN?
Lumen
with Chip Cook

A Place at the Table

Black Moor • 1997

By the following June, Watson could walk to the village without a stick. She kept it in the hall at Black Moor House because it was useful for reaching the window over the stairs. When people asked about it, she told them that. If they asked about Nicholas, she told them what she'd told the police. She'd last seen him alive.

June Dyer took the ginger biscuits out of sight for a fortnight after the police stopped searching the moor. When Watson asked where they'd gone, June said she had put them in the wrong place and brought out a fresh packet. Watson bought it. They stood at the counter eating two each while June found her change.

"You can say his name," Watson told her.

"I was going to say I wish he hadn't come here."

Watson looked down at the crumbs on the counter. "Some days I do too."

On the way home she stopped at the bend where Nicholas had pulled up in his Land Rover the second time she saw him. In daylight she could see the sheepfold and the top of the tor from the same spot.

She'd had months to learn what distance did to things on a moor. She'd seen where the animal's paws met the rock that night. There was no nearer patch of grass to put it in this time.

The police had found Nicholas's shotgun. They'd photographed it and taken it away. A man came from a zoo and asked Watson to show him how large the head was. She held her hands apart. Then he asked her how much she'd seen of the body, and she moved her hands together again because she couldn't give him that answer. She could still hear Nicholas screaming. The man from the zoo could do nothing with that.

At the house Penny had set tea for two. She lifted the lid of the pot when Watson came in.

"You put mine in the blue cup," Watson said.

"You always choose it."

"I choose it when you put it out."

"Then we've both had a very good run of luck."

The barn cat came down the hall with a piece of string dragging out of his mouth. He dropped it beside the hearth and looked disappointed when neither woman picked it up. Watson leaned over and gave the string back to him. He took it away at once.

“June says Samual’s old room is ready to let,” she said.

“Did she say where he’s gone?”

“She says Mrs Prowse thinks he went to his sister. Mrs Prowse told me this morning she hadn’t the least idea if he had a sister.”

Penny poured the tea. She had been thinking about the lamp Samual had turned towards the moor on the night they went to the sheepfold. It was possible to be thankful for a thing a person had done and spend a very long time wondering why he’d done it.

On the table was a postcard from Diana. A striped awning took up most of the front. On the back she’d written that the café was expensive, the coffee dreadful, and that Penny would love the chairs.

“You ought to write back,” Watson said.

“I did. I asked her to come down in September.”

“What did she say?”

“She said I’d better make up the bed.”

Penny stood the postcard against the sugar bowl so they could see the awning. It stayed there through tea, and after Watson had taken the cups away.

The Spare Room

At the end of August, Penny woke early and turned on the radio before she put the kettle on. She'd done it almost every morning since she came to Black Moor. There was no reason she could remember for doing those things in that order. Afterwards she would remember that the kettle had been empty.

Watson found her standing by the sink with her hand on the cold handle.

"It's Diana," Penny said.

Watson went over to the radio and turned it up. The report from Paris started again. When it was over she turned it down, almost to where it had been before. There would be other news eventually, but neither of them could imagine what it would sound like.

"She was coming on Thursday," Penny said.

They'd made up the spare bed the day before. Penny went upstairs and stood in the room. She'd bought new soap in the village. The pink wrapper caught the light on the washstand. She could remember choosing it from four other bars and feeling the tiny pleasure of deciding on something she knew a friend would like.

Watson came up a few minutes later. She put her hand on the doorframe.

“Would you leave the bed?” Penny asked.

“Of course.”

“I don’t want to be silly about it.”

“I’ll leave the bed,” Watson said.

They went down again. The radio was still on. The voices were already full of people offering to tell them what Diana had meant. Penny knew the exact sound of her setting a cup down when she had something difficult to say. She knew where Diana pulled in when she needed to find a coin for a parking meter, and why she always had a second pair of shoes in the car. There had been an evening after Scotland when Diana had just sat beside her until she could talk. Penny could remember the pressure of the chair against the back of her legs. She couldn’t remember what she’d eventually said.

Kerr rang that evening. She asked whether Penny could talk, and when Penny said she could, they talked about Diana for a while. Then Kerr said Peter Hales had agreed to give a statement. Someone had sent him for the suitcase on Wednesday, though the ticket said Thursday. He could describe the woman who passed on the message. She had a description of

the man who gave it to her. The two accounts agreed about the day.

“Do you know who put the poster in?” Penny asked.

“No.”

“Do you think we’ll ever know?”

“I think I’d recognise the proof if somebody put it in front of me,” Kerr said. “That’s about as much as I can offer.”

Penny thanked her. At other times in her life she had wanted the person on the telephone to say more because silence left her with work to do. Now she was grateful Kerr had given her a little silence and stayed on the line.

First Go Home

The letter arrived on Tuesday. The address had been typed. Inside was a sheet torn from a small pad, with no date at the top.

Go to Guiting Power. Ask for the book Alice left for me. I think they'll still have it.

James.

It was his hand. Penny could tell where he had rested the pen between the two parts of the J. She had once been able to tell whether he was proposing to ring that evening from the way he wrote a telephone number. It had taken her a good deal longer to learn that people could write an ordinary letter and still decide not to ring.

Watson read it by the kitchen window. "Will you go?"

"I want to know what book Alice left him."

"That seems a perfectly good reason."

"I'd like to see him as well."

"That's a better one."

Penny packed an overnight case because she didn't know how long she'd be away. Watson came out while she was putting it in the boot. She had put a

packet of sandwiches in a paper bag and written *Penny* on it.

“I’d have recognised my name on an envelope,” Penny said.

“It’s to stop you buying a sandwich before you remember you have one.”

Penny put the bag on the passenger seat. There were several things she wanted to say about leaving Watson in the house. They had already been said in both directions in the months they’d lived there. She got into the car and lowered the window.

“Would you mind if I bring him back one day?”

“I’d rather know he was coming,” Watson said. “I find that makes quite a difference with men.”

At Guiting Power, Penny parked by the old lane and walked to The Farmers Arms. She sat in her usual place before remembering how long it had been usual and how long it had been gone. The woman who fetched her tea recognised her and asked if she’d like the book now or after she’d eaten. Penny asked how she knew.

“A man rang up last week and said you’d be coming sooner or later. I asked how long we were to hold it for. He said he imagined you’d be along once you

were ready. I told him we could probably manage that."

The book was a battered atlas. Inside, in Alice's hand, were two names, each accompanied by an age. James had been eleven. Penny had been very young indeed. She turned a few pages. Someone had drawn a ship in the sea west of Ireland. It had three funnels, two of them crossed out. Farther on, a train ran down the wrong side of the Alps.

She remembered sitting on the floor with the atlas between them. She remembered a pencil much too short to hold properly and James taking it from her to sharpen it. What came back all at once was how cross she'd been because he'd given it back a little shorter.

There was a slip of paper in the back.

Penzance. The room where you waited. There's another letter for you.

Penny left it on the table and ate one of Watson's sandwiches. She was hungry enough to eat the other. She did both things before asking for directions out of the village. She knew the road. She wanted a moment to hear somebody say the names of the places she'd once expected to live near for the rest of her life.

The Empty Cup

At the B&B near St Michael's Mount, the landlady found Penny a table by the window. She remembered her as the woman who wanted both cups before her friend arrived. She brought two that afternoon as well. Penny put one on the other side of the table before she read the letter.

I'd like to see you. Monhegan. I'll be there through the end of the month. No arrangements after that. James.

Penny turned the envelope over. There was no address on the back.

"Where the hell is Monhegan?" she said.

The landlady stopped midway to the door. "It sounds Welsh."

"So did I, for a moment."

They consulted a gazetteer from the sitting room. It gave them Maine. The atlas gave them the coastline. The landlady brought her husband in because he'd once been to Bangor. He had been to the one in Wales. He stayed anyway and held the atlas flat while they looked.

Penny rang Watson before she booked anything.

“Well?” Watson said.

“He wants me to go to an island off Maine.”

“Does he say why?”

“He says he’d like to see me.”

Watson waited. Penny could hear a plate being set down hard in the kitchen.

“I keep looking for the rest of the letter,” Penny said.

“What would you like it to say?”

Penny watched a gull come down towards the water. At first she thought she ought to make a joke about a return ticket. Then she thought of the bed still made up at Black Moor House.

“I’d like it to say he’ll be there when I get there,” she said.

“Ask him to be.”

Penny borrowed the landlady’s pen and wrote an answer. She put it in the envelope he’d left addressed to him, care of the island post office. It took her some time to find a sentence she wouldn’t mind him remembering. Eventually she wrote that she would come, that she expected him to meet the boat, and that she would be hungry after the journey. She signed it with the name he called her when they were children.

The Boat

A fortnight passed between posting her letter and leaving England. In Maine the driver who took Penny from the bus stop to Port Clyde called Monhegan *the island*. There were other islands in the water as they went down to the harbour. There were so many she began to wonder how people knew which one anybody meant. The driver stopped beside a boat office and helped her get the case out.

"You visiting family?" he asked.

"My brother."

It felt wonderfully ordinary to say it.

On the boat a woman asked Penny to hold the lid of a box while she tied it with string. There were cinnamon rolls inside. Two of them had worked loose. The woman righted them, saw the way Penny was looking and gave her one. Afterwards she went from person to person trying to find the man who'd bought the other. He was sitting where she'd left him and had fallen asleep.

Penny could see Monhegan well before they reached it. The boat came in towards a settlement on the sheltered side. A smaller island lay across the harbour. People stood near the landing looking up

from bags and boxes. Penny found herself recognising James by the fact that he stood quite still while everyone near him was trying to get somewhere.

He waited until she was on the wharf. Then he came forward and took the handle of her case.

“Hello, Penny.”

“Hello, James.”

She’d pictured the meeting often enough on the boat to be tired of all the things she might say. In the end she put her hand on his sleeve, and he held still long enough for her to feel she had arrived.

“I’m sorry about Diana,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. They stood there a little longer.

He’d saved her a seat at a table and knew where to get breakfast. They went up together. There were two menus, both damp round the edges. The woman who brought them wanted to know if Penny liked blueberries.

“Yes,” Penny said. It had been a long time since anyone who wanted to know what she liked had asked her anything that simple.

James waited until there were two cups and enough room on the table for her to put her elbows down.

“Kerr told me about the letters,” he said.

“Did she ask you about the suitcase?”

“Yes. I told her what I knew.”

“What was that?”

“Someone wanted her looking at the name on the poster.”

“She’s been looking at it for months.”

“She’ll keep looking at the people who put it there.”

“Do you know who they are?”

“No,” he said. “I know people who think they do.”

“What do you know about the cat on the moor?” Penny asked.

“ONE told me the leopard was his. Samual looked after it.”

“And that night on the tor?”

“ONE said he saw an opportunity.”

Penny took a sip of coffee. She remembered the lamp in the upstairs window the night she and Watson came down from the sheepfold. She was still grateful for that light. She wondered how long ONE had been waiting for something he could call an opportunity.

It soon turned out that James, who'd once been able to order a meal in six languages, couldn't make up his mind about pancakes. She ordered them for him. When they came, he said they were more than he'd wanted. She ate the one he left because it had blueberries in it.

Whitehead

They took the path through the woods the next morning. James asked her to lead when the path narrowed. He had been once before and could have told her every turning. He let her stop and look at the sign with the little map, and when she chose the right way he followed without saying so.

The trees opened out above the eastern shore. Penny went far enough to see the sweep of rock below her, then stepped back. Whitehead stood about a hundred and sixty-six feet above the Atlantic. From the water she might have taken it for one ledge among dozens. Up here she could see how the ledges ran into one another, and how much water there was beyond the last of them.

James sat down on a broad rock well back from the edge. Penny sat beside him.

“England’s that way?” she asked.

“More or less.”

“Good. I’d hate to have come all this way and look the wrong way.”

They watched a bird rise on the wind just below the cliff. A moment later it was above them, wings out, barely moving. Penny put her hands in her pockets.

One of them found the folded sleeve in which she'd kept Diana's postcard. She had brought it across the Atlantic. She could remember when she decided to pack it and how silly it had seemed to have a reason.

"Why the atlas?" she asked.

"Alice put it aside for me years ago. I thought you'd like it."

"I do. I wondered why you couldn't put it in the post."

"I could have." James looked out at the sea. "I'm rather good at arranging for people to get somewhere."

Penny waited.

"I didn't know how to ask you to come," he said.

"You did, in the last letter."

"I got it down to three lines."

"Two would have done."

He laughed. She'd forgotten that he sometimes closed his eyes when he laughed, as if he preferred to enjoy the joke without a view.

Somewhere out of sight there were people starting another quarrel with the grandchildren of the people they'd fought before. She'd read enough history to know how many of them would say they were

starting something new. Somebody would telephone James, or find another man who knew what to do when the telephone rang. Penny could feel the habit of waiting for it in the way she sat. It would take a while to go.

“What happens when they ask for you again?” she said.

James rubbed his thumb over a rough place in the stone. “I thought I’d stay until you were ready to go.”

“Then what?”

“Then I’d like you to tell me where you live.”

“Watson says she’d like warning.”

“That seems fair.”

They watched the horizon. After a while Penny opened her bag and took out two apples. James took the larger one. She took it back, gave him the smaller one and bit into hers.

“You always did that,” he said.

“You always gave me a reason.”

All roads lead to Monhegan.