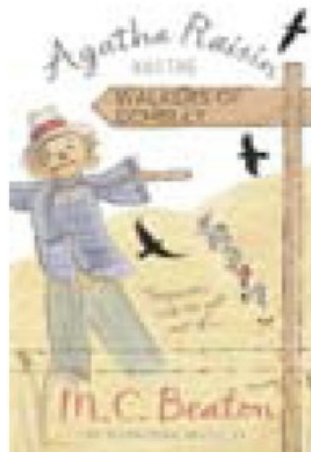
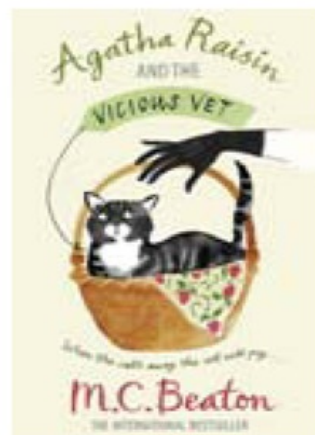
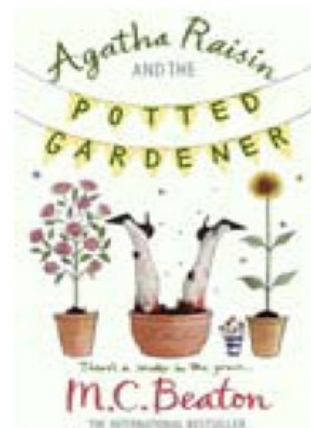
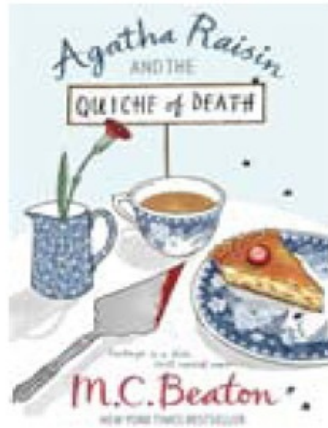


# Agatha Raisin Omnibus



*The Quiche of Death, The Potted  
Gardener, The Vicious Vet & The Walkers  
of Dembley*

# M.C. Beaton

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

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The Agatha Raisin Companion

Agatha Raisin  
Omnibus

M. C. Beaton

ROBINSON  
London

Constable & Robinson Ltd  
55–56 Russell Square  
London WC1B 4HP  
[www.constablerobinson.com](http://www.constablerobinson.com)

*Agatha Raisin and the Quiche of Death* first published in the USA by St Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, 1992

First published in the UK by Constable, an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2002

*Agatha Raisin and the Vicious Vet* first published in the USA by St Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, 1993

First published in the UK by Constable, an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2002

*Agatha Raisin and the Potted Gardener* first published in the USA by St Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, 1994

First published in the UK by Constable, an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2003

*Agatha Raisin and the Walkers of Dembley* first published in the USA by St Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, 1994

First published in the UK by Robinson, an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2005

This omnibus edition published by Constable & Robinson, 2011

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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78033-584-1

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Agatha Raisin  
and the  
Quiche of Death

M. C. Beaton

ROBINSON  
London

For Patrick Heining and his wife, Caroline,  
and children, Benjamin and Olivia, of  
Bourton-on-the-Water, with love.



# Chapter One

Mrs Agatha Raisin sat behind her newly cleared desk in her office in South Molton Street in Mayfair. From the outer office came the hum of voices and the clink of glasses as the staff prepared to say farewell to her.

For Agatha was taking early retirement. She had built up the public relations firm over long hard years of work. She had come a long way from her working-class background in Birmingham. She had survived an unfortunate marriage and had come out of it, separated and battered in spirit, but determined to succeed in life. All her business efforts were to one end, the realization of a dream – a cottage in the Cotswolds.

The Cotswolds are surely one of the few man-made beauties in the world: quaint villages of golden stone houses, pretty gardens, winding green lanes and ancient churches. Agatha had been taken to the Cotswolds as a child for one brief magical holiday. Her parents had hated it and had said that they should have gone to Butlin's Holiday Camp as usual, but to Agatha the Cotswolds represented everything she wanted in life: beauty, tranquillity and security. So even as a child, she had become determined that one day she would live in one of those pretty cottages in a quiet peaceful village, far from the noise and smells of the city.

During all her time in London, she had, until just recently, never gone back to the Cotswolds, preferring to keep the dream intact. Now she had purchased that dream cottage in the village of Carsely. It was a pity, thought Agatha, that the village was called plain Carsely and not Chipping Campden or Aston Magna or Lower Slaughter or one of those intriguing Cotswold names, but the cottage was perfect and the village not on the tourist route, which meant freedom from craft shops, tea-rooms and daily bus parties.

Agatha was aged fifty-three, with plain brown hair and a plain square face and a stocky figure. Her accent was as Mayfair as could be except in moments of distress or excitement, when the old nasal Birmingham voice of her youth crept through. It helps in public relations to have a certain amount of charm and Agatha had none. She got results by being a sort of one-woman soft-cop/hard-cop combination; alternately bullying and wheedling on behalf of her clients. Journalists often gave space to her clients just to get rid of her. She was also an expert at emotional blackmail and anyone unwise enough to

accept a present or a free lunch from Agatha was pursued shamelessly until they paid back in kind.

She was popular with her staff because they were a rather weak, frivolous lot, the kind of people who build up legends about anyone of whom they are frightened. Agatha was described as 'a real character', and like all real characters who speak their mind, she did not have any real friends. Her work had been her social life as well.

As she rose to go through and join the party, a small cloud crossed the horizon of Agatha's usually uncomplicated mind. Before her lay days of nothing: no work from morning till night, no bustle or noise. How would she cope?

She shrugged the thought away and crossed the Rubicon into the outer office to say her farewells.

'Here she comes!' screeched Roy, one of her assistants. 'Made some special champagne punch, Aggie. Real knicker-rotter.'

Agatha accepted a glass of punch. Her secretary, Lulu, approached and handed her a gift-wrapped parcel and then the others crowded around with their offerings. Agatha felt a lump rising in her throat. A little insistent voice was chattering in her head, 'What have you done? What have you *done*?' There was a bottle of scent from Lulu and, predictably, a pair of crotchless panties from Roy; there was a book on gardening from one, a vase from another, and so it went on. 'Speech!' cried Roy.

'Thank you all,' said Agatha gruffly. 'I'm not going to China, you know. You'll all be able to come and see me. Your new bosses, Pedmans, have promised not to change anything, so I suppose life will go on for all of you much the same. Thank you for my presents. I will treasure them, except for yours, Roy. I doubt if at my age I'll find any use for them.'

'You never know your luck,' said Roy. 'Some horny farmer'll probably be chasing you through the shrubbery.'

Agatha drank more punch and ate smoked-salmon sandwiches and then, with her presents packed by Lulu into two carrier bags, she made her way down the stairs of Raisin Promotions for the last time.

In Bond Street, she elbowed aside a thin, nervous businessman who had just flagged down a cab, said unrepentantly, 'I saw it first,' and ordered the driver to take her to Paddington station.

She caught the 15:20 train to Oxford and sank back into the corner seat of a first-class carriage. Everything was ready and waiting for her in the Cotswolds. An interior decorator had 'done over' the cottage, her car was waiting for her at Moreton-in-Marsh station for the short drive to Carsely, a removal firm had taken all her belongings from her London flat, now sold. She was free. She could relax. No temperamental pop stars to handle, no prima-donnaish couture firms to launch. All she had to do from now on was

to please herself.

Agatha drifted off to sleep and awoke with a start at the guard's cry of 'Oxford. This is Oxford. The train terminates here.'

Not for the first time, Agatha wondered about British Rail's use of the word 'terminate'. One expected the train to blow apart. Why not just say 'stops here'? She looked up at the screen, like a dingy television set, which hung over Platform 2. It informed her that the train to Charlbury, Kingham, Moreton-in-Marsh and all further points to Hereford was on Platform 3, and lugging her carrier bags, she walked over the bridge. The day was cold and grey. The euphoria produced by freedom from work and Roy's punch was slowly beginning to evaporate.

The train moved slowly out of the station. Glimpses of barges on one side and straggly allotments on the other and then flat fields flooded from the recent rain lay gloomily in front of her increasingly jaundiced view.

This is ridiculous, thought Agatha. I've got what I always wanted. I'm tired, that's all.

The train stopped somewhere outside Charlbury, gliding to a stop and sitting there placidly in the inexplicable way that railway trains often do. The passengers sat stoically, listening to the rising wind whining over the bleak fields. Why are we like sheep that have gone astray? wondered Agatha. Why are the British so cowed and placid? Why does no one shout for the guard and demand to know the reason? Other, more voluble, races would not stand for it. She debated whether to go and see the guard herself. Then she remembered she was no longer in a hurry to get anywhere. She took out a copy of the *Evening Standard*, which she had bought at the station, and settled down to read it.

After twenty minutes the train creaked slowly into life. Another twenty minutes after Charlbury and it slid into the little station of Moreton-in-Marsh. Agatha climbed out. Her car was still where she had left it. During the last few minutes of the journey she had begun to worry that it might have been stolen.

It was market day in Moreton-in-Marsh and Agatha's spirits began to revive as she drove slowly past stalls selling everything from fish to underwear. Tuesday. Market day was Tuesday. She must remember that. Her new Saab purred out of Moreton and then up through Bourton-on-the-Hill. Nearly home. Home! Home at last.

She turned off the A44 and then began the slow descent to the village of Carsely, which nestled in a fold of the Cotswold Hills.

It was a very pretty village, even by Cotswold standards. There were two long lines of houses interspersed with shops, some low and thatched, some warm gold brick with slate roofs. There was a pub called the Red Lion at one end and a church at the other. A few straggling streets ran off this one main

road where cottages leaned together as if for support in their old age. The gardens were bright with cherry blossom, forsythia and daffodils. There was an old-fashioned haberdasher's, a post office and general store, and a butcher's, and a shop that seemed to sell nothing other than dried flowers and to be hardly ever open. Outside the village and tucked away from view by a rise was a council estate and between the council estate and the village proper was the police station, a primary school, and a library.

Agatha's cottage stood alone at the end of one of the straggling side streets. It looked like a cottage in one of the calendars she used to treasure as a girl. It was low and thatched, new thatch, Norfolk reed, and with casement windows and built of the golden Cotswold stone. There was a small garden at the front and a long narrow one at the back. Unlike practically everyone else in the Cotswolds, the previous owner had not been a gardener. There was little else but grass and depressing bushes of the hard-wearing kind found in public parks.

Inside there was a small dark cubby-hole of a hall. To the right was the living-room; to the left, the dining-room, and the kitchen at the back was part of a recent extension and was large and square. Upstairs were two low-ceilinged bedrooms and a bathroom. All the ceilings were beamed.

Agatha had given the interior decorator a free hand. It was all as it should be and yet . . . Agatha paused at the door of the living-room. Three-piece suite covered in Sanderson's linen, lamps, coffee-table with glass top, fake medieval fire-basket in the hearth, horse brasses nailed to the fireplace, pewter tankards and toby jugs hanging from the beams and bits of polished farm machinery decorating the walls, and yet it looked like a stage set. She went into the kitchen and switched on the central heating. The superduper removal company had even put her clothes in the bedroom and her books on the shelves, so there was not much for her to do. She went through to the dining-room. Long table, shining under its heat-resistant surface, Victorian dining chairs, Edwardian painting of a small child in a frock in a bright garden, Welsh dresser with blue-and-white plates, another fireplace with a fake-log electric fire, and a drinks trolley. Upstairs, the bedrooms were pure Laura Ashley. It felt like someone else's house, the home of some characterless stranger, or an expensive holiday cottage.

Well, she had nothing for dinner and after a life of restaurants and take-aways, Agatha had planned to learn how to cook, and there were all her new cookery books in a gleaming row on a shelf in the kitchen.

She collected her handbag and made her way out. Time to investigate what few village shops there were. Many of the shops, the estate agent had told her, had closed down and had been transformed into 'des reses'. The villagers blamed the incomers, but it was the motor car which had caused the damage, the villagers themselves preferring to go to the supermarkets of Stratford or

Evesham for their goods rather than buy them at a higher price in the village. Most people in the village owned some sort of car.

As Agatha approached the main street, an old man was coming the other way. He touched his cap and gave her a cheerful 'Arternoon.' Then in the main street, everyone she passed greeted her with a few words, a casual 'Afternoon' or 'Nasty weather.' Agatha brightened. After London, where she had not even known her neighbours, all this friendliness was a refreshing change.

She studied the butcher's window and then decided that cookery could wait for a few days and so passed on to the general store and bought a 'very hot' Vindaloo curry to microwave and a packet of rice. Again, in the store, she was met with friendliness all round. At the door of the shop was a box of second-hand books. Agatha had always read 'improving' books, mostly non-fiction. There was a battered copy of *Gone With the Wind* and she bought it on impulse.

Back in her cottage, she found a basket of pseudo-logs by the fire, little round things made out of pressed sawdust. She piled some up in the grate and set fire to them and soon had a blaze roaring up the chimney. She removed the lace antimacassar which the decorator had cutely draped over the television screen and switched it on. There was some war going on, as there usually was, and it was getting the usual coverage; that is, the presenter and the reporter were having a cosy talk. 'Over to you, John. What is the situation now?' 'Well, Peter . . .' By the time they moved on to the inevitable 'expert' in the studio, Agatha wondered why they bothered to send any reporter out to the war at all. It was like the Gulf War all over again, where most of the coverage seemed to consist of a reporter standing in front of a palm tree outside some hotel in Riyadh. What a waste of money. He never had much information and it would surely have been cheaper to place him in front of a palm tree in a studio in London.

She switched it off and picked up *Gone With the Wind*. She had been looking forward to a piece of intellectual slumming to celebrate her release from work, but she was amazed at how very good it was, almost *indecently* readable, thought Agatha, who had only read before the sort of books you read to impress people. The fire crackled and Agatha read until her rumbling stomach prompted her to put the curry in the microwave. Life was good.

But a week passed, a week in which Agatha, in her usual headlong style, had set out to see the sights. She had been to Warwick Castle, Shakespeare's birthplace, Blenheim Palace, and had toured through the villages of the Cotswolds while the wind blew and the rain fell steadily from grey skies, returning every evening to her silent cottage with only a new-found discovery

of Agatha Christie to help her through the evenings. She had tried visiting the pub, the Red Lion, a jolly low-raftered chintzy sort of place with a cheerful landlord. And the locals had talked to her as they always did with a peculiar sort of open friendliness that never went any further. Agatha could have coped with a suspicious animosity but not this cheerful welcome which somehow still held her at bay. Not that Agatha had ever known how to make friends, but there was something about the villagers, she discovered, which repelled incomers. They did not reject them. On the surface they welcomed them. But Agatha knew that her presence made not a ripple on the calm pond of village life. No one asked her to tea. No one showed any curiosity about her whatsoever. The vicar did not even call. In an Agatha Christie book the vicar would have called, not to mention some retired colonel and his wife. All conversation seemed limited to 'Mawnin', 'Afternoon,' or talk about the weather.

For the first time in her life, she knew loneliness, and it frightened her.

From the kitchen windows at the back of the house was a view of the Cotswold Hills, rising up to block out the world of bustle and commerce, trapping Agatha like some baffled alien creature under the thatch of her cottage, cut off from life. The little voice that had cried, 'What have I done?' became a roar.

And then she suddenly laughed. London was only an hour and a half away on the train, not thousands of miles. She would take herself up the following day, see her former staff, have lunch at the Caprice, and then perhaps raid the bookshops for some more readable material. She had missed market day in Moreton, but there was always another week.

As if to share her mood, the sun shone down on a perfect spring day. The cherry tree at the end of her back garden, the one concession to beauty that the previous owner had seen fit to make, raised heavy branches of flowers to a clear blue sky as Agatha had her usual breakfast of one cup of black coffee, instant, and two filtertipped cigarettes.

With a feeling of holiday, she drove up the winding hill that led out of the village and then down through Bourton-on-the-Hill to Moreton-in-Marsh.

She arrived at Paddington station and drew in great lungfuls of polluted air and felt herself come alive again. In the taxi to South Molton Street she realized she did not really have any amusing stories with which to regale her former staff. 'Our Aggie will be queen of that village in no time at all,' Roy had said. How could she explain that the formidable Agatha Raisin did not really exist as far as Carsely was concerned?

She got out of the taxi in Oxford Street and walked down South Molton Street, wondering what it would be like to see 'Pedmans' written up where her own name used to be.

Agatha stopped at the foot of the stairs which led up to her former office

over the Paris dress shop. There was no sign at all, only a clean square on the paintwork where 'Raisin Promotions' had once been.

She walked up the stairs. All was silent as the grave. She tried the door. It was locked. Baffled, she retreated to the street and looked up. And there across one of the windows was a large board with FOR SALE in huge red letters and the name of a prestigious estate agent.

Her face grim, she took a cab over to the City, to Cheapside, to the headquarters of Pedmans, and demanded to see Mr Wilson, the managing director. A bored receptionist with quite the longest nails Agatha had ever seen languidly picked up the phone and spoke into it. 'Mr Wilson is busy,' she enunciated, picked up the women's magazine she had been reading when Agatha had arrived and studied her horoscope.

Agatha plucked the magazine from the receptionist's hands. She leaned over the desk. 'Get off your lazy arse and tell that crook he's seeing me.'

The receptionist looked up into Agatha's glaring eyes, gave a squeak, and scampered off upstairs. After some moments during which Agatha read her own horoscope – 'Today could be the most important day of your life. But watch your temper' – the receptionist came tottering back on her very high heels and whispered, 'Mr Wilson will see you now. If you will come this way . . .'

'I know the way,' snarled Agatha. Her stocky figure marched up the stairs, her sensible low-heeled shoes thumping on the treads.

Mr Wilson rose to meet her. He was a small, very clean man with thinning hair, gold-rimmed glasses, soft hands and an unctuous smile, more like a Harley Street doctor than the head of a public relations firm.

'Why have you put my office up for sale?' demanded Agatha.

He smoothed the top of his head. 'Mrs Raisin, not *your* office; you sold the business to us.'

'But you gave me your word you would keep on my staff.'

'And so we did. Most of them preferred the redundancy pay. We do not need an extra office. All the business can be done from here.'

'Let me tell you, you can't do this.'

'And let me tell you, Mrs Raisin, I can do what I like. You sold us the concern, lock, stock and barrel. Now, if you don't mind, I am very busy.'

Then he shrank back in his chair as Agatha Raisin told him at the top of her voice exactly what he could do to himself in graphic detail before slamming out.

Agatha stood in Cheapside, tears starting to her eyes. 'Mrs Raisin . . . Aggie?'

She swung round. Roy was standing there. Instead of his usual jeans and psychedelic shirt and gold earrings, he was wearing a sober business suit.

'I'll kill that bastard Wilson,' said Agatha. 'I've just told him what he can

do to himself.’

Roy squeaked and backed off. ‘I shouldn’t be seen talking to you, sweetie, if you’re not the flavour of the month. Besides, you sold him the outfit.’

‘Where’s Lulu?’

‘She took the redundancy money and is sunning her little body on the Costa Brava.’

‘And Jane?’

‘Working as PR for Friends Scotch. Can you imagine? Giving an alcoholic like her a job in a whisky company? She’ll sink their profits down her gullet in a year.’

Agatha inquired after the rest. Only Roy had been employed by Pedmans. ‘It’s because of the Trendies,’ he explained, naming a pop group, one of Agatha’s former clients. ‘Josh, the leader, has always been ever so fond of me, as you know. So Pedmans had to take me on to keep the group. Like my new image?’ He pirouetted round.

‘No,’ said Agatha gruffly. ‘Doesn’t suit you. Anyway, why don’t you come down and visit me this weekend?’

Roy looked shifty. ‘Love to, darling, but got lots and lots to do. Wilson is a slave-driver. Must go.’

He darted off into the building, leaving Agatha standing alone on the pavement.

She tried to hail a cab but they were all full. She walked along to Bank station but the Tube wasn’t running and someone told her there was a strike. ‘How am I going to get across town?’ grumbled Agatha.

‘You could try a river boat,’ he suggested. ‘Pier at London Bridge.’

Agatha stumped along to London Bridge, her anger fading away to be replaced with a miserable feeling of loss. At the pier at London Bridge, she came across a sort of yuppies’ Dunkirk. The pier was crammed with anxious young men and women clutching briefcases while a small flotilla of pleasure boats took them off.

She joined the end of the queue, inching forward on the floating pier, feeling slightly seasick by the time she was able to board a large old pleasure steamer that had been pressed into action for the day. The bar was open. She clutched a large gin and tonic and took it up to the stern and sat down in the sunshine on one of those little gold-and-red plush ballroom chairs one finds on Thames pleasure boats.

The boat moved out and slid down the river in the sunshine, seeming to Agatha to be moving past all she had thrown away – life and London. Under the bridges cruised the boat, along past the traffic jams on the Embankment and then to Charing Cross Pier, where Agatha got off. She no longer felt like lunch or shopping or anything else but just wanted to get back to her cottage and lick her wounds and think of what to do.



She walked up to Trafalgar Square and then along the Mall, past Buckingham Palace, up Constitution Hill, down the underpass and up into Hyde Park by Decimus Burton's Gate and the Duke of Wellington's house. She cut across the Park in the direction of Bayswater and Paddington.

Before this one day, she thought, she had always forged ahead, always known what she had wanted. Although she was bright at school, her parents made her leave at fifteen, for there were good jobs to be had in the local biscuit factory. At that time, Agatha had been a thin, white-faced, sensitive girl. The crudity of the women she worked with in the factory grated on her nerves, the drunkenness of her mother and father at home disgusted her, and so she began to work overtime, squirrelling away the extra money in a savings account so that her parents might not get their hands on it, until one day she decided she had enough and simply took off for London without even saying goodbye, slipping out one night with her suitcase when her mother and father had fallen into a drunken stupor.

In London, she had worked as a waitress seven days a week so that she could afford shorthand and typing lessons. As soon as she was qualified, she got a job as a secretary in a public relations firm. But just when she was beginning to learn the business, Agatha had fallen in love with Jimmy Raisin, a charming young man with blue eyes and a mop of black hair. He did not seem to have any steady employment but Agatha thought that marriage was all he needed to make him settle down. After a month of married life, it was finally borne in on her that she had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. Her husband was a drunk. Yet she had stuck by him for two whole years, being the breadwinner, putting up with his increasing bouts of drunken violence until, one morning, she had looked down at him lying snoring on the bed, dirty and unshaven, and had pinned a pile of Alcoholics Anonymous literature to his chest, packed her things and moved out.

He knew where she worked. She thought he would come in search of her if only for money, but he never did. She once went back to the squalid room in Kilburn which they had shared, but he had disappeared. Agatha had never filed for divorce. She assumed he was dead. She had never wanted to marry again. She had become harder and harder and more competent, more aggressive, until the thin shy girl that she had been slowly disappeared under layers of ambition. Her job became her life, her clothes expensive, her tastes in general those that were expected of a rising public relations star. As long as people noticed you, as long as they envied you, that was enough for Agatha.

By the time she reached Paddington station, she had walked herself into a more optimistic frame of mind. She had chosen her new life and she would make it work. That village was going to sit up and take notice of Agatha Raisin.

When she arrived home, it was late afternoon and she realized she had had

nothing to eat. She went to Harvey's, the general store-cum-post-office, and was ferreting around in the deep freeze wondering if she could face curry again when her eye was caught by a poster pinned up on the wall. 'Great Quiche Competition' it announced in curly letters. It was to be held on Saturday in the school hall. There were other competitions listed in smaller letters: fruit cake, flower arrangements, and so on. The quiche competition was to be judged by a Mr Cummings-Browne. Agatha scooped a Chicken Korma out of the deep freeze and headed for the counter. 'Where does Mr Cummings-Browne live?' she asked.

'That'll be Plumtrees Cottage, m'dear,' said the woman. 'Down by the church.'

Agatha's mind was racing as she trotted home and shoved the Chicken Korma in the microwave. Wasn't that what mattered in these villages? Being the best at something domestic? Now if she, Agatha Raisin, won that quiche competition, they would sit up and take notice. Maybe ask her to give lectures on her art at Women's Institute meetings and things like that.

She carried the revolting mess that was her microwaved dinner into the dining-room and sat down. She frowned at the table-top. It was covered with a thin film of dust. Agatha loathed housework.

After her scrappy meal, she went into the garden at the back. The sun had set and a pale-greenish sky stretched over the hills above Carsely. There was a sound of movement from nearby and Agatha looked over the hedge. A narrow path divided her garden from the garden next door.

Her neighbour was bent over a flower-bed, weeding it in the failing light.

She was an angular woman who, despite the chill of the evening, was wearing a print dress of the type beloved by civil servants' wives abroad. She had a receding chin and rather bulbous eyes and her hair was dressed in a forties style, pinned back in rolls from her face. All this Agatha was able to see as the woman straightened up.

'Evening,' called Agatha.

The woman turned on her heel and walked into her house and closed the door.

Agatha found this rudeness a welcome change after all the friendliness of Carsely. It was more what she was used to. She walked back through her own cottage, out the front door, up to the cottage next door, which was called New Delhi, and rapped on the brass knocker.

A curtain at a window near the door twitched but that was the only sign of life. Agatha gleefully knocked again, louder this time.

The door opened a crack and one bulbous eye stared out at her.

'Good evening,' said Agatha, holding out her hand. 'I'm your new neighbour.'

The door slowly opened. The woman in the print dress reluctantly picked

up Agatha's hand, as if it were a dead fish, and shook it. 'I am Agatha Raisin,' said Agatha, 'and you are . . .?'

'Mrs Sheila Barr,' said the woman. 'You must forgive me, Mrs . . . er . . . Raisin, but I am very busy at the moment.'

'I won't take up much of your time,' said Agatha. 'I need a cleaning woman.'

Mrs Barr gave that infuriating kind of laugh often described as 'superior'. 'You won't get anyone in the village. It's almost impossible to get anyone to clean. I have my Mrs Simpson, so I'm very lucky.'

'Perhaps she might do a few hours for me,' suggested Agatha. The door began to close. 'Oh, no,' said Mrs Barr, 'I am sure she wouldn't.' And then the door was closed completely.

We'll see about that, thought Agatha.

She collected her handbag and went down to the Red Lion and hitched her bottom on to a bar stool. 'Evening, Mrs Raisin,' said the landlord, Joe Fletcher. 'Turned nice, hasn't it? Maybe we'll be getting some good weather after all.'

Sod the weather, thought Agatha, who was tired of talking about it. Aloud she said, 'Do you know where Mrs Simpson lives?'

'Council estate, I think. Would that be Bert Simpson's missus?'

'Don't know. She cleans.'

'Oh, ah, that'll be Doris Simpson all right. Don't recall the number, but it's Wakefield Terrace, second along, the one with the gnomes.'

Agatha drank a gin and tonic and then set out for the council estate. She soon found Wakefield Terrace and the Simpsons because their garden was covered in plastic gnomes, not grouped round a pool, or placed artistically, but just spread about at random.

Mrs Simpson answered the door herself. She looked more like an old-fashioned schoolteacher than a charwoman. She had snow-white hair scraped back in a bun, and pale-grey eyes behind spectacles.

Agatha explained her mission. Mrs Simpson shook her head. 'Don't see as how I can manage any more, and that's a fact. Do Mrs Barr next to you on Tuesdays, then there's Mrs Chomley on Wednesdays and Mrs Cummings-Browne on Thursdays, and then the weekends I work in a supermarket at Evesham.'

'How much does Mrs Barr pay you?' asked Agatha.

'Five pounds an hour.'

'If you work for me instead, I'll give you six pounds an hour.'

'You'd best come in. Bert! Bert, turn that telly off. This here is Mrs Raisin what's taken Budgen's cottage down Lilac Lane.'

A small, spare man with thinning hair turned off the giant television set which commanded the small neat living-room.

‘I didn’t know it was called Lilac Lane,’ said Agatha. ‘They don’t seem to believe in putting up names for the roads in the village.’

‘Reckon that’s because there’s so few of them, m’dear,’ said Bert.

‘I’ll get you a cup of tea, Mrs Raisin.’

‘Agatha. Do call me Agatha,’ said Agatha with the smile that any journalist she had dealt with would recognize. Agatha Raisin was going in for the kill.

While Doris Simpson retreated to the kitchen, Agatha said, ‘I am trying to persuade your wife to stop working for Mrs Barr and work for me instead. I am offering six pounds an hour, a whole day’s work, and, of course, lunch supplied.’

‘Sounds handsome to me, but you’ll have to ask Doris,’ said Bert. ‘Not but what she would be glad to see the back of that Barr woman’s house.’

‘Hard work?’

‘It’s not the work,’ said Bert, ‘it’s the way that woman do go on. She follows Doris around, checking everything, like.’

‘Is she from Carsely?’

‘Naw, her’s an incomer. Husband died a whiles back. Something in the Foreign Office he was. Came here about twenty year ago.’

Agatha was just registering that twenty years in Carsely did not qualify one for citizenship, so to speak, when Mrs Simpson came in with the tea-tray.

‘The reason I am trying to get you away from Mrs Barr is this,’ said Agatha. ‘I am very bad at housework. Been a career woman all my life. I think people like you, Doris, are worth their weight in gold. I pay good wages because I think cleaning is a very important job. I will also pay your wages when you are sick or on holiday.’

‘Now that’s more than fair,’ cried Bert. ‘’Member when you had your appendix out, Doris? Her never even came nigh the nospital, let alone gave you a penny.’

‘True,’ said Doris. ‘But it’s steady money. What if you was to leave, Agatha?’

‘Oh, I’m here to stay,’ said Agatha.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Doris suddenly. ‘In fact, I’ll phone her now and get it over with.’

She went out to the kitchen to phone. Bert tilted his head on one side and looked at Agatha, his little eyes shrewd. ‘You know you’ll have made an enemy there,’ he said.

‘Pooh,’ said Agatha Raisin, ‘she’ll just need to get over it.’

As Agatha was fumbling for her door key half an hour later, Mrs Barr came out of her cottage and stood silently, glaring across at Agatha.

Agatha gave a huge smile. ‘Lovely evening,’ she called.

She felt quite like her old self.

## Chapter Two

Plumtrees Cottage, where the Cummings-Brownes lived, was opposite the church and vicarage in a row of four ancient stone houses fronting on to a cobbled diamond-shaped area. There were no gardens at the front of these houses, only narrow strips of earth which held a few flowers.

The door was answered late the next morning to Agatha's knock by a woman whom Agatha's beady eyes summed up as being the same sort of species of expatriate as Mrs Barr. Despite the chilliness of the spring day, Mrs Cummings-Browne was wearing a print sun-dress which showed tanned middle-aged skin. She had a high autocratic voice and pale-blue eyes and a sort of 'colonel's lady' manner. 'Yes, what can I do for you?'

Agatha introduced herself and said she was interested in entering the quiche competition but as she was new to the village, she did not know how to go about it. 'I am Mrs Cummings-Browne,' said the woman, 'and really all you have to do is read one of the posters. They're all over the village, you know.' She gave a patronizing laugh which made Agatha want to strike her. Instead Agatha said mildly, 'As I say, I am new in the village and I would like to get to know some people. Perhaps you and your husband might care to join me for dinner this evening. Do they do meals at the Red Lion?'

Mrs Cummings-Browne gave that laugh again. 'I wouldn't be seen *dead* in the Red Lion. But they do good food at the Feathers in Ancombe.'

'Where on earth is Ancombe?' asked Agatha.

'Only about two miles away. You really don't know your way about very well, do you? We'll drive. Be here at seven thirty.'

The door closed. Well, well, thought Agatha. That was easy. Must be a pair of free-loaders, which means my quiche stands a good chance.

She strolled back through the village, mechanically smiling and answering the greetings of 'Mawning' from the passers-by. So there were worms in this charming polished apple, mused Agatha. The majority of the villagers were working and lower-middle class and extremely civil and friendly. If Mrs Barr and Mrs Cummings-Browne were anything to go by, it was the no doubt self-styled upper class of incomers who were rude. A drift of cherry blossom blew down at Agatha's feet. The golden houses glowed in the sunlight. Prettiness did not necessarily invite pretty people. The incomers had probably bought

their dinky cottages when prices were low and had descended to be big fish in this small pool. But there was no impressing the villagers or scoring off them in any way that Agatha could see. The incomers must have a jolly time being restricted to trying to put each other down. Still, she was sure that, if she won the competition, the village would sit up and take notice.

That evening, Agatha sat in the low-raftered dining-room of the Feathers at Ancombe and covertly studied her guests. Mr Cummings-Browne – ‘Well, it’s Major for my sins but I don’t use my title, haw, haw, haw’ – was as tanned as his wife, a sort of orangey tan that led Agatha to think it probably came out of a bottle. He had a balding pointed head with sparse grey hairs carefully combed over the top and odd juglike ears. Mr Cummings-Browne had been in the British Army in Aden, he volunteered. That, Agatha reflected, must have been quite some time ago. Then it transpired he had done a ‘little chicken farming’, but he preferred to talk about his army days, a barely comprehensible saga of servants he had had, and ‘chappies’ in the regiment. He was wearing a sports jacket with leather patches at the elbow over an olive-green shirt with a cravat at the neck. His wife was wearing a Laura Ashley gown that reminded Agatha of the bedspreads in her cottage.

Agatha thought grimly that her quiche had better win, for she knew when she was being ripped off and the Feathers was doing just that. A landlord who stood on the wrong side of the bar which ran along the end of the dining-room drinking with his cronies, a pretentious and dreadfully expensive menu, and sullen waitresses roused Agatha’s anger. The Cummings-Brownes had, predictably, chosen the second-most-expensive wine on the menu, two bottles of it. Agatha let them do most of the talking until the coffee arrived and then she got down to business. She asked what kind of quiche usually won the prize. Mr Cummings-Browne said it was usually quiche lorraine or mushroom quiche. Agatha said firmly that she would contribute her favourite – spinach quiche.

Mrs Cummings-Browne laughed. If she laughs like that again, I really will slap her, thought Agatha, particularly as Mrs Cummings-Browne followed up the laugh by saying that Mrs Cartwright always won. Agatha was to remember later that there had been a certain stillness about Mr Cummings-Browne when Mrs Cartwright’s name was mentioned, but for the present, she had the bit between her teeth. Her own quiche, said Agatha, was famous for its delicacy of taste and lightness of pastry. Besides, a spirit of competition was what was needed in the village. Very bad for morale to have the same woman winning year in and year out. Agatha was good at emanating emotional blackmail without precisely saying anything direct. She made jokes about how dreadfully expensive the meal was while all the time her bearlike brown eyes hammered home the message: ‘You owe me for this dinner.’

But journalists as a rule belong to the kind of people who are born feeling

guilty. Obviously the Cummings-Brownes were made of sterner stuff. As Agatha was preparing to pay the bill – notes slowly counted out instead of credit card to emphasize the price – her guests stayed her hand by ordering large brandies for themselves.

Despite all they had drunk, they remained as sober-looking as they had been when the meal started. Agatha asked about the villagers. Mrs Cummings-Browne said they were pleasant enough and they did what they could for them, all delivered in a lady-of-the-manor tone. They asked Agatha about herself and she replied briefly. Agatha had never trained herself to make social chit-chat. She was only used to selling a product or asking people all about themselves to soften them up so that she could eventually sell that product.

They finally went out into the soft dark night. The wind had died and the air held a promise of summer to come. Mr Cummings-Browne drove his Range Rover slowly through the green lanes leading back to Carsely. A fox slid across the road in front of the lights, rabbits skittered for safety, and bird cherry, just beginning to blossom, starred the hedgerows. Loneliness again gripped Agatha. It was a night for friends, for pleasant company, not a night to be with such as the Cummings-Brownes. He parked outside his own front door and said to Agatha, ‘Find your way all right from here?’

‘No,’ said Agatha crossly. ‘The least you could do is to run me home.’

‘Lose the use of your legs if you go on like this,’ he said nastily, but after giving an impatient little sigh, he drove her to her cottage.

I must leave a light on in future, thought Agatha as she looked at her dark cottage. A light would be welcoming. Before getting out of the car, she asked him exactly how to go about entering the competition, and after he had told her she climbed down and, without saying good night, went into her lonely cottage.

The next day, as instructed, she entered her name in the quiche-competition book in the school hall. The voices of the schoolchildren were raised in song in some classroom: ‘To my hey down-down, to my ho down-down.’ So they still sang ‘Among the Leaves So Green-O’, thought Agatha. She looked around the barren hall. Trestle-tables were set against one wall and there was a rostrum at the far end. Hardly a setting for ambitious achievement.

She then got out her car and drove straight to London this time, much as she loathed and dreaded the perils of the motorways. She parked in the street at Chelsea’s World’s End where she had lived such a short time ago, glad that she had not surrendered her resident’s parking card.

There had been a sharp shower of rain. How wonderful London smelled, of wet concrete, diesel fumes, petrol fumes, litter, hot coffee, fruit and fish, all

the smells that meant home to Agatha.

She made her way to The Quicherie, a delicatessen that specialized in quiches. She bought a large spinach quiche, stowed it in the boot of her car, and then took herself off to the Caprice for lunch, where she ate their salmon fish cakes and relaxed among what she considered as ‘my people’, the rich and famous, without it ever crossing her mind that she did not know any of them. Then to Fenwick’s in Bond Street to buy a new dress, not print (heaven forbid!) but a smart scarlet wool dress with a white collar.

Back to Carsely in the evening light and into the kitchen. She removed the quiche from its shop wrappings, put her own ready printed label, ‘Spinach Quiche, Mrs Raisin’, on it, and wrapped it with deliberate amateurishness in thin clear plastic. She surveyed it with satisfaction. It would be the best there. The Quicherie was famous for its quiches.

She carried it up to the school hall on Friday evening, following a straggling line of women bearing flowers, jam, cakes, quiches and biscuits. The competition entries had to be in the school hall the evening before the day of the competition, for some of the women worked at the weekends. As usual, a few of the women hailed her with ‘Evening. Bit warmer. Maybe get a bit o’ sun.’ How would they cope with some horror like an earthquake or a hurricane? Agatha wondered. Might shut them up in future as the mild vagaries of the Cotswolds weather rarely threw up anything dramatic – or so Agatha believed.

She found she was quite nervous and excited when she went to bed that night. Ridiculous! It was only a village competition.

The next day dawned blustery and cold, with wind tearing down the last of the cherry blossom from the gardens and throwing the petals like bridal showers over the villagers as they crowded into the school hall. A surprisingly good village band was playing selections from *My Fair Lady*, ages of the musicians ranging from eight to eighty. The air smelt sweetly from the flower arrangements and from single blooms set proudly in their thin vases for the flower competition: narcissi and daffodils. There was even a tea-room set up in a side-room with dainty sandwiches and home-made cakes.

‘Of course Mrs Cartwright will win the quiche competition,’ said a voice near Agatha.

Agatha swung round. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because Mr Cummings-Browne is the judge,’ said the woman and moved off to be lost in the crowd.

Lord Pendlebury, a thin elderly gentleman who looked like an Edwardian ghost, and who had estates on the hill above the village, was to announce the winner of the quiche competition, although Mr Cummings-Browne was to be the judge.

Agatha’s quiche had a thin slice cut out of it, as had the others. She looked



at it smugly. Three cheers for The Quicherie. The spinach quiche was undoubtedly the best one there. The fact that she was expected to have cooked it herself did not trouble her conscience at all.

The band fell silent. Lord Pendlebury was helped up to the platform in front of the band.

‘The winner of the Great Quiche Competition is . . .’ quavered Lord Pendlebury. He fumbled with a sheaf of notes, picked them up, tidied them, took out a pair of pince-nez, looked again helplessly at the papers, until Mr Cummings-Browne pointed to the right sheet of paper.

‘Bless me. Yes, yes, yes,’ wittered Lord Pendlebury. ‘Harrumph! The winner is . . . Mrs Cartwright.’

‘Snakes and bastards,’ muttered Agatha.

Fuming, she watched as Mrs Cartwright, a gypsy-looking woman, climbed up on to the stage to receive the award. It was a cheque. ‘How much?’ Agatha asked the woman next to her.

‘Ten pounds.’

‘Ten pounds!’ exclaimed Agatha, who had not even asked before what the prize was to be but had naively assumed it would be in the form of a silver cup. She had imagined such a cup with her name engraved on it resting on her mantelpiece. ‘How’s she supposed to celebrate by spending that? Dinner at McDonald’s?’

‘It’s the thought that counts,’ said the woman vaguely. ‘You are Mrs Raisin. You have just bought Budgen’s cottage. I am Mrs Bloxby, the vicar’s wife. Can we hope to see you at church on Sunday?’

‘Why Budgen?’ asked Agatha. ‘I bought the cottage from a Mr Alder.’

‘It has always been Budgen’s cottage,’ said the vicar’s wife. ‘He died fifteen years ago, of course, but to us in the village, it will always be Budgen’s cottage. He was a great character. At least you do not have to worry about your dinner tonight, Mrs Raisin. Your quiche looks delicious.’

‘Oh, throw it away,’ snarled Agatha. ‘Mine was the best. This competition was rigged.’

Mrs Bloxby gave Agatha a look of sad reproach before moving away.

Agatha experienced a qualm of unease. She should not have been bitchy about the competition to the vicar’s wife. Mrs Bloxby seemed a nice sort of woman. But Agatha had only been used to three lines of conversation: either ordering her staff about, pressuring the media for publicity, or being oily to clients. A faint idea was stirring somewhere in her brain that Agatha Raisin was not a very lovable person.

That evening, she went down to the Red Lion. It was indeed a beautiful pub, she thought, looking about: low-raftered, dark, smoky; with stone floors, bowls of spring flowers, log fire blazing, comfortable chairs and solid tables at proper drinking and eating height instead of those ‘cocktail’ knee-high

tables which meant you had to crouch to get the food to your mouth. Some men were standing at the bar. They smiled and nodded to her and then went on talking. Agatha noticed a slate with meals written on it and ordered lasagne and chips from the landlord's pretty daughter before carrying her drink over to a corner table. She felt as she had done as a child, longing to be part of all this old English country tradition of beauty and safety and yet being on the outside, looking in. But had she, she wondered, ever really been part of anything except the ephemeral world of PR? If she dropped dead, right now, on this pub floor, was there anyone to mourn her? Her parents were dead. God alone knew where her husband was, and he would certainly not mourn her. Shit, this gin's depressing stuff, thought Agatha angrily, and ordered a glass of white wine instead to wash down her lasagne, which she noticed had been microwaved so that it stuck firmly to the bottom of the dish.

But the chips were good. Life did have its small comforts after all.

Mrs Cummings-Browne was preparing to go out to a rehearsal of *Blithe Spirit* at the church hall. She was producing it for the Carsely Dramatic Society and trying unsuccessfully to iron out their Gloucestershire accents. 'Why can't any of them achieve a proper accent?' she mourned as she collected her handbag. 'They sound as if they're mucking out pigs or whatever one does with pigs. Speaking of pigs, I brought home that horrible Raisin woman's quiche. She flounced off in a huff and said we were to throw it away. I thought you might like a piece for supper. I've left a couple of slices on the kitchen counter. I've had a lot of cakes and tea this afternoon. That'll do me.'

'I don't think I'll eat anything either,' said Mr Cummings-Browne.

'Well, if you change your mind, pop the quiche in the microwave.'

Mr Cummings-Browne drank a stiff whisky and watched television, regretting that the hour was before nine in the evening, which meant no hope of any full frontal nudity, the powers-that-be having naively thought all children to be in bed by nine o'clock, after which time pornography was permissible, although anyone who wrote in to describe it as such was a fuddy-duddy who did not appreciate true art. So he watched a nature programme instead and consoled himself with copulating animals. He had another whisky and felt hungry. He remembered the quiche. It had been fun watching Agatha Raisin's face at the competition. She really had wanted her dinner back, silly woman. People like Agatha Raisin, that sort of middle-aged yuppie, lowered the tone decidedly. He went into the kitchen and put two slices of quiche in the microwave and opened a bottle of claret and poured himself a glass. Then, putting quiche and wine on a tray, he carried the lot through to the living-room and settled down again in front of the television.

It was two hours later and just before the promised gang rape in a movie

called *Deep in the Heart* that his mouth began to burn as if it were on fire. He felt deathly ill. He fell out of his chair and writhed in convulsions on the floor and was dreadfully sick. He lost consciousness as he was fighting his way toward the phone, ending up stretched out behind the sofa.

Mrs Cummings-Browne arrived home sometime after midnight. She did not see her husband because he was lying behind the sofa, nor did she notice any of the pools of vomit because only one dim lamp was burning. She muttered in irritation to see the lamp still lit and the television still on. She switched both off.

Then she went up to her bedroom – it had been some time since she had shared one with her husband – removed her make-up, undressed and soon was fast asleep.

Mrs Simpson arrived early the next morning, grumbling under her breath. Her work schedule had been disrupted. First the change-over to cleaning Mrs Raisin's place, and now Mrs Cummings-Browne had asked her to clean on Sunday morning because the Cummings-Brownes were going off on holiday to Tuscany on the Monday and Vera Cummings-Browne had wanted the place cleaned before they left. But if she worked hard, she could still make it to her Sunday job in Evesham by ten.

She let herself in with the spare key which was kept under the doormat, made a cup of coffee for herself, drank it at the kitchen table and then got to work, starting with the kitchen. She would have liked to do the bedrooms first but she knew the Cummings-Brownes slept late. If they were not up by the time she had finished the living-room, then she would need to rouse them. She finished cleaning the kitchen in record time and then went into the living-room, wrinkling her nose at the sour smell. She went round behind the sofa to open the window and let some fresh air in and her foot struck the dead body of Mr Cummings-Browne. His face was contorted and bluish. He was lying doubled up. Mrs Simpson backed away, both hands to her mouth. She thought vaguely that Mrs Cummings-Browne must be out. The phone was on the window-ledge. Plucking up her courage, she leaned across the dead body and dialled 999 and asked for the police and an ambulance. She then shut herself in the kitchen to await their arrival. It never occurred to her to check if he was really dead or to go out and get immediate help. She sat at the kitchen table, hands tightly clasped as though in prayer, frozen with shock.

The local policeman was the first to arrive. Police Constable Fred Griggs was a fat, jolly man, unused to coping with much more than looking for stolen cars in the tourist season and charging the odd drunken driver.

He was bending over the body when the ambulance men arrived.

In the middle of all the commotion, Mrs Cummings-Browne descended the

stairs, holding a quilted dressing-gown tightly about her.

When it was explained to her that her husband was dead, she clutched hold of the newel-post at the foot of the stairs and said in a stunned voice, 'But he can't be. He wasn't even here when I got home. He had high blood pressure. It must have been a stroke.'

But Fred Griggs had noticed the pools of dried vomit and the distorted bluish face of the corpse. 'We can't touch anything,' he said to the ambulance men. 'I'm pretty damn sure it's poisoning.'

Agatha Raisin went to church that Sunday morning. She could not remember having been inside a church before, but going to church, she believed, was one of those things one did in a village. The service was early, eight thirty, the vicar having to go on afterwards to preach at two other churches in the neighbourhood of Carsely.

She saw P.C. Griggs's car standing outside the Cummings-Brownes' and an ambulance. 'I wonder what happened,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'Mr Griggs is not saying anything. I hope nothing has happened to poor Mr Cummings-Browne.'

'I hope something has,' said Agatha. 'Couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow,' and she marched on into the gloom of the church of St Jude and left the vicar's wife staring after her. Agatha collected a prayer-book and a hymn-book and took a pew at the back of the church. She was wearing her new red dress and on her head was a broad-brimmed black straw hat decorated with red poppies. As the congregation began to file in, Agatha realized she was overdressed. Everyone else was in casual clothes.

During the first hymn, Agatha could hear the wail of approaching police sirens. What on earth had happened? If one of the Cummings-Brownes had just dropped dead, surely it did not require more than an ambulance and the local policeman. The church was small, built in the fourteenth century, with fine stained-glass windows and beautiful flower arrangements. The old Book of Common Prayer was used. There were readings from the Old and New Testaments while Agatha fidgeted in the pew and wondered if she could escape outside to find out what was going on.

The vicar climbed into the pulpit to begin his sermon and all Agatha's thoughts of escape disappeared. The Reverend Alfred Bloxby was a small, thin, ascetic-looking man but he had a compelling presence. In a beautifully modulated voice he began to preach and his sermon was 'Love Thy Neighbour'. To Agatha, it seemed as if the whole sermon was directed at her. We were too weak and powerless to alter world affairs, he said, but if each one behaved to his or her neighbours with charity and courtesy and kindness, then the ripples would spread outwards. Charity began at home. Agatha

thought of bribing Mrs Simpson away from Mrs Barr and squirmed. When communion came round, she stayed where she was, not knowing what the ritual involved. Finally, with a feeling of release, she joined in the last hymn, 'My Country 'Tis of Thee', and impatiently shuffled out, giving the vicar's hand a perfunctory shake, not hearing his words of welcome to the village as her eyes fastened on the police cars filling the small space outside the Cummings-Brownes' house.

P.C. Griggs was on duty outside, warding off all questions with a placid 'Can't say anything now, I'm sure.'

Agatha went slowly home. She ate some breakfast and picked up an Agatha Christie mystery and tried to read, but could not focus on the words. What did fictional mysteries matter when there was a real-live one in the village? Had Mrs Cummings-Browne hit him on the top of his pointy head with the poker?

She threw down the book and went along to the Red Lion. It was buzzing with rumour and speculation. Agatha found herself in the centre of a group of villagers eagerly discussing the death. To her disappointment, she learned that Mr Cummings-Browne had suffered from high blood pressure.

'But it can't be natural causes,' protested Agatha. 'All those police cars!'

'Oh, we likes to do things thoroughly in Gloucestershire,' said a large beefy man. 'Not like Lunnon, where there's people dropping dead like flies every minute. My shout. What you 'aving, Mrs Raisin?'

Agatha ordered a gin and tonic. It was all very pleasurable to be in the centre of this cosy group. When the pub finally closed its doors at two in the afternoon, Agatha felt quite tipsy as she walked home. The heavy Cotswolds air, combined with the unusually large amount she had drunk, sent her to sleep. When she awoke, she thought that Cummings-Browne had probably had an accident and it was not worth finding out about anyway. Agatha Christie now seemed much more interesting than anything that could happen in Carsley, and Agatha read until bedtime.

In the morning, she decided to go for a walk. Walks in the Cotswolds are all neatly signposted. She chose one at the end of the village beyond the council houses, opening a gate that led into some woods.

Trees with new green leaves arched over her and primroses nestled among their roots. There was a sound of rushing water from a hidden stream over to her left. The night's frost was slowly melting in shafts of sunlight which struck down through the trees. High above, a blackbird sang a heart-breaking melody and the air was sweet and fresh. The path led her out of the trees and along the edge of a field of new corn, bright green and shiny, turning in the breeze like the fur of some huge green cat. A lark shot up to the heavens, reminding Agatha of her youth, in the days when even the wastelands of Birmingham were full of larks and butterflies, the days before chemical spraying. She strode out, feeling healthy and well and very much alive.

By following the signs, she walked through fields and more woods, finally emerging on to the road that led down into Carsely. As she walked down under the green tunnels formed by the branches of the high hedges which met overhead and she saw the village lying below her, all her euphoria caused by healthy walking and fresh air left, to be replaced by an inexplicable sense of dread. She felt she was walking down into a sort of grave where Agatha Raisin would lie buried alive. Again she was plagued with restlessness and loneliness.

This could not go on. The dream of her life was not what she had expected. She could sell up, although the market was still not very good. Perhaps she could travel. She had never travelled extensively before, only venturing each year on one of the more expensive packaged holidays designed for single people who did not want to mix with the riff-raff: rambling holidays in France, painting holidays in Spain, that sort of thing.

In the village street, a local woman gave her a broad smile and Agatha wearily waited for that usual greeting of 'Mawning,' wondering what the woman would do or say if she replied, 'Get stuffed.'

But to her surprise, the woman stopped, resting her shopping basket on one broad hip, and said, 'Police be looking for you. Plain clothes.'

'Don't know what they want with me,' said Agatha uneasily.

'Better go and find out, m'dear.'

Agatha hurried on, her mind in a turmoil. What could they want? Her driving licence was in order. Of course, there were those books she had never got around to returning to the Chelsea library . . .

As she approached her cottage, she saw Mrs Barr standing in her front garden, staring avidly at a small group of three men who were waiting outside Agatha's cottage. When she saw Agatha, she scurried indoors and slammed the door but immediately took up a watching position at the window.

A thin, cadaverous man approached Agatha. 'Mrs Raisin? I am Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes. May we have a word with you? Indoors.'

## Chapter Three

Agatha led them indoors. Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes introduced a dark, silent man beside him as Detective Sergeant Friend, and a young tubby oriental who looked like a Buddha as Detective Constable Wong.

Agatha sat in an armchair by the fireplace and the three sat down on the sofa, side by side. 'We are here to ask you about your quiche, Mrs Raisin,' said Wilkes. 'I understand the Cummings-Brownes took it home. What was in it?'

'What's all this about?' demanded Agatha.

'Just answer my questions,' said Wilkes stolidly.

What was in a quiche? wondered Agatha desperately. 'Eggs, flour, milk and spinach,' she volunteered hopefully.

Detective Constable Wong spoke up. He had a soft Gloucestershire accent. 'Perhaps it would be best if Mrs Raisin took us into her kitchen and showed us the ingredients.'

The three detectives promptly stood up and towered over Agatha. Agatha got up, registering that her knees were trembling, and led the way into the kitchen while they crowded in after her.

Under their watching eyes, she opened the cupboards. 'Strange,' said Agatha. 'I seem to have used everything up. I am very thrifty.'

Wong, who had been watching her with amusement, said suddenly, 'If you will write down the recipe, Mrs Raisin, I'll run down to Harvey's and buy the ingredients and then you can show us how you baked it.'

Agatha shot him a look of loathing. She took down a cookery book called *French Provincial Cooking*, opened it, wincing at the faint crack from its hitherto unopened spine, and looked up the index. She found the required recipe and wrote down a list of the ingredients. Wong took the list from her and went out.

'Now *will you* tell me what this is about?' asked Agatha.

'In a moment,' said Wilkes stolidly.

Had Agatha not been so very frightened, she would have screamed at him that she had a right to know, but she weakly made a jug of instant coffee and suggested they sit in the living-room and drink it while she waited for Wong.

Having got rid of them, she studied the recipe. Provided she did exactly as

instructed, she should be able to get it right. She had meant to take up baking and so she had scales and measures, thank God. Wong returned with a brown paper bag full of groceries.

‘Join the others in the living-room,’ ordered Agatha, ‘and I’ll let you know when it is ready.’

Wong sat down in a kitchen chair. ‘I like kitchens,’ he said amiably. ‘I’ll watch you cook.’

Agatha shot him a look of pure hatred from her little brown eyes as she heated the oven and got to work. There were old ladies being mugged all over the country, she thought savagely. Had this wretched man nothing better to do? But he seemed to have infinite patience. He watched her closely and then, when she finally put the quiche in the oven, he rose and went to join the others. Agatha stayed where she was, her mind in a turmoil. She could hear the murmur of voices from the other room.

It was like being back at school, she thought. She remembered the headmistress telling them that they all must open their lockers for inspection without explaining why. Oh, the dread of opening her own locker in case there was something in it that shouldn’t have been there. A policewoman had silently gone through everything. No one explained what was wrong. No one said anything. Agatha could still remember the silent, frightened girls, the stern and silent teachers, the competent policewoman. And then one of the girls was led away. They never saw her again. They assumed she had been expelled because of whatever had been found in her locker. But no one had called at the girl’s home to ask her. Judgement had been passed on her by that mysterious world of adults and she had been spirited out of their lives as if by some divine retribution. They had gone on with their schooldays.

Now she felt like a child again, hemmed in by her own guilt and an accusing silence. She glanced at the clock. When had she put it in? She opened the oven door. There it stood, raised and golden and perfect. She heaved a sigh of relief and took it out just as Wong came back into the kitchen.

‘We’ll leave it to cool for a little,’ he said. He opened his notebook. ‘Now about the Cummings-Brownes. You dined with them at the Feathers. What did you have? Mmmm. And then? What did they drink?’ And so it went on while out of the corner of her eye, Agatha saw her golden-brown quiche sink slowly down into its pastry shell.

Wong finally closed his notebook and called the others in. ‘We’ll just cut a slice,’ he said. Agatha wielded a knife and spatula and drew out one small soggy slice.

‘What did he die of?’ asked Agatha desperately.

‘Cowbane,’ said Friend.

‘Cowbane?’ Agatha stared at them. ‘Is that something like mad cow



disease?’

‘No,’ said Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes heavily. ‘It’s a poisonous plant, not all that common, but it’s found in several parts of the British Isles, including the West Midlands, and we are in the West Midlands, Mrs Raisin. On examining the contents of the deceased’s stomach, it was shown he had eaten quiche and drunk wine just before his death. The green vegetable stuff was identified as cowbane. The poisonous substance it contains is an unsaturated higher alcohol, cicutoxin.’

‘So you see, Mrs Raisin,’ came the mild voice of Wong, ‘Mrs Cummings-Browne thinks your quiche poisoned her husband . . . that is, if you ever made that quiche.’

Agatha glared out of the window, wishing they would all disappear.

‘Mrs Raisin!’ She swung round. Detective Constable Wong’s slanted brown eyes were on a level with her own. Wasn’t he too small for the police force? she thought inconsequently. ‘Mrs Raisin,’ said Bill Wong softly, ‘it is my humble opinion that you have never baked a quiche or a cake in your life. Your cookery books had obviously never been opened before. Some of your cooking utensils still had the prices stuck to them. So will you begin at the beginning? There is no need to lie so long as you are innocent.’

‘Will this come out in court?’ asked Agatha miserably, wondering if she could be sued by the village committee for having thrust a Quicherie quiche into their competition.

Wilkes’s voice was heavy with threat. ‘Only if we think it necessary.’

Again, Agatha’s memory carried her back to her schooldays. She had bribed one of the girls to write an essay for her with two chocolate bars and a red scarf. Unfortunately, the girl, a leading light in the Young People in Christ movement, had confessed all to the headmistress and so Agatha had been summoned and told to tell the truth.

In a small, almost childish voice, quite unlike her usual robust tones, she confessed going up to Chelsea and buying the quiche. Wong was grinning happily and she could have wrung his neck. Wilkes demanded the bill for the quiche and Agatha found it at the bottom of the rubbish bin under several empty frozen food packets and gave it to him. They said they would check her story out.

Agatha hid indoors for the rest of that day, feeling like a criminal. She would have stayed in hiding the next day had not the cleaner, Mrs Simpson, arrived, reminding Agatha that she had promised her lunch. Agatha scuttled down to Harvey’s and bought some cold meat and salad. Nothing seemed to have changed. People talked about the weather. The death of Cummings-Browne might never have happened.

Agatha returned to find Mrs Simpson down on her hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor. A sign of her extreme low state was that Agatha’s

eyes filled with weak tears at the sight. When had she last seen a woman scrubbing a floor instead of slopping it around with a mop? She had hired a succession of cleaning girls through an agency in London, mostly foreign girls or out-of-work actresses who seemed expert at producing an effect of cleanliness without actually ever getting down to the nitty-gritty.

Mrs Simpson looked up from her cleaning. 'I found him, you know,' she said. 'I found the body.'

'I don't want to talk about it,' said Agatha hurriedly and Mrs Simpson grinned as she wrung out the floor cloth.

'That's a mercy, for to tell the truth, I don't like talking about it. Rather get on with the work.'

Agatha retreated to the living-room and then, when Mrs Simpson moved upstairs, she prepared her a cold lunch, put it on the kitchen table beside an envelope containing Mrs Simpson's money, and called upstairs, 'I'm going out. I have a spare key. Just lock up and put the key through the letter-box.' She received a faint affirmative, shouted over the noise of the vacuum cleaner.

Agatha got in her car and drove up and out of the village. Where should she go? Market day in Moreton-in-Marsh. That would do. She battled in the busy town to find a parking place and then joined the throngs crowding the stalls. The Cotswolds appeared to be a very fecund place. There were young women with babies and toddlers everywhere, pushing them in pushchairs which they thrust against the legs of the childless with aplomb. She had read an article once where a young mother had explained how she had suffered from acute agoraphobia when her child had grown out of the pushchair. It certainly seemed to give the mothers an aggressive edge as, like so many Boadiceas, they propelled their chariots through the market crowd. Agatha bought a geranium for the kitchen window, fresh fish for dinner, potatoes and cauliflower. She was determined to cook everything herself. No more frozen food. After depositing her shopping in the car, she ate lunch in the Market House Restaurant, bought scent in the chemist's, a blouse at one of the stalls, and then, at four o'clock, as the market was closing down, she reluctantly returned to her car and took the road home.

Mrs Simpson had left a jug of wild flowers on the middle of the kitchen table. Bless the woman. All Agatha's guilt about having lured her away from Mrs Barr evaporated. The woman was a queen among cleaners.

The following morning there was a knock at the door and Agatha groaned inwardly. Anyone else, she thought bitterly, would not be depressed, would expect some friend to be standing on the doorstep. But not Agatha Raisin. She knew it could only be the police.

Detective Constable Wong stood there. 'This is an informal call,' he said. 'May I come in?'

'I suppose so,' said Agatha ungraciously. 'I was just about to have a glass

of sherry, but I won't ask you to join me.'

'Why not?' he said with a grin. 'I'm off duty.'

Agatha poured two glasses of sherry, threw some imitation logs on the fire and lit them. 'What now?' she asked. 'And what do I call you?'

'My name is Bill Wong. You may call me Bill.'

'An appropriate name. If you were older, I could call you the Old Bill. Now, what about the quiche?'

'You're off the hook,' said Bill. 'We checked out your story. Mr Economides, the owner of The Quicherie, remembers selling you that quiche. He cannot understand what happened. He buys his vegetables from the greengrocer's across the road. Greengrocer goes to the market at Nine Elms every morning to buy his stock. Stuff comes from all over the country and abroad. Cowbane must have got in with the spinach. It's a tragic accident. Of course, we had to tell Mrs Cummings-Browne where the quiche came from.'

Agatha groaned.

'She might have accused you of murder otherwise.'

'But look here,' protested Agatha, 'she could have killed her husband by putting cowbane in my quiche.'

'Like most of the British population, I'd swear she couldn't tell a piece of cowbane from a palm tree,' said Bill. 'Also, it couldn't have been you. When you left that quiche, you had no idea it would be taken home and eaten by Cummings-Browne. So it couldn't have been you. And it couldn't have been Mrs Cummings-Browne. Poisoning like that would need to be a coldblooded, premeditated act. No, it was a horrible accident. Cowbane was only in part of the quiche.'

'I feel sorry for Mr Economides,' said Agatha. 'Mrs Cummings-Browne could sue him.'

'She has generously said she will not press charges. She is a very rich woman in her own right. She has the money. She had nothing to gain from his death.'

'But why did Cummings-Browne not drop dead at the tasting when he had a slice of it? Perhaps someone substituted another quiche. Or . . . let me think . . . wouldn't there have been some cowbane in that wedge, the juice, for instance?'

'Yes, we wondered about that,' said Bill. 'Mrs Cummings-Browne said her husband did feel a bit queasy after the tasting but she put that down to the amount of precompetition drinks he had been knocking back.'

Agatha asked all about the case, all the details she had not asked before. He had been found dead in the morning. Then why, asked Agatha, had Mrs Cummings-Browne gone straight up to bed?

'Oh, that was because her husband was usually late, drinking at the Red Lion.'

‘But that precious pair – or rather, it was Mrs Cummings-Browne – told me they wouldn’t be seen dead in the Red Lion. Mind you, that was before they socked me for a disgracefully expensive load of rubbish at the Feathers.’

‘He drinks at the Red Lion, all right, but Mrs Cummings-Browne owns twenty-five per cent of the Feathers.’

‘The cow! I’ll be damned. Anyway, how did you guess I never cooked that quiche? For you did, you know, even before I baked one.’

‘The minute I saw there wasn’t a single baking ingredient in the kitchen I was sure.’ He laughed. ‘I asked you to make one to be absolutely sure. You should have seen your face!’

‘Oh, *very* funny.’

He looked at her curiously. What an odd woman she was, he thought. Her shiny brown, well-groomed hair was not permed but cut in a sort of Dutch bob that somehow suited her square, rather truculent face. Her body was square and stocky and her legs surprisingly good. ‘What,’ asked Bill, ‘was so special to a recently ex-high-powered businesswoman like yourself about winning a village competition?’

‘I felt out of place,’ said Agatha bleakly. ‘I wanted to make my mark on the village.’

He laughed happily, his eyes closing into slits. ‘You’ve done just that. Mrs Cummings-Browne knows now you cheated and so does Fred Griggs, the local bobby, and he’s a prize gossip.’

Agatha felt too humiliated to speak. So much for her dream home. She would need to sell up. How could she face anyone in the village?

He looked at her sympathetically. ‘If you want to make your mark on the village, Mrs Raisin, you could try becoming popular.’

Agatha looked at him in amazement. Fame, money and power were surely the only things needed to make one’s mark on the world.

‘It comes slowly,’ he said. ‘All you have to do is start to like people. If they like you back, regard it as a bonus.’

Really, what odd types they had in the police force these days, thought Agatha, surprised. Did she dislike people? Of course she didn’t. Well, so far the only people she had taken a dislike to in Yokel Country, she thought savagely, were old fart-face next door and Mrs Cummings-Browne and the dear deceased.

‘How old are you?’ she asked.

‘Twenty-three,’ said Bill.

‘Chinese?’

‘Half. Father is Hong Kong Chinese and Mother is from Evesham. I was brought up in Gloucestershire.’ He rose to go but for some reason Agatha wanted him to stay.

‘Are you married?’ she asked.

‘No, Mrs Raisin.’

‘Well, sit down for a moment,’ said Agatha urgently, ‘and tell me about yourself.’

Again a flicker of sympathy appeared in his eyes. He sat down and began to talk about his short career in the police force and Agatha listened, soothed by his air of certainty and calm. Unknown to her, it was the start of an odd friendship. ‘So,’ he said at last, ‘I really must go. Case finished. Case solved. Nasty accident. Life goes on.’

The next day, to escape from the eyes of the villagers, eyes that would accuse her of being a cheat, Agatha drove to London. She was anxious about Mr Economides. Agatha, a regular takeaway eater, had frequented Mr Economides’s shop over the years. Perhaps some of Bill Wong’s remarks had struck home, but Agatha had realized Mr Economides, although their relationship had been that of customer and salesman, was as near a friend as she had got. The shop contained two small tables and chairs for customers who liked to have coffee, and when the shop was quiet, Mr Economides had often treated Agatha to a coffee and told her tales of his numerous family.

But when she arrived, the shop was busy and Mr Economides was guarded in his answers as his competent hairy hands packed quiche and cold cuts for the customers. Yes, Mrs Cummings-Browne had called in person to assure him that she would not be suing him. Yes, it had been a tragic accident. And now, if Mrs Raisin would excuse him . . .

Agatha left, feeling rather flat. London, which had so recently enclosed her like a many-coloured coat, now stretched out in lonely streets full of strangers all about her. She went to Foyle’s bookshop in the Charing Cross Road and looked up a book on poisonous plants. She studied a picture of cowbane. It was an innocuous-looking plant with a ridged stem and flower heads composed of groups of small white flowers. She was about to buy the book when she suddenly thought, why bother? It had been an accident, a sad accident.

She potted around a few other shops before returning to her car and joining the long line of traffic that was belching its way out of London. Reluctant to return to the village before dark, she cut off the motorway and headed for Oxford, where she parked her car in St Giles and made her way to the Randolph Hotel for tea. She was the only customer, odd in that most popular of hotels. She settled back in a huge sofa and drank tea and ate crumpets served to her by a young maiden with a Pre-Raphaelite face. Faintly from outside came the roar of traffic ploughing up Beaumont Street past the Ashmolean Museum. The hotel had a dim ecclesiastical air, as if haunted by the damp souls of dead deans. She pushed the last crumpet around on her plate. She did not feel like eating it. She needed a purpose in life, she thought, an aim. Would it not be marvellous if Cummings-Browne turned out to have

been murdered after all? And she, Agatha Raisin, solved the case? She would become known throughout the Cotswolds. People would come to her. She would be respected. Had it been an accident? What sort of marriage had the Cummings-Brownes really had where she could come home and trot off to bed while her husband lay dead behind the sofa? Why separate bedrooms? Bill Wong had told her that. Why should Mr Economides's excellent and famous quiche suddenly contain cowbane when over the years he had not had one complaint? Perhaps she could ask around. Just a few questions. No harm in that.

Feeling more cheerful than she had for a long time, she paid the bill and tipped the gentle waitress lavishly. The sun was sinking low behind the trees as she motored through the village and turned off at Lilac Lane. She fished out the spare door key and then she heard her phone ringing, sharp and insistent.

She swore under her breath as she fumbled with the key. It was the first time her phone had rung. She tumbled in the door and felt her way towards it in the gloom.

'Roy here,' came the familiar mincing voice of her ex-assistant.

'How lovely to hear from you,' cried Agatha in tones she had never used before to the young man.

'Fact is, Aggie, I was hoping I could come down and see you this weekend.'

'Of course. You're welcome.'

'I've got this Australian friend, Steve, wants to see the countryside. Do you mind if he comes too?'

'More the merrier. Are you driving here?'

'Thought we'd take the train and come down Friday night.'

'Wait a bit,' said Agatha, 'I've got a timetable here.' She fumbled in her bag. 'Yes, there's a through train leaves Paddington at six twenty in the evening. Don't need to change anywhere. Gets in at Moreton-in-Marsh –'

'Where?'

'Moreton-in-Marsh.'

'Too Agatha Christie for words, darling.'

'And I'll meet you at the station.'

'It's the May Day celebrations at the weekend, Aggie, and Steve wants to look at maypoles and morris dancers and all that sort of thing.'

'I haven't had time to look at any posters, Roy. I've been involved in a death.'

'Did one of the clodhoppers try to mumble with you with his gruttock, luv?'

'Nothing like that. I'll tell you all about it when I see you.'

Agatha whistled to herself as she cracked open one of her cookery books

and began to prepare the fish she had bought the day before. There seemed to be so many exotic recipes. Surely one just fried the stuff. So she did and by the time it was ready, realized she had not put the potatoes on to boil or cooked the cauliflower. She threw a packet of microwaveable chips in the micro and opened a can of bright-green peas. It all tasted delicious to Agatha's undemanding palate when she finally sat down to eat.

The next day, she called in at Harvey's and studied the posters at the door. Yes, there was to be morris dancing, maypole dancing, and a fair in the village on the Saturday. People nodded and smiled to her. No one said 'quiche' or anything dreadful like that. Cheerfully Agatha trotted home but was waylaid by Mrs Barr before she could get to her own garden gate.

'I thought you would have been at the inquest yesterday at Mircester,' said Mrs Barr, her eyes cold and watchful.

'No one asked me,' said Agatha. 'It was an accident. I suppose the police evidence was enough.'

'Not enough for me,' said Mrs Barr coolly. 'Nothing came out about the way you cheated at that competition.'

Curiosity overcame rancour in Agatha's bosom. 'Why not? Surely it was mentioned that it had been bought in a shop in Chelsea?'

'Oh, yes, *that* came out but not a word of condemnation for you being a cheat and a liar. Poor Mrs Cummings-Browne broke down completely. We don't need your sort in this village.'

'And what was the verdict?'

'Accidental death, but you killed him, Agatha Raisin. You killed him with your nasty foreign quiche, just as much as if you had knifed him.'

Agatha's eyes blazed. 'I'll kill you, you malicious harridan, if you don't bugger off.'

She marched to her own cottage, blinking tears from her eyes, appalled at her own shock and dismay and weakness.

Thank God Roy was coming. Dear Roy, thought Agatha sentimentally, forgetting she had always considered him a tiresomely effeminate young man whom she would have sacked had he not had a magic touch with the peculiar world of pop music.

There came a knock at the door and Agatha cringed, wondering if some other nasty local was about to berate her. But when she opened it, it was Bill Wong who stood on the step.

'Came to tell you about the inquest,' he said. 'I called yesterday but you were out.'

'I was seeing *friends*,' said Agatha loftily. 'In fact, two of them are coming to stay with me for the weekend. But come in.'

'What was the Barr female on about?' he asked curiously as he followed Agatha into her kitchen.

‘Accusing me of murder,’ mumbled Agatha, putting groceries away in the cupboards. ‘Like a coffee?’

‘Yes, please. So the inquest is over and Mr Cummings-Browne is to be cremated and his ashes cast to the four winds on Salisbury Plain in memory of his army days.’

‘I believe Mrs Cummings-Browne collapsed at the inquest,’ said Agatha.

‘Yes, yes, she did. Two sugars please and just a dash of milk. Most affecting.’

Agatha turned and looked at him, her interest suddenly quickening. ‘You think she was acting?’

‘Maybe. But I was surprised he was so generally mourned. There were quite a lot of ladies there sobbing into their handkerchiefs.’

‘With their husbands? Or on their own?’

‘On their own.’

Agatha put a mug of coffee down in front of him, poured one for herself and sat down at the kitchen table opposite him.

‘Something’s bothering you,’ said Agatha.

‘Oh, the case is closed and I have a lot of work to do. There’s an epidemic of joy-riders in Mircester.’

‘What time did Mrs Cummings-Browne go to bed, the night her husband died?’ asked Agatha.

‘Just after midnight or thereabouts.’

‘But the Red Lion closes sharp at eleven and it’s only a few minutes’ walk away.’

‘She said he often stayed out late, drinking with friends.’

Agatha’s eyes were shrewd. ‘Oho! And weeping women at the inquest. Don’t tell me old jug ears was a philanderer.’

‘There’s no evidence of that.’

‘And yet Mrs Cartwright always won the competition. Why?’

‘Perhaps her baking was the best.’

‘No one bakes a better quiche than Mr Economides,’ said Agatha firmly.

‘But you are the incomer. More natural to give a prize to one of the locals.’

‘Still . . .’

‘I can see from the look in your eye, Mrs Raisin, that you would like it to be murder after all and so clear your conscience.’

‘Why did you call to tell me about the inquest?’

‘I thought you would be interested. There’s a paragraph about it in today’s *Gloucestershire Telegraph*.’

‘Have you got it?’ demanded Agatha. ‘Let me see.’

He fished in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled newspaper. ‘Page three.’

Agatha turned to page three.



At the coroner's court in Mircester yesterday [she read], a verdict of accidental death by eating poisoned quiche was pronounced. The victim was Mr Reginald Cummings-Browne, fifty-eight, of Plumtrees Cottage, Carsely. Giving evidence, Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes said that cowbane had been introduced into a spinach quiche by accident. The quiche had been bought by a newcomer to the village, Mrs Agatha Raisin. She had bought the quiche from a London delicatessen and had entered it in a village competition as her own baking, a competition at which the late Mr Cummings-Browne was the judge.

The owner of the delicatessen, Mr Economides, had stated to the police that the cowbane must have become mixed with the spinach by accident. It was stressed that no blame fell on the unfortunate Mr Economides, a Greek immigrant, aged forty-five, who owns The Quicherie at the World's End, Chelsea.

Mrs Vera Cummings-Browne, fifty-two, collapsed in court.

Mr Cummings-Browne was a well-known figure in the Cotswolds . . .

‘And blah, blah, blah,’ said Agatha, putting the paper down. ‘Hardly a paragraph.’

‘You're lucky,’ said Bill Wong. ‘If there hadn't been riots on that estate in Mircester and two deaths, I am sure some enterprising reporter would have been around to find out about the cheating incomer of Carsley. You got off lucky.’

Agatha sighed. ‘I'll never live it down, unless I can prove it was murder.’

‘Don't go looking for more trouble. That's why there's a police force. Best let everyone forget about your part in the death. Economides is lucky as well. With all this going on in the Middle East, not one London paper has bothered to pick up the story.’

‘I still wonder why you came?’

He drained the last of his coffee and stood up.

‘Perhaps I like you, Agatha Raisin.’

Agatha blushed for about the first time in her life. He gave her an amused look and let himself out.

## Chapter Four

Agatha felt quite nervous as she waited for the Cotswold Express to pull in at Moreton-in-Marsh station. What would this friend of Roy's be like? Would she like him? Agatha's main worry was that the friend might not like her, but she wasn't even going to admit to that thought.

The weather was calm but still cold. The train, oh, miracle of miracles, was actually on time. Roy descended and rushed to embrace her. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt which bore the legend I HAVE BEEN USED. Following him came a slight young man. He had thick black hair and a heavy moustache and wore a light-blue denim jacket, jeans, and high-heeled cowboy boots. Butch Cassidy comes to Moreton-in-Marsh. This then was Steve. He gave her a limp handshake and stood looking at her with doggy eyes.

'Welcome to the Cotswolds,' said Agatha. 'Roy tells me you're Australian. On holiday?'

'No, I am a systems analyst,' said Steve in the careful English accents of an Eliza Doolittle who hadn't yet quite got it. 'I work in the City.'

'Come along, then,' said Agatha. 'The car's parked outside. I thought I would take you both out for dinner tonight. I'm not much of a cook.'

'And neither you are, ducks,' said Roy. He turned to Steve. 'We used to call her the queen of the microwave. She ate most of her meals in the office and kept a microwave oven there, awful stuff like the Rajah's Spicy Curry and things like that. Where are we going to eat, Aggie?'

'I thought maybe the Red Lion in the village.'

She unlocked the car door but Roy stood his ground. 'Pub grub?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Steak and kidney pie and chips, sausage and chips, fish and chips and lasagne and chips?'

'Yes, so what?'

'So what? My delicate little stomach cringes at the thought, that's what. My friend Jeremy said there was ever such a good restaurant in the Red Huntsman at Bourton-on-the Hill. Don't you just love these place names, Steve? See, he's drooling already.' Steve looked impassive. 'They're Basque and do all those sort of fishy dishes. I say, Aggie, have you heard the one about the fire at the Basque football game? They all rushed to get out of the stadium and all

got crushed in the exit and do you know what the moral of that is, my loves? Don't put all your Basques in one exit. Get it?'

'Stop wittering,' said Agatha. 'All right. We'll try the place, although if it's that good they may not have a table left.'

But it turned out the Red Huntsman had just received a cancellation before they arrived. The dining-room was elegant and comfortable and the food was excellent. Agatha asked Steve to tell her about his work and then regretted it bitterly as he began a long and boring description of his job in particular and computers in general.

Even Roy grew weary of his friend's monologue and cut across it, saying, 'What's all this about you being involved in a death, Aggie?'

'It was an awful mistake,' said Agatha. 'I entered a spinach quiche in a village competition. One of the judges ate it and died of poisoning.'

Roy's eyes filled with laughter. 'You never could cook, Aggie dear.'

'It wasn't my cooking,' protested Agatha. 'I bought a quiche from The Quicherie in Chelsea and entered that.'

Steve looked at her solemnly. 'But surely in these sort of home-baking competitions you're supposed to cook the thing yourself?'

'Yes, but –'

'But she was trying to pull a fast one as usual,' crowed Roy. 'Who was the judge and what did he die of?'

'Mr Cummings-Browne. Cowbane poisoning.'

'Struck down by a bane of cows? What is it? One of those peculiar agricultural diseases like swine fever or violet-root rot?'

'No, cowbane is a plant. It must have got mixed up in the spinach that Mr Economides of the deli used.'

Steve put down his fork and looked gravely at Agatha. 'So you murdered him.'

Roy screeched with laughter. He kicked his heels in the air, fell off the chair and rolled around the dining-room carpet, holding his stomach. The other diners studied him with the polite frozen smiles the English use for threatening behaviour.

'Oh, Aggie,' wheezed Roy when his friend had picked up his chair and thrust him back into it, 'you are a one.'

Patently Agatha explained the whole sorry business. It had been a sad accident.

'What do they think about you in the village?' asked Roy, mopping his streaming eyes. 'Are they calling you the Borgia of the Cotswolds?'

'It's hard to know what they think,' said Agatha. 'But I had better sell up. The whole move to Carsely was a terrible mistake.'

'Wait a minute,' said Steve. He carefully extracted a piece of lobster and popped it in his mouth. 'Where does this cowbane grow?'

‘In the West Midlands, and this, as the police pointed out, is the West Midlands.’

Steve frowned. ‘Does it grow in farms among the regular vegetables?’

Agatha searched her memory for what she had read about cowbane in the book in Foyle’s. ‘It grows in marshy places.’

‘I’ve heard the Cotswolds are famous for asparagus and strawberries . . . oh, and plums and things like that,’ said Steve. ‘I read up on it. But not spinach. And how could a marshy plant get in among a field of spinach?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Agatha, ‘but as I recall, it grows in other parts of the British Isles as well. I mean, the stuff at Nine Elms comes from abroad and all over the place in Britain.’

Steve shook his head slowly, his mouth open as he contemplated another piece of lobster. ‘Are you wondering if there’s an aargh in the month?’ demanded Roy. ‘You look like one of those faces at the fairground where you’ve to try and toss a ball into the mouth.’

‘It just doesn’t happen,’ said Steve.

‘What?’

‘Well, look here. A field of spinach is harvested. For some reason a marshy plant gets caught up with the spinach. Right? So how come no one else dropped dead? How come it all got into one spinach quiche? Just the one. Surely a bit of it would have got into *another* quiche. Surely another one of this Economides’s customers would bite the dust.’

‘Oh, the police will have looked into all that,’ said Roy a trifle testily. He felt Steve was taking up too much of the conversation.

Steve shook his head slowly from side to side.

‘Look,’ said Agatha. ‘Be sensible. Who was to know I would walk off in a huff and leave that quiche? Who would even know that the Cummings-Brownes would take it home? The vicar could have taken it and given it to some old-age pensioner. Lord Pendlebury could have taken it.’

‘When did you take your quiche to the competition?’ asked Steve.

‘The night before,’ said Agatha.

‘So it was just lying there all night, unattended, in this hall? Someone could have baked another quiche with cowbane in it and substituted it for Agatha’s quiche.’

‘We’re back to motive,’ said Agatha. ‘So say someone substituted a poisoned quiche for mine. Who was to know Cummings-Browne would take it? I didn’t even know I was going to walk off and leave it until the last minute.’

‘But it could have been meant for you,’ said Steve. ‘Don’t you see? Even if you had won that competition, only a little slice was taken out for the judging, and then you would have taken the rest home.’ He leaned forward. ‘Who hates you enough?’

Agatha thought uneasily of Mrs Barr and then shrugged. 'This is ridiculous. Do you read Agatha Christie?'

'All the time,' said Steve.

'Well, so do I, but delightful as those detective stories are, believe me, murders are usually sudden and violent and take place in cities, some drunken lout of a husband bashing his wife to death. Don't you see, I would like it to be murder.'

'Yes, I can see that,' said Steve, 'because you have been exposed as a cheat.'

'Here, wait a minute –'

'But it all looks very odd.'

Agatha fell silent. If only she had never tried to win that stupid competition.

Again a feeling of loneliness assailed her as she paid the bill and ushered her guests out into the night. She had a whole weekend in front of her entertaining this precious pair, and yet their very presence emphasized her loneliness. Roy had no real affection for her of any kind. His friend had wanted to see rural England and so he was using her.

Roy pranced around the cottage, looking at everything. 'Very cute, Aggie,' was his verdict. 'Fake horse brasses! Tch! Tch! And all that farm machinery.'

'Well, what would you have?' said Agatha crossly.

'I dunno, sweetie. Looks like a stage set. Nothing of Aggie here.'

'Perhaps that's understandable,' said Steve. 'There are people who do not have personalities that transfer to interior decorating. You need to be a homebody.'

'You can go off people, you know,' commented Agatha waspishly. 'Off to bed with both of you. I'm tired. The village festivities don't begin until noon, so you can have a long lie-in.'

The next morning Roy took over the cooking when he found Agatha was about to microwave the sausages for breakfast. He whistled happily as he went about the preparations and Agatha told him he would make someone a good wife. 'More than you would, Aggie,' he said cheerfully. 'It's a wonder your health hasn't crumbled under a weight of microwaved curries.'

Steve came down wrapped in a dressing-gown, gold and blue stripes and with the badge of a cricket club on the pocket. 'He got it at a stall in one of the markets,' said Roy. 'Don't bother talking to him, Aggie. He doesn't really wake up until he's had a jug of coffee.'

Agatha read through the morning papers, turning the pages rapidly to see if there was anything further about the quiche poisoning, but there wasn't a word.

The morning passed amicably if silently and then they went out to the main street, Roy doing cartwheels down the lane past Mrs Barr's cottage. Agatha

saw the lace curtains twitch.

Steve took out a large notebook and began to write down all about the festivities, which started off with the crowning of the May Queen, a small pretty schoolgirl with a slimly old-fashioned figure. In fact all the schoolchildren looked like illustrations in some long-forgotten book with their innocent faces and underdeveloped figures. Agatha was used to seeing schoolgirls with busts and backsides. The Queen was drawn by the morris men in their flowered top hats, the bells at their knees jingling. Roy was disappointed in the morris dancers, possibly because, despite the flowered hats, they looked like a boozy rugby team and were led by a white-haired man who struck various members of the audience with a pig's bladder. 'Supposed to make you fertile,' said Steve ponderously and Roy shrieked with laughter and Agatha felt thoroughly ashamed of him.

They wandered around the stalls set up in the main street. Every one seemed to be selling wares in support of some charity or other. Agatha winced away from the home-baking stand. Roy won a tin of sardines at the tombola and got so carried away, he bought ticket after ticket until he managed to win a bottle of Scotch. There was a game of skittles which they all tried, a rendering of numbers from musicals by the village band, and then the morris dancers again, leaping up into the sunny air, accompanied by fiddle and accordion. 'Don't you know you are living in an anachronism?' said Steve ponderously, scribbling away in his notebook.

Roy wanted to try his luck at the tombola again and he and Steve went off. Agatha flicked through a pile of second-hand books on a stall and then looked sharply at the woman behind the stall. Mrs Cartwright!

She was, as Agatha had already noticed, a gypsy-looking woman, swarthy-skinned among all the pink-and-white complexions of the villagers. Her rough hair hung down her back and her strong arms were folded across her generous bosom.

'Mrs Cartwright?' said Agatha tentatively.

The woman's dark eyes focused on her. 'Oh, you be Mrs Raisin,' she said. 'Bad business about the quiche.'

'I can't understand it,' said Agatha. 'I shouldn't have bought it, but on the other hand, how on earth would cowbane get into a London quiche?'

'London is full of bad things,' said Mrs Cartwright, straightening a few paperbacks that had tumbled over.

'Well, the result is that I will have to sell up,' said Agatha. 'I can't stay here after what happened.'

''Twas an accident,' said Mrs Cartwright placidly. 'Reckon you can't go running off after an accident. Besides, I was ever so pleased a London lady should think she had to buy one to compete with me.'

Agatha gave her an oily smile. 'I did hear you were the best baker in the

Cotswolds. Look, I would really like to talk about it. May I call on you?’

‘Any time you like,’ said Mrs Cartwright lazily. ‘Judd’s cottage, beyond the Red Lion on the old Station Road.’

Roy came prancing up and Agatha moved on quickly, afraid that Roy’s chattering and posturing might put Mrs Cartwright off. Agatha began to feel better. Mrs Cartwright hadn’t accused her of cheating, nor had she been nasty.

But then, after Steve and Roy had rejoined her and as they were leaving the May Day Fair, they came face to face with Mrs Barr. She stopped in front of Agatha, her eyes blazing. ‘I am surprised you have the nerve to show your face in the daylight,’ she said.

‘What’s got your knickers in a twist, sweetie?’ asked Roy.

‘This woman’ – Mrs Barr bobbed her head in Agatha’s direction – ‘caused the death of one of our most respected villagers by poisoning him.’

‘It was an accident,’ said Roy, before Agatha could speak. ‘Bugger off, you old fright. Come on, Aggie.’

Mrs Barr stood opening and shutting her mouth in silent outrage as Roy propelled Agatha past her.

‘Miserable old cow,’ said Roy as they turned into Lilac Lane. ‘What got up her nose?’

‘I lured her cleaning woman away.’

‘Oh, that’s a capital crime. Murder has been committed for less. Take us to Bourton-on-the-Water, Aggie. Steve wants to see it and we don’t need to eat yet after that enormous breakfast.’

Agatha, although she still felt shaken by Mrs Barr, patiently got out the car. ‘Stow-on-the-Wold,’ screamed Roy a quarter of an hour later as Agatha was about to bypass that village. ‘We must see it.’ So Agatha turned round and went into the main square, thrusting her car head first into the one remaining parking place, which a family car had been just about to reverse into.

She had never seen so many morris dancers. They seemed to be all over the place and of a more energetic type than the ones in Carsely as they waved their handkerchiefs and leaped in the air like so many Nijinskys.

‘I think,’ said Roy, ‘that if you’ve seen one lot of morris dancers, you’ve seen the lot. Put away your notebook, Steve, for God’s sake.’

‘It is all very interesting,’ said Steve. ‘Some say that morris dancing was originally Moorish dancing. What do you think?’

‘I think . . . yawn, yawn, *yawn*,’ said Roy pettishly. ‘Let’s go and sample the cosmopolitan delights of Bourton-on-the-Water.’

Bourton-on-the-Water is certainly one of the prettiest villages in the Cotswolds, with a glassy stream running through the centre under stone bridges. The trouble is that it is a famous beauty spot and always full of tourists. That May Day they were out in force and Agatha thought longingly of the peaceful streets of London. There were tourists everywhere: large

family parties, sticky crying children, busloads of pensioners from Wales, muscle-bound men with tattoos from Birmingham, young Lolitas in white slit skirts and white high-heeled shoes, tottering along, eating ice cream and giggling at everything in sight. Steve wanted to see all that was on offer, from the art galleries to the museums, which depressed Agatha, because a lot of the village museum displays were items from her youth and she felt only really old things should go into museums. Then there was the motor museum, also jammed with tourists, and then, unfortunately, someone had told Steve about Birdland at the end of the village and so they had to go there, and stare at the birds and admire the penguins. Agatha had often wondered what it would be like to live in Hong Kong or Tokyo. Now she knew. People everywhere. People *eating* everywhere: ice cream, chocolate bars, hamburgers, chips, munch, munch, munch went all those jaws. They seemed to enjoy being in such a crowd, except the many small children who were getting tired and bawled lustily, dragged along by indifferent parents.

The air was turning chilly when Steve with a sigh of pleasure at last closed his notebook. He looked at his watch. 'It's only half-past three,' he said. 'We can make it to Stratford-on-Avon. I must see Shakespeare's birthplace.'

Agatha groaned inwardly. Not so long ago Agatha Raisin would have told him to forget it, that she was bored and tired, but the thought of Carsely and Mrs Barr made her meekly walk with them to the car-park and set out for Stratford.

She parked in the multi-storey Birthplace Car-Park and plunged into the crowds of Stratford with Roy and Steve. So many, many people, all nationalities this time. They shuffled along with the crowds through Shakespeare's home, a strangely soulless place, thought Agatha again. It had been so restored, so *sanitized* that she could not help feeling that some of the old pubs in the Cotswolds had more of an air of antiquity.

Then down to look at the River Avon. Then a search by Steve for tickets to the evening's showing of *King Lear* by the Royal Shakespeare Company which, to Agatha's dismay, he managed to get.

In the darkness of the theatre with her stomach rumbling, for she had had nothing to eat since breakfast, Agatha's mind turned back to the . . . murder? It would surely do no harm to find out a little more about Mr Cummings-Browne. Then Mrs Simpson had found the body. How had Mrs Cummings-Browne reacted? The first act passed unheeded before Agatha's eyes. Two large gins at the interval made her feel quite tipsy. Once more, she imagined solving the case and earning the respect of the villagers. By the last act, she was fast asleep and all the glory of Shakespeare fell on her deaf ears.

It was only as they were walking out – crowds, more crowds – that Agatha realized she had nothing at home for them to eat and it was too late to find a restaurant. But Steve, who had, at one point of the day, been lugging a carrier



bag, said he planned to cook them dinner and had bought fresh trout at Birdland.

‘You really ought to dig in your heels and stay here,’ said Roy, as he got out of the car in front of Agatha’s cottage. ‘No people. Quiet. Calm. You’re lucky you don’t live in a tourist village. Do any tourists come at all?’

‘The Red Lion’s got rooms, I believe,’ said Agatha. ‘A few let out their cottages. But not many come.’

‘Let’s have a drink while Steve does the cooking,’ said Roy. He looked around Agatha’s living-room. ‘If I were you, I would junk all those cutesy mugs and fake horse brasses and farm machinery, and get some paintings and bowls of flowers. It’s not the thing to have a fire-basket, particularly a fake medieval one. You’re supposed to burn the logs on the stone hearth.’

‘I dig my heels in over the fire-basket,’ said Agatha, ‘but I might get rid of the other stuff.’ She thought, They collect a lot for charity in this village. I could load up the car with the stuff on Tuesday and take it along to the vicarage. Ingratiate myself a bit there.

Dinner was excellent. I must learn to cook, thought Agatha. I’ve got little else to do. Steve opened his notebook. ‘Tomorrow, if you do not think it too much, Agatha, I would like to visit Warwick Castle.’

Agatha groaned. ‘Warwick Castle’s like Bourton-on-the Water, wall-to-wall tourists from one year’s end to the other.’

‘But it says here,’ said Steve, fishing out a guidebook, ‘that it is one of the finest medieval castles in England.’

‘Well, I suppose that’s true but –’

‘I would very much like to go.’

‘All right! But be prepared for an early start. See if we can get in there before the crowds.’

Warwick Castle is a tourist’s dream. It has everything from battlements and towers to a torture chamber and dungeon. It has rooms peopled by Madame Tussaud’s waxworks depicting a Victorian house party. It has signs in the drive saying: DRIVE SLOWLY, PEACOCKS CROSSING. It has a rose garden and a peacock garden. It takes a considerable amount of time to see everything and Steve wanted to see everything. With unflagging energy and interest, he climbed up the towers and along the battlements and down to the dungeons. Oblivious to the tourists crowding behind, he lingered in the state rooms, writing busily in his notebook. ‘Are you going to write about all this?’ asked Agatha impatiently.

Steve said only in letters. He wrote a long letter home each week to his mother in Sydney. Agatha hoped they could finally escape, but the tyranny of the notebook was replaced by the tyranny of the video camera. Steve insisted they all climb back up to the top of one of the towers and he filmed Agatha

and Roy standing at the edge leaning against the crenellated parapet.

Agatha's feet were aching by the time she climbed back in her car. They had lunch at a pub in Warwick and Agatha, numb with fatigue, found herself agreeing to take them round the Cotswold villages they had not seen, the ones whose names intrigued Steve, like Upper and Lower Slaughter, Aston Magna, Chipping Campden, and so on. Steve found shops open in Chipping Campden and bought groceries, saying he would cook them dinner that evening.

She was so tired when dinner was over that all Agatha wanted to do was go to bed, but it turned out that Steve's camera was the type you could plug in to the TV and show the film taken.

Agatha leaned back and half-closed her eyes. She hated seeing herself on film anyway. Then she heard Roy exclaim, 'Wait a minute. At Warwick Castle. On top of the tower. That woman. Look, Aggie. Run it again, Steve.'

The film flickered back and then began to roll again. There she was with Roy on top of the tower. Roy was giggling and clowning. The camera then slowly panned over the surrounding countryside, inch, it seemed, by inch, Steve obviously trying to avoid the amateur's failing of camera swing. And then suddenly it focused on a woman, standing a little way from Agatha and Roy. She was a spinsterish creature in a tweed jacket, drooping tweed skirt and sensible shoes. But she was glaring at Agatha with naked venom in her eyes and her fingers were curled like claws. The film moved back to Agatha and Roy.

'Enter First Murderer,' said Roy. 'Anyone you know, Aggie?'

Agatha shook her head. 'I've never seen her before, not in the village anyway. Run it again.'

Again those hate-filled eyes loomed up. 'Perhaps it wasn't me she was glaring at,' said Agatha. 'Perhaps her husband had just come up the stairs.'

Steve shook his head. 'There was no one else there. I remember seeing just that woman when I was filming. Then, just as I'd finished, a whole lot of tourists appeared.'

'How odd.' Roy stared blankly at the television screen. 'How could she know you enough to hate you? What were we saying?'

'Roy was clowning,' said Agatha slowly. 'It's a pity you haven't any sound on that film, Steve.'

'I forgot. There is. Usually I don't bother about it and tape some music to go with the English travelogue and then send it home to my mother.'

'Turn the sound up,' said Roy eagerly.

Into the room came the sound of the wind on the top of the battlements. Then Roy's voice. 'Do you want Aggie to throw herself off the battlements like Tosca?' And Agatha saying, 'Oh, do give over, Roy. Gosh, it's cold here.'

And then, in sepulchral tones, Roy said, 'As cold as the grave into which you drove Mr Cummings-Browne with your quiche, Agatha.'

Agatha's voice was replying testily, 'He's not in a grave. He's scattered to the four winds on Salisbury Plain. Are you finished yet, Steve?'

Then Steve's voice saying, 'Just a bit longer,' and then the shot of the glaring woman.

'And you said nobody hated you!' mocked Roy. 'That one looked as if she wanted to kill you. Wonder who she is?'

'I'll photograph her from the screen,' said Steve, 'and send you a print. Might be an idea to find out. She must have known about the death of Cummings-Browne.'

Agatha sat silent for a few moments. She thought she would never forget that spinsterish face and those glaring eyes.

'Beddy-byes,' said Roy. 'Which train should we catch tomorrow?'

Agatha roused herself. 'Trains might not be very good on a holiday Monday. I'll run you to Oxford and take you both for lunch and you can get the train from there.'

She had thought she would be glad to see the last of the pair of them, but when she finally stood with them on Oxford station to say goodbye, she suddenly wished they weren't going.

'Come again,' she said. 'Any time.'

Roy planted a wet kiss on her cheek. 'We'll be back, Aggie. Super weekend.'

The guard blew his whistle, Roy jumped aboard to join Steve, and the train moved out of the station.

Agatha stood forlornly for several minutes, watching the train disappearing round the curve, before trailing out to the car-park. She felt slightly frightened and wished she had been able to go to London with them. Why had she ever left her job?

But home was waiting for her in Carsely, down in a fold of the Cotswold Hills, Carsely where she had disgraced herself, where she did not belong and never would.

## Chapter Five

Agatha loaded up the car with the toby jugs, pewter mugs, fake horse brasses and bits of farm machinery the next day and drove the short distance to the vicarage.

Mrs Simpson was busy cleaning the cottage. Agatha planned to talk to her over lunch. Perhaps it was because of the poisoning, but Mrs Simpson called Agatha Mrs Raisin and Agatha felt compelled to call her Mrs Simpson, not Doris. The cleaner was efficient and correct but exuded a certain atmosphere of wariness. At least she had not brought her own lunch.

Mrs Bloxby, the vicar's wife, answered the door herself. Frightened of a rebuff, Agatha gabbled out that she had brought some items she hoped the church might be able to sell to benefit some charity.

'How very good of you,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'Alf,' she called over her shoulder, 'Mrs Raisin has brought us some items for charity. Come and lend a hand.' Agatha was startled. Vicars should not be called plain Alf but something like Peregrine, Hilary, or Aloysius. The vicar appeared wearing an old gardening shirt and corduroy trousers.

All three carried the boxes into the vicarage living-room. Agatha took out a few of the items. 'My dear Mrs Raisin,' exclaimed Mrs Bloxby, 'are you sure? You could sell this stuff yourself for quite a bit of money. I don't mean the horse brasses, but the jugs are good and the farm-machinery pieces are genuine. This' – she held up a shiny instrument of torture – 'is a genuine mole trap. You don't see many of those around today.'

'No, I'll be happy if you get some money. But try to choose some charity which won't spend it all on cocktail parties or politics.'

'Yes, of course. We're very keen on supporting Cancer Research and Save the Children,' said the vicar. 'Perhaps you would like a cup of coffee, Mrs Raisin?'

'That would be nice.'

'I'll leave my wife to look after you. I have Sunday's sermons to prepare.'

'Sermons?'

'I preach in three churches.'

'Why not use the same sermon for all?'

'Tempting, but it would hardly show a sign of caring for the parishioners.'

The vicar retreated to the nether regions and his wife went off to the kitchen to make coffee. Agatha looked about her. The vicarage must be very old indeed, she thought. The window-frames sloped and the floor sloped. Here was no fitted carpet such as she had in her own cottage but old floor-boards polished like black glass and covered in the centre by a brightly coloured Persian rug. Logs smouldered in the cavernous fireplace. There was a bowl of pot-pourri on one small table. A vase of flowers stood on another, and there was a bowl of hyacinths at the low window. The chairs were worn, with – Agatha shifted her bottom experimentally – feather cushions. In front of her was a new coffee-table of the kind you buy in Do-It-Yourself stores and put together, and yet, covered as it was with newspapers and magazines, and the beginnings of a tapestry cushion-cover, it blended in with the rest of the room. Above her head were low beams black with age and centuries of smoke. There was a faint smell of lavender and wood-smoke mixed with the smells of hyacinths and pot-pourri.

Also, there was an air of comfort and *goodness* about the place. Agatha decided that the Reverend Bloxby was a rare bird in the much-maligned aviary of the Church of England – a man who believed what he preached. For the first time since she had arrived in Carsely, she felt unthreatened and, as the door opened, and the vicar's wife appeared, filled with a desire to please.

'I've toasted some teacakes as well,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'It's still so cold. I do get tired of keeping the fires burning. But of course you have central heating, so you don't have that problem.'

'You have a beautiful home,' said Agatha.

'Thank you. Milk and sugar?' Mrs Bloxby had a small, delicate, lined face and brown hair threaded with grey. She was slim and fragile with long, delicate hands, the sort of hands that portrait painters used to love to give their subjects.

'And how are you settling in, Mrs Raisin?'

'Not very well,' said Agatha. 'I may have to settle *out!*'

'Oh, because of your quiche,' said Mrs Bloxby tranquilly. 'Do try a teacake. I make them myself and it is one of the few things I do well. Yes, a horrible affair. Poor Mr Cummings-Browne.'

'People must think I am a dreadful person,' said Agatha.

'Well, it was unfortunate that wretched quiche should have cowbane in it. But a lot of cheating goes on in these village affairs. You're not the first.'

Agatha sat with a teacake dripping butter and stared at the vicar's wife. 'I'm not?'

'No, no. Let me see, there was Miss Tenby five years ago. An incomer. Set her heart on winning the flower-arranging competition. She ordered a basket of flowers from the florist over at St Anne's. Quite blatant about it. It was a very pretty display but the neighbours had seen the florist's van arriving and

so she was found out. Then there was old Mrs Carter. *She* bought her strawberry jam and put her own label on it and won. No one would ever have known if she had not got drunk in the Red Lion and bragged about it. Yes, your deception would have occasioned quite a lot of comment in the village, Mrs Raisin, had it not all happened before, or, for that matter, if the judging had been fair.'

'Do you mean Mr Cummings-Browne cheated?'

Mrs Bloxby smiled. 'Let us say he was apt to give prizes to favourites.'

'But if this was generally known, why do the villagers bother to enter anything at all?'

'Because they are proud of what they make and like to show it off to their friends. Besides, Mr Cummings-Browne judged competitions in neighbouring villages and it is estimated he had only one favourite in each. Also, there is no disgrace in losing. Alf often wanted to change the judge, but the Cummings-Brownes did give quite a lot to charity and the one year Alf was successful and got someone else to judge, the judge gave the prize to his sister, who did not even live in the village.'

Agatha let out a long slow breath. 'You make me feel less of a villain.'

'It was all very sad. You must have had a frightful time.'

To Agatha's horror, her eyes filled with tears and she dabbed at them fiercely while the vicar's wife looked tactfully away.

'But be assured' – the vicar's wife addressed the coffee-pot – 'that your deception did not occasion all that much comment. Besides, Mr Cummings-Browne was not popular.'

'Why?'

The vicar's wife looked evasive. 'Some people are not, you know.'

Agatha leaned forward. 'Do you think it was an accident?'

'Oh, yes, for if it were not, then one would naturally suspect the wife, but Vera Cummings-Browne was a most devoted wife, in her way. She has a great deal of money and he had very little. They have no children. She could have walked off and left him any time at all. I had to help comfort her on the day of her husband's death. I have never seen a woman more grief-stricken. It is best to put the whole matter behind you, Mrs Raisin. The Carsely Ladies' Society meets tonight here at the vicarage at eight o'clock. Do come along.'

'Thank you,' said Agatha humbly.

'Have you got rid of that dreadful woman?' asked the vicar ten minutes later when his wife walked into his study.

'Yes. I don't think she's really so bad and she is genuinely suffering about the quiche business. I've invited her to the women's get-together tonight.'

'Then thank goodness I won't be here,' said the vicar and bent over his

sermon.

Agatha felt cleansed of sin as she drove back to her cottage. She would go to church on Sunday and she would try to be a good person. She put a Healthy Fun Shepherd's Pie in the microwave for Mrs Simpson's lunch.

Mrs Simpson picked at the hot mess tentatively with her fork and all Agatha's saintliness evaporated. 'It's not poisoned,' she snapped.

'It's just I don't much care for frozen stuff,' said Mrs Simpson.

'Well, I'll get you something better next time. Was Mrs Cummings-Browne very upset about the death of her husband?'

'Oh, dreadful it was,' said Doris Simpson. 'Real shook, her were. Numb with shock at first and then crying and crying. Had to fetch the vicar's wife to help.'

Guilt once more settled on Agatha's soul. She felt she had to get out. She walked to the Red Lion and ordered a glass of red wine and sausage and chips.

Then she remembered her intention of calling on Mrs Cartwright. It all seemed a bit pointless now but it was something to do.

Judd's cottage where the Cartwrights lived was a broken-down sort of place. The garden gate was hanging on its hinges and in the weedy front garden was parked a rusting car. Agatha looked this way and that, wondering how the car had got in, but could see no way it could have been achieved short of lifting it bodily over the fence.

The glass pane on the front door was cracked and stuck in place with brown paper tape. She rang the bell and nothing happened. She rapped at the side of the door. Mrs Cartwright's blurred figure loomed up on the other side of the glass.

'Oh, it's you,' she said when she opened the door. 'Come in.'

Agatha followed her into a sour-smelling cluttered living-room. The furniture was soiled and shiny with wear. There was a two-bar electric fire in the grate with imitation plastic coals on the top. A bunch of plastic daffodils hung over a chipped vase on the window. There was a cocktail cabinet in one corner ornamented with pink glass and strips of pink fluorescent lighting.

'Drink?' asked Mrs Cartwright. Her coarse hair was wound up in pink foam rollers and she was wearing a pink wrap-over dress which gaped when she moved to reveal a dirty petticoat.

'Thank you,' said Agatha, wishing she had not come.

Mrs Cartwright poured two large glasses of gin and then tinged them pink with Angostura. Agatha looked nervously at her own glass, which was smeared with lipstick at the rim.

Mrs Cartwright sat down and crossed her legs. Her feet were encased in

dirty pink slippers. All this pink, thought Agatha nervously. She looks like some sort of debauched Barbara Cartland.

‘Did you know Mr Cummings-Browne well?’ asked Agatha.

Mrs Cartwright lit a cigarette and studied Agatha through the smoke. ‘A bit,’ she said.

‘Did you like him?’

‘Some. Can’t think straight at the moment.’

‘Because of the death?’

‘Because of the bingo over at Evesham. John, that’s my husband, he’s cut off my money on account he doesn’t want me to go there. Men are right bastards. I brought up four kids and now they’ve left home and I want a bit o’ fun, all he does is grumble. Yes, give me a bit o’ money for the bingo and I can ’member most things.’

Agatha fished in her handbag. ‘Would twenty pounds help?’

‘Would it ever!’

Agatha passed the money over. Then there came the sound of the front door being opened. Mrs Cartwright thrust the note down into her bosom, grabbed Agatha’s glass and ran with that and her own to the kitchen.

‘Ella?’ called a man’s voice.

The door opened and a strongly built ape-like man walked in just as his wife came back from the kitchen. ‘Who’s she?’ he demanded, jerking a thumb at Agatha. ‘I told you not to let them Jehovahs in.’

‘This is Mrs Raisin from down Lilac Lane, called social-like.’

‘What do you want?’ he snarled.

Agatha stood up. Mrs Cartwright’s large dark eyes flashed a warning. ‘I am collecting for charity,’ said Agatha.

‘Then you can bugger off. Haven’t got a penny to spare. *She’s* seen to that.’

‘Sit down, John, and shut up. I’ll see Mrs Raisin out.’

Agatha nervously edged past John Cartwright. Mrs Cartwright opened the front door. ‘Come tomorrow,’ she whispered. ‘Three in the afternoon.’

Was there some sinister mystery or had she just been conned out of twenty pounds? Agatha walked thoughtfully down the road.

When she got back to her cottage, Mrs Simpson was hard at work in the bedrooms. Agatha washed a load of clothes and carried them out to the back garden where there was one of those whirligig devices for hanging clothes. Feeling more relaxed than she had for some time and quite domesticated, Agatha pegged out the clothes. As she moved around to the other side of the whirligig, she saw Mrs Barr. She was leaning on her garden fence, staring straight at Agatha with a look of cold dislike on her face. Agatha finished pegging the clothes, raised two fingers at Mrs Barr and went indoors.

‘Post came,’ shouted Mrs Simpson from upstairs. ‘I put it on the kitchen table.’



Agatha noticed a flat brown envelope for the first time. She tore it open. There was a large print of the woman on the tower at Warwick Castle. Agatha shuddered. Those staring eyes, that hatred reminded her of Mrs Barr. Pinned to the enlargement was a note: ‘Thank you for a splendid weekend, Steve.’

She put the photograph away in the kitchen drawer, feeling even after she had closed the drawer that those eyes were still staring at her.

Overcome by the need for some escapist literature, she drove down to Moreton-in-Marsh, swearing under her breath as she remembered it was market day. By driving round and round the car-park, she was able to secure a place when some shopper drove off.

Walking through the Old Market Place, as the new mini shopping arcade was called, she crossed the road and walked between the crowded stalls to the row of shops on the far side where she knew there was a second-hand bookshop. In the back room were rows and rows of paperbacks. She bought three detective stories – one Ruth Rendell, one Colin Dexter, and one Colin Watson – and then returned to her car. She flipped open the Colin Watson one and was caught by the first page. Oh, the joys of detective fiction. Time rolled past as Agatha sat in the carpark and read steadily. Finally it dawned on her that it was ridiculous to sit reading in a car-park when she had the comfort of her own home and so she drove back to Carsely just in time to meet Bill Wong, who was standing on her doorstep.

‘Now what?’ demanded Agatha uneasily.

Bill smiled. ‘Just called to see how you were.’

At first Agatha felt gratified as she unlocked the door and let herself in, picking up the other key from the hall floor where it had fallen when Mrs Simpson had popped it through the letterbox. Then she felt a twinge of unease. Could Bill Wong be checking up on her for any reason?

‘Coffee?’ she asked.

‘Tea will do.’ In the sitting-room, Bill looked slowly around. ‘Where did all the bits and pieces go?’

‘I didn’t think they were *me*,’ said Agatha, ‘so I gave them to the church to sell for charity.’

‘What is *you* if toby jugs and farm machinery are not?’

‘Don’t know,’ mumbled Agatha. ‘Something a bit more homy.’

‘The lighting’s wrong,’ said Bill, looking at the spotlights on the beams. ‘Spots are out.’

‘You sound like someone talking about acne,’ snapped Agatha. ‘And why is everyone suddenly so arty-farty about interior decoration these days?’

‘Ah, your friends who came at the weekend, the prancing one and the one with the cowboy boots?’

‘You’ve been spying on me!’

‘Not I. I was off duty and took a girlfriend to Bourton-on-the-Water. A

great mistake. I'd forgotten about the holiday crowds.'

'I can't imagine you having a girlfriend.'

'Oh! Why?'

'I don't know. I always imagine you as never being off duty.'

'In any case,' said Bill, 'I hope you haven't decided to become the Miss Marple of Carsely and are still trying to prove accident as murder.'

Agatha opened her mouth to tell him about Mrs Cartwright and then decided against it. He would criticize her for interfering and he would point out, probably correctly, that Mrs Cartwright had nothing to tell and was simply out for money.

Instead she said, 'An odd thing happened at Warwick Castle. Steve, the young man with the cowboy boots, took a video film of me and Roy, that's the other young man, on the top of one of the towers. He showed the video on television in the evening and there on the tower was this woman glaring at me with hatred.'

'Interesting. But you could have jostled her on the stairs or trodden on her foot.'

'He took a photograph from the television set and it's quite clear, and we were talking about the death when he filmed. Would you like to see it?'

'Yes, might be someone I know.'

Agatha brought in the print and handed it to him. He studied it carefully. 'No one I've seen before,' he said, 'but if you took that nasty look off her face, she would look like hundreds of other women in the Cotswold villages: thin, spinsterish, wispy hair, indeterminate features, false teeth . . .'

'How do you know about the false teeth, Sherlock?'

'You can always tell by the drooping corners of the mouth and by the way the jaw sags. Mind if I keep this?'

'Why?' demanded Agatha.

'Because I might find out who it is and do you a favour by revealing to you that Miss Prim here was merely offended by your friends or perhaps you reminded her of someone she hated in her past, and then you can be easy.'

'That is kind of you,' said Agatha gruffly. 'I'm beginning to get edgy what with her next door glaring at me over the garden fence because I took her car away.'

'I wouldn't worry about her. Taking someone's cleaning woman away is like mugging them. The trouble with businesswomen like yourself, Mrs Raisin, is that your normally very active brain has nothing left to feed on but trivia. After a few months, believe me, you will settle down and get involved in good works.'

'Heaven forbid,' said Agatha with a shudder.

'Why? Had I suggested bad works, would you have been pleased?'

'I'm going to a meeting of the Carsely Ladies' Society at the vicarage

tonight,' said Agatha.

'That should be fun,' said Bill with his eyes twinkling. 'And now I'd better go. I'm on late duty.'

After a meal at the Red Lion – giant sausage and chips liberally doused with ketchup – Agatha walked to the vicarage and rang the bell. From inside came the hum of voices. She felt suddenly nervous and yes, a little timid.

Mrs Bloxby answered the door. 'Come in, Mrs Raisin. Most people have arrived.' She led Agatha into the sitting-room, where about fifteen women were seated. They stopped talking and looked curiously at Agatha. 'I'll introduce you,' said Mrs Bloxby. Agatha tried to remember the names but they kept sliding out of her mind as soon as each was announced. Mrs Bloxby offered Agatha tea, cakes and sandwiches. Agatha helped herself to a cucumber sandwich.

'Now, if we are all ready,' said Mrs Bloxby, 'our chairwoman, Mrs Mason, will begin. The floor is yours, Mrs Mason.'

Mrs Mason, a large woman in a purple nylon dress and big white shoes like canoes, surveyed the room. 'As you know, ladies, our old people in the village do not get out much. I am appealing to any of you with cars to step in and volunteer to take some of them on an outing when you can manage it. I will read out the names of the old people and volunteer if you can manage some free time.'

There seemed to be no shortage of volunteers as Mrs Mason went through a list in her hand. Agatha looked around at the other women. There was something strangely old-fashioned about them with their earnest desire to help. All were middle-aged apart from a thin, pale-looking girl in her twenties who was seated next to Agatha. 'Ain't got no car,' she whispered to Agatha. 'Can hardly take them on me bike.'

'And now,' said Mrs Mason, 'last but not least, we have old Mr and Mrs Boggle at Culloden.'

There was a long silence. The fire behind Mrs Mason's ample figure crackled cheerfully, spoons clinked against tea cups, jaws munched. No volunteers.

'Come now, ladies. Mr and Mrs Boggle would love a trip somewhere. Needn't be too far. Even just into Evesham and around the shops.'

Agatha thought she felt the vicar's wife's eyes resting on her. Her voice sounded odd in her own ears as she heard herself saying, 'I'll take them. Would Thursday be all right?'

Did she sense a feeling of relief in the room? 'Why, thank you, Mrs Raisin. How very good of you. Perhaps you do not know the village very well, but Culloden is number 28, Moreton Road, on the council estate. Shall we say

nine o'clock on Thursday, and I shall take it on myself to tell Mr and Mrs Boggle?'

Agatha nodded.

'Good. They will be *so* pleased. Now, as you know, next week we are to be hosted by the Mircester Ladies' Society and they have promised us an exciting time. I will pass around a book and sign your names in it if you wish to go. Retford Bus Company is giving us a bus for the day.'

The book was passed round. After some hesitation, Agatha signed her name. It would be something to do.

'Right,' said Mrs Mason. 'The coach will leave from outside here at eleven in the morning. I am sure we will all be awake by that time.' Dutiful laughter. 'And so I will get our secretary, Miss Simms, to read out the minutes of our last meeting in case any of you missed it.'

To Agatha's surprise, the young girl next to her rose and went to face the company. In a droning nasal voice she read out the minutes. Agatha stifled a yawn. Then the treasurer gave a lengthy report of money raised at the last fête in aid of Cancer Research.

Agatha was nearly asleep when she heard her own name. The treasurer had been replaced by Mrs Bloxby. 'Yes,' said the vicar's wife, 'when our new member, Mrs Raisin, came with boxes and boxes of stuff and gave them all away to be sold for charity, I thought I would show you some of the items. I think they warrant a special sale.'

Agatha felt gratified as oohs and ahs greeted the tobyjugs and bits of burnished farm machinery. 'Reckon I'd buy some o' that meself,' said one of the women.

'I am glad you share my enthusiasm,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'I suggest we should take the school hall for the tenth of June, that's a Saturday, and put these items on display. The week before the sale, we will have a special pricing meeting. That will also give us time to find some extra items. Mrs Mason, can I ask you to run the tea-room as usual?'

Mrs Mason nodded.

'Mrs Raisin, perhaps you might like to take command of the main stall?'

'Tell you what,' said Agatha. 'I'll auction them. I'll be auctioneer. People always pay more when they are bidding against each other.'

'What a good idea. All in favour?' Hands were raised.

'Excellent. The money will go to Save the Children. Perhaps, if we are lucky, some of the local papers might put in an item.'

'I'll see to that,' said Agatha, feeling better by the minute. This was like old times.

Her happiness was dimmed when the business was over; the women were gathering up their coats and handbags when Miss Simms nudged her and said, 'Better you than me.'

‘You mean the auction?’

‘Naw, them Boggles. Grouchiest old miseries this side o’ Gloucester.’

But somehow Mrs Bloxby was there and had heard the remark. She smiled into Agatha’s eyes and said, ‘What a good deed to give the Boggles an outing. Old Mrs Boggle has bad arthritis. It will mean so very much to them.’

Agatha felt weak and childlike before the simple, uncomplicated goodness in Mrs Bloxby’s eyes and filled again with that desire to please.

And the women as they were leaving spoke to her of this and that and not one mentioned quiche.

With a feeling of belonging, Agatha walked home. Lilac Lane was beginning to live up to its name. Lilac trees, heavy with blossom, scented the evening air. Wisteria hung in purple profusion over cottage doors.

Must do something about my own garden, thought Agatha.

She unlocked and opened her front door and switched on the light. One sheet of paper lay on the doormat, the message scrawled on it staring up at her: ‘Stop noseyparking, you innerfering old bich.’

Picking it up with the tips of her fingers, Agatha stared at it in dismay. For the first time she realized how very quiet the village was in the evening. She was surrounded by silence, a silence that seemed ominous, full of threat.

She dropped the note into the rubbish bin and went up to bed, taking the brass poker with her, propping it up by the bedside where she could reach it easily.

Old houses creak and sigh as they settle down for the night. For a long time Agatha lay awake, starting at every sound, until she suddenly fell asleep, one hand resting on the knob of the poker.

## Chapter Six

The next morning, rough winds were shaking the darling buds of May. Sunlight streamed in Agatha's windows. It was a day of movement and bright, sharp, glittering colour. She took the threatening note out of the rubbish. Why not show this to Bill Wong? What did it mean? She had not been doing any investigating to speak of. But he would ask a lot of questions and she might slip up and tell him of her visit to Mrs Cartwright and that Mrs Cartwright had told her to call again.

She smoothed out the note and tucked it in with the cookery books. Perhaps she should keep it just in case.

After breakfast, there was a knock at her door. She had a little scared feeling it might be Mrs Barr. Damn the woman! She was nothing but a warped middle-aged frump, and she should not cause a stalwart such as Agatha Raisin any trouble at all.

But it was Mrs Bloxby who stood there, and behind her, to Agatha's dismay, Vera Cummings-Browne.

'May we come in?' asked Mrs Bloxby.

Agatha led the way into the kitchen, bracing herself for tears and recriminations. Mrs Bloxby refused Agatha's offer of coffee and said, 'Mrs Cummings-Browne has something to say to you.'

Vera Cummings-Browne addressed the table-top rather than Agatha. 'I have been most distressed, most upset about the death of my husband, Mrs Raisin. But I am now in a calmer frame of mind. I do not blame you for anything. It was an accident, a strange and unfortunate accident.' She raised her eyes. 'You see, I have always believed that when one dies, it is *meant*. It could have been a car driven by a drunken driver which mounted the pavement. It could have been a piece of fallen masonry. The police pathologist felt that Reg could have survived the accidental poisoning had he been stronger. But he had high blood pressure and his heart was bad. So be it.'

'I am so very sorry,' said Agatha weakly. 'How very generous of you to call on me.'

'It was my Christian duty,' said Mrs Cummings-Browne.

Behind the mask of her face, which Agatha hoped was registering sorrow, sympathy, and concern, her mind was rattling away at a great rate. 'So be it . . .

. Christian duty?’ How very *stogy*. But then Mrs Cummings-Browne buried her face in her hands and wept, gasping through her sobs, ‘Oh, Reg, I do miss you so. Oh, Reg!’

Mrs Bloxby led the weeping Mrs Cummings-Browne out. No, thought Agatha, the woman was genuinely broken up. Mrs Cummings-Browne had forgiven her. All Agatha had to do was to get on with life and forget about the whole thing.

She set about phoning up the editors of local newspapers to raise publicity for the auction. Local editors were used to timid, pleading approaches from ladies of the parish. Never before had they experienced anything like Agatha Raisin on the other end of the phone. Alternately bullying and wheedling, she left them with a feeling that something only a little short of the crown jewels was going to be auctioned. All promised to send reporters, knowing they would have to keep their word, for Agatha threatened each that she would phone on the morning of the auction to see if they had indeed dispatched someone.

That passed the morning happily. But by the afternoon and after a snack of Farmer Giles’ Steak and Kidney Pie (‘Suitable for Microwaves’), Agatha found her steps leading her in the direction of the Cartwrights’.

Mrs Cartwright answered the door herself, her hair back in pink rollers, her body in a pink dressing-gown.

‘Come in,’ she said. ‘Drink?’

Agatha nodded. Pink gin again. Where had Mrs Cartwright learned to drink pink gins? she wondered suddenly. Surely Bacardi Breezers, lager and lime, rum and Coke would have been more to her taste.

‘How was bingo?’ asked Agatha.

‘Not a penny,’ said Mrs Cartwright bitterly. ‘But tonight’s my lucky night. I saw two magpies in the garden this morning.’

Agatha reflected that as magpies were a protected species, one saw the wretched black-and-white things everywhere. Surely it would have been more of a surprise if Mrs Cartwright had not seen any magpies at all.

‘I wanted to know about Mr Cummings-Browne,’ said Agatha.

‘What, for example?’ Mrs Cartwright narrowed her eyes against the rising smoke from the cigarette she held in one brown hand.

From the living-room where they sat, Agatha could see through to the cluttered messy kitchen – hardly the kitchen of a dedicated baker.

‘Well, as you won the prize year after year, I thought you might have known him pretty well,’ she said.

‘As much as I know anyone in the village.’ Mrs Cartwright took a slug of her gin.

‘Do you bake a lot?’

‘Naw. Used to. Occasionally do some baking for Mrs Bloxby. Terrible

woman she is. Can't say no to her. Come in the kitchen and I'll show you.'

Dirty dishes were piled in the sink. A tattered calendar showing a picture of a blonde in nothing but a wisp of gauze and sandals leered down from the wall. But on a cleared corner of the kitchen table beside the half-empty milk bottle, the pat of butter smeared with marmalade, lay a tray of delicate fairy cakes. They looked exquisite. There was no doubt Mrs Cartwright could bake.

'So I'd make a quiche and get a tenner for it,' said Mrs Cartwright. 'Silly waste of time if you ask me. My husband doesn't like quiche. Used to make them for the Harveys and they'd sell them down at the shop for me. Went well, too. But I can't seem to find the time these days.' She tottered back to the living-room in her pink high-heeled mules.

Agatha decided to get down to some hard business. 'I paid you twenty pounds for information yesterday,' she said bluntly, 'information which I have not yet received.'

'I spent it.'

'Yes, but how you spent it or what you spent it on is not my affair,' snapped Agatha.

Mrs Cartwright put a finger to her brow. 'Now what was it? Dammit, my bloody memory's gone wandering again.'

Her eyes gleamed darkly as Agatha fished in her capacious handbag. Agatha held up a twenty. 'No, you don't,' she said as Mrs Cartwright reached for it. 'Information first. Is your husband liable to come in?'

'No, he's up at Martin's farm. He works there.'

'So what have you got to tell me?'

'I was surprised,' said Mrs Cartwright, 'when Mr Cummings-Browne died.'

'Oh, weren't we all,' commented Agatha sarcastically.

'I mean, I thought *he* would've murdered *her*.'

'What, why?'

'He spoke to me a bit. People are always telling me their troubles. It's because I'm the maternal type.' Mrs Cartwright yawned, reached inside her dressing-gown and scratched one of her generous bosoms. A smell of sour sweat came to Agatha's nostrils and she thought inconsequently how rare it was to meet a really dirty woman in these hygienic days. 'Couldn't stand Vera, Reg couldn't. She held the purse-strings and he said she made him jump through hoops or sit up and beg just to get some drinking money. The only money he had of his own was his pension and that didn't go very far. He used to say to me, "Ella," he'd say, "one day I'm going to wring that woman's neck and be rid of her for once and for all."'

Agatha looked bewildered. 'But he died, not her!'

'Maybe she got there first. She hated him.'

'But I had dinner with the pair of them and they seemed a devoted couple;



in fact, quite alike.'

'Naw, you could have a laugh with Reg, but Mrs Snobby was always turning her nose up at me. That was no accident. That was murder.'

'But how could she do it? I mean, it was my quiche.'

'Dunno, but I feel it here.' Mrs Cartwright struck her bosom and another waft of sweat floated across to Agatha's nostrils.

'Mrs Cummings-Browne called on me this morning,' said Agatha firmly, 'and forgave me. But she was broken up about her husband's death, quite genuinely so.'

'She acts in the Carsely Dramatic Society,' said Mrs Cartwright cynically, 'and bloody good she is, too. Right little actress.'

'No,' said Agatha stubbornly. 'I know when people are being straight with me, and you are not one of those people, Mrs Cartwright.'

'Told you what I know.' Mrs Cartwright stared at the twenty-pound note, which Agatha still held in her hand.

The broken gate outside creaked and Agatha started nervously. She did not want another confrontation with John Cartwright. She thrust the note at Mrs Cartwright. 'Look,' she said urgently, 'you know where to find me. If there's anything at all you can tell me, let me know.'

'I certainly will,' said Mrs Cartwright, looking happy now that she had the money in her possession.

Agatha was just leaving by stepping round the broken garden gate when she saw John Cartwright lumbering down the road. She hurried on, but he had seen her. He caught up with her and roughly seized her arm and swung her round. 'You've been snooping around about Cummings-Browne,' he snarled. 'Ella told me. I'm telling you for the last time, you go near her again and I'll break your neck. That fart Cummings-Browne got what was coming to him and so will you.'

Agatha wrenched her arm free and hurried on, her face flaming. She went straight home and put the threatening note in an envelope along with a letter and addressed it to Detective Constable Wong at Mircester Police Station. She felt sure now that John Cartwright had written that note.

As she returned from posting it, she saw a couple arriving at New Delhi, Mrs Barr's house. They turned and stared at her. They looked vaguely familiar. With a wrench of memory, Agatha realized they had been among the other diners in the Red Huntsman that evening when she had been discussing the 'murder' with Roy and Steve.

She went into her own cottage and stood in her sitting-room, looking about her. She had never furnished anything in her life before, living as she had in a succession of furnished rooms until she made her first real money, and then renting a furnished flat and finally buying one, but that too had been furnished, for she had bought the contents as well.

She screwed up her eyes and tried to visualize what she would like but no ideas came except that the three-piece suite annoyed her. She wanted something more in the lines of the vicarage living-room. Well, antiques could be bought, and that was as good a reason as any to get out of Carsely for the remainder of the day.

She drove to Cheltenham Spa and after cruising about that town's irritating and baffling one-way system until she got her bearings, she stopped a passer-by and asked where she could buy antique furniture. She was directed to a network of streets behind Montpelier Terrace. She drove there and managed to find a parking space in a private parking lot outside someone's house. Her first good find was in an old cinema now used as a furniture warehouse. She bought an old high-backed wing armchair in soft green leather and a chesterfield sofa with basketwork and soft dull-green cushions. Then, to the increasing delight of the salesman, who had feared it was going to be a slow day, she also bought a wide Victorian fruitwood chair, running her fingers appreciatively over the carving. She paid for the lot without a blink and said she would pick them up after the tenth of June. Agatha now planned to amaze the village by adding her living-room furniture to the sale. Two elegant lamps caught her eye as she was leaving and she purchased them as well. Agatha remembered when she was at school, she had vowed that when she had her first pay cheque, she would walk into a sweet-shop and buy all the chocolate she wanted. But by the time that happened, her desires had focused on a pair of purple high-heeled shoes with bows. She enjoyed having enough money to enable her to buy what she wanted.

Then, before she left Cheltenham, she went to Marks and Spencer and bought giant prawns in garlic butter and a packet of lasagne, both of which she could cook in the microwave. It was still not her own cooking, but a cut above what she could get at the village shop.

Later, after a good meal, she settled down to read a detective story, wondering idly whether she should take the television set up to the bedroom. The vicarage living-room did not boast a television set.

It was only when she was preparing for bed that she remembered the Boggles with a sinking heart. With any luck, they would not expect her to drive them about all day.

In the morning, she presented herself at the Boggles' home. Why Culloden? Were they Scottish?

But Mr Boggle was a small, spry, wrinkled man with a Gloucestershire accent and his wife, an old creaking harridan, was undoubtedly Welsh.

Agatha waited for either of the pair to say it was very kind of her, or to evince any sign of gratitude, but they both climbed into the back seat and Mr Boggle said, 'We're going to Bath.'

Bath! Agatha had been hoping for somewhere nearer, like Evesham.

‘It’s quite a bit away,’ she protested.

Mrs Boggle jabbed her in the shoulder with one horny forefinger. ‘You said you was takin’ us out, so take us.’

Agatha fished out her road atlas. The easiest would be to get on the Fosse Way to Cirencester and then on to Bath.

She heaved a sigh. It was a glorious day. Summer was edging its way into England. Hawthorn flowers were heavy with scent, pink and white along the winding road out of Carsely. On either side of the Fosse Way, obviously a Roman road, for it runs straight as an arrow up steep hills and down the other side, lay fields of oilseed rape, bright yellow, Van Gogh yellow, looking too vulgarly bright among the gentler colours of the English countryside. Queen Anne’s lace frothed along the roadside. There was no sound from the passengers in the back. Agatha began to feel more cheerful. Perhaps her ancient passengers would be content to go off on their own in Bath.

But in Bath, Agatha’s troubles started. The Boggles pointed out that they had no intention of walking from any car-park to the Pump Room where, it appeared, they meant to ‘take the waters’. It was Agatha’s duty to drive them there and then go and park the car herself. She sweated her way round the one-way system, congested with traffic, trying to turn a deaf ear to Mr Boggle’s comments of ‘Not a very good driver, are you?’

‘Well?’ demanded Mrs Boggle when they had reached the colonnaded entrance to the Pump Room. ‘Aren’t you going to help a body out?’

Mrs Boggle was small and round, dressed in a tweed coat and a long scarf that seemed to be inextricably wound around the seat-belt. She smelt very strongly of cheap scent. ‘Stop pushin’ me. You’re hurtin’ me,’ she grumbled as Agatha tried to release her from bondage. Her husband elbowed Agatha aside, produced a pair of nail scissors and hacked through the scarf. ‘Now look what you’ve done,’ moaned Mrs Boggle.

‘Quit your frettin’, woman,’ said Mr Boggle. He jerked a thumb at Agatha. ‘Her’ll buy you another one.’

Like hell, thought Agatha when she finally parked near the bus station. She deliberately took a long time returning to the Pump Room, an hour, in fact. She found the Boggles in the tearoom beside an empty coffee-pot and plates covered in cake crumbs.

‘So you’ve finally decided to show up,’ said Mr Boggle, handing her the bill. ‘You’re a fine one.’

‘The trouble is, no one don’t care nothing about old folks these days. All they want is discos and drugs,’ said Mrs Boggle. They both stared fiercely at Agatha.

‘Have you taken the waters yet?’ asked Agatha.

‘Going to now,’ said Mrs Boggle. ‘Help me up.’

Agatha raised her to her feet, gagging slightly at the wafts of cheap scent

and old body. The Boggles drank cups of sulphurous water. ‘Do you want to see the Roman Baths?’ asked Agatha, remembering Mrs Bloxby and determined to please. ‘I haven’t seen them.’

‘Well, we’ve seen them scores of times,’ whined Mrs Boggle. ‘We wants to go to Polly Perkins’ Pantry.’

‘What’s that?’

‘That’s where we’s having dinner.’

The Boggles belonged to that generation which still took dinner in the middle of the day.

‘It’s only ten to twelve,’ pointed out Agatha, ‘and you’ve just had coffee and cakes.’

‘But you’ve got to go and get the car,’ said Mr Boggle. ‘Pantry’s up in Monmouth Road. Can’t expect us to walk there. No consideration.’

The idea of a short break from the Boggles while she got the car prompted Agatha to accept her orders docilely. Again she took her time, returning to pick up the Boggles at one o’clock and ignoring their cries and complaints that Mrs Boggle’s joints were stiffening with all the waiting.

No one could accuse Agatha Raisin of having a delicate or refined palate, but she had a sharp eye for a rip-off and as soon as she sat down with the horrible pair in Polly Perkins’ Pantry, she wondered if they were soul mates of the Cummings-Brownes. Waitresses dressed in laced bodices and mob caps flitted about at great speed, therefore being able to ignore all the people trying to get served.

The menu was expensive and written in that twee kind of prose which irritated Agatha immensely. The Boggles wanted Beau Nash cod fritters to start – ‘sizzling and golden, on a bed of fresh, crunchy lettuce’ – followed by Beau Brummell escalopes of veal – ‘tender and mouthwatering, with a white wine sauce and sizzling aubergine sticks, tender new carrots, and succulent green peas.’ ‘And a bottle of champagne,’ said Mr Boggle.

‘I’m not made of money,’ protested Agatha hotly.

‘Champagne’s good for my arthrititis,’ quavered Mrs Boggle. ‘Not often we gets a treat, but if you’ goin’ to count every penny . . .’

Agatha caved in. Get them sozzled and they might sleep on the way home.

The waitresses were now grouped in a corner by the till, chatting and laughing. Agatha rose and marched over to them. ‘I have no intention of waiting for service. Get a move on,’ she snarled. ‘I want cheerful and polite and *fast* service *now*. And don’t give me those looks of dumb insolence. Jump to it!’

A now surly waitress followed Agatha over to her table and took the order. The champagne was warm when it arrived. Agatha cracked. She rose to her feet and glared at the pale, shy English faces of the other diners. ‘Why do you sit there and put up with this dreadful service?’ she howled. ‘You’re *paying*

for it, dammit.'

'You're right,' called a meek-looking little man. 'I've been here for half an hour and no one's come near this table.'

Cries of rage and frustration rose from the other diners. The manager was hurriedly summoned from his office. An ice bucket was produced like lightning. 'On the house,' muttered the manager, bending over Agatha. Waitresses flew backwards and forwards, serving the customers this time, long skirts swinging, outraged bosoms heaving under laced bodices, mob caps nodding.

'They'll be worn out by the time they get home,' said Agatha with a grin. 'Never moved so much in all their lives.'

Mrs Boggle speared a cod fritter and popped the whole thing in her mouth. 'We've never 'ad trouble afore,' she said through a spray of cod-flakes. 'Have we, Benjamin?'

'No, people respect *us*,' said Mr Boggle.

Agatha opened her mouth to blast the horrible pair when Mr Boggle added, 'Were you one o' his fancy women?'

She looked at him dumbfounded.

'Who?'

'Reg Cummings-Browne, him what you poisoned.'

'I didn't poison him,' roared Agatha and then dropped her voice as the other diners stared. 'It was an accident. And what the hell makes you think I was having an affair with Cummings-Browne?'

'You was seen up at Ella Cartwright's. Like to like, I allus say.'

'You mean Mrs Cartwright was having an affair with Cummings-Browne?'

'Course. Everybody knew that, 'cept her husband.'

'How long had this been going on?'

'Dunno. Must have gone off her, though, for he was arter some bit in Ancombe, or so I heard.'

'So Cummings-Browne *was* a philanderer,' said Agatha.

Enlivened by champagne, Mr Boggle suddenly giggled. 'Got his leg over half the county, if you ask me.'

Agatha's mind raced. She remembered having dinner with the Cummings-Brownes. She remembered Mrs Cartwright's name being mentioned and the sudden stillness between the pair. Then there were those sobbing women at the inquest.

'O' course,' said Mrs Boggle suddenly, 'we all knew it was you that was meant to be poisoned, if anyone.'

'Why would anyone want to poison me?' demanded Agatha.

'Look what you did to Mrs Barr. Lured Mrs Simpson away from her with promises of gold. Heard Mrs Barr down in Harvey's talking about it.'

'Don't try to tell me that Mrs Barr would try to poison me because I took

her cleaning woman away.'

'Why not? Reckon her has a point. Said you brought down the tone of the village.'

'Are you usually so rude to people who give up a day to take you out?' asked Agatha.

'I tell it like it is,' said Mrs Boggle proudly.

Agatha was about to retort angrily when she remembered herself saying exactly the same thing on several occasions. Instead she said, after they had demolished their main course, 'Do you want any pudding?'

Silly question. Of course they wanted pudding. Prince Regent fudge cake with ice cream – 'devilishly good'.

Agatha's mind returned to the problem of Cummings-Browne's death. Mr Cummings-Browne had been a judge at competitions in other villages. He had had favourites. Had those favourites been his mistresses? And what of the burning animosity of Mrs Barr? Was it all because of Mrs Simpson? Or did Mrs Barr enter home-baking, jam-making, or flower-arranging in the village competitions?

'Don't want coffee,' Mrs Boggle was saying. 'Goes straight for me bowels.'

Agatha paid the bill but did not leave a tip, free champagne or no free champagne.

'If you would both like to wait here,' she said, 'I'll get the car.' Freedom from this precious pair was close at hand. Agatha felt quite cheerful as she brought the car round.

As she was heading out of Bath, Mrs Boggle poked her in the shoulder. 'Here! Where you going?'

'Home,' said Agatha briefly.

'We wants to hear the band in the Parade Gardens,' said Mr Boggle. 'What sort of a day out is it if you can't hear the band?'

Only the thought of Mrs Bloxby's gentle face made Agatha turn the car round. The couple had to be deposited at the gardens while Agatha wearily parked the car again, a long way away, and then walked back. Deck chairs had to be found for the Boggles.

The sun shone, the band played its way through a seemingly endless repertoire as the afternoon wore on. Then the Boggles wanted afternoon tea at the Pump Room. Did they always eat so much? wondered Agatha. Or were they storing up food inside for some long hibernation before the next outing?

At last they allowed her to take them home. All went well until she reached the Fosse Way and again that horny finger prodded her back. 'I have ter pee,' said Mrs Boggle.

'Can't you wait until I reach Bourton-on-the-Water or Stow?' called Agatha over her shoulder. 'Bound to be public toilets there.'

‘I gotta go *now*,’ wailed Mrs Boggle.

Agatha pulled into the side of the road, bumping the car on to the grassy verge.

‘You’d best help her,’ said Mr Boggle.

Mrs Boggle had to be led into a field and behind the shelter of some bushes. Mrs Boggle produced toilet paper from her handbag. Mrs Boggle needed help getting her knickers down, capacious pink cotton knickers with elastic at the knee.

It was all very stomach-churning for Agatha, who felt quite green when she finally shepherded her charge back to the car. It would be a cold day in hell, thought Agatha, before she ever let herself in for a day like this again.

She felt quite limp and weepy when she arrived outside Culloden. ‘Why Culloden?’ she asked.

‘When we bought our council house,’ said Mr Boggle, ‘we went down to the nursery where they sell house signs. I wanted Rose Cottage, but she wanted Culloden.’

Agatha got out and heaved Mrs Boggle on to the pavement beside her husband. Then she fairly leaped back into the driving seat and drove off with a frantic crunching of gears.

Detective Constable Wong was waiting on Agatha’s doorstep.

‘Out enjoying yourself?’ he asked as Agatha let him into the house.

‘I’ve had a hellish time,’ said Agatha, ‘and I don’t want to talk about it. What brings you here?’

He sat down at the kitchen table and spread out the anonymous letter. ‘Have you any idea who sent this?’

Agatha plugged in the electric kettle. ‘I thought it might be John Cartwright. He’s been threatening me.’

‘And why should John Cartwright threaten you?’

Agatha looked shiftily. ‘I called on his wife. He didn’t seem to like it.’

‘And you were asking questions,’ said Bill.

‘Well, do you know that Cummings-Browne was having an affair with Ella Cartwright?’

‘Yes.’

Agatha’s eyes gleamed. ‘Well, there’s a motive . . .’

‘In desperately trying to prove this a murder, you are going to land into trouble. No one likes anyone poking into their private life. This note, now. It interests me. No fingerprints.’

‘Everyone knows about fingerprints,’ scoffed Agatha.

‘And everyone also knows that if you do not have a criminal record, there is no way the police can trace you through your fingerprints. The police are not going to fingerprint a whole village just because of one nasty letter. Then it was, I think, written by someone literate trying to sound semi-literate.’

‘How do you come by that?’

‘Even in the broadest Gloucestershire dialect, interfering comes out sounding just that, not “innerfering”. Might be interferin’ with the dropped *g*, but that’s all. Also, strangely enough, everyone appears to know how to spell bitch. Apart from the Cartwrights, who else have you been questioning?’

‘No one,’ said Agatha. ‘Except that I was discussing the murder in the Red Huntsman with my friends, and two friends of her next door were there.’

‘Not murder,’ he said patiently. ‘Accident. I’ll keep this note. I haven’t found anyone who recognizes the woman in your photograph. The reason I have called is to warn you, Agatha Raisin, not to go messing about in people’s lives, or soon there might be a real-live murder, with you as the corpse!’



## Chapter Seven

Agatha's figure, though stocky, had hitherto carried very little surplus fat. As she tried to fasten her skirt in the morning, she realized she had put on about an extra inch and a half around the waistline. In London, she had walked a lot, walking being quicker than sitting in a bus crawling through the traffic. But since she had come to Carsely, she had been using the car to go everywhere apart from short trips along the village. Carsely was not going to make Agatha Raisin let herself go!

She drove to a bicycle shop in Evesham and purchased a light, collapsible bicycle of the kind she could carry around in the boot of her car. She did not want to experiment cycling near the village until she felt she had remastered the knack. She had not cycled since the age of six.

She parked off the road next to one of the country walks, took out the little bicycle, and pushed it to the beginning of the grassy path. She mounted and wobbled off very nervously, climbed a small rise, and then, with a feeling of exhilaration, cruised downhill through pretty woods dappled with sunlight. After a few miles, she realized she was approaching the village, and with a groan, she turned back. Her well-shaped legs, although fairly sturdy with London walking, were not up to cycling the whole way back up the hill and so she got off and pushed. Clouds covered the sun very quickly and it began to rain, fine, soft, drenching rain.

In London, she could have gone into a bar or café and waited for the rain to stop, but there was nothing here but fields and woods and the steady drip of water from the trees above.

She thankfully reached her car and stowed away the bicycle. She was just moving off when a car passed her. She stared at it in amazement. Surely it was that rusting brown thing she had recently seen trapped in the Cartwrights' front garden. On impulse, she swung her own car round and set off in pursuit. Her quarry wound through narrow lanes, heading for Ancombe. Agatha tried to keep out of sight, but there were no other cars on the road. She could just make out that Mrs Cartwright was driving the rusty car.

As Agatha approached Ancombe, she noticed large signs and arrows directing drivers to the ANCOMBE ANNUAL FAIR. Mrs Cartwright appeared to be heading for it. Now there were other cars and Agatha let a

Mini get between her and Mrs Cartwright.

Mrs Cartwright parked her car in a large wet field. Agatha, ignoring a steward's waving arm, parked a good bit away. As abruptly as it had started, the rain stopped and the sun shone down. Feeling damp and creased, Agatha got out. There was no sign of Mrs Cartwright. Her car, an old brown Ford, Agatha noted as she passed it, was empty.

Agatha walked towards the fair and paid the ten pence admission charge and an additional ten pence for a programme. She flicked through it until she found the Home Baking Competition tent on the map in the centre.

Just as she was about to enter the tent, Agatha came face to face with Mrs Cartwright. 'What you doin' here?' demanded Mrs Cartwright suspiciously.

'How did you get your car out of the garden?' asked Agatha.

'Push the fence over, drive off, push the fence up again. Been like that for years, but will my John fix it? Nah. Why are you here?'

'I heard there was a fair on,' said Agatha vaguely. 'Are you entering anything?'

'Quiche,' said Mrs Cartwright laconically. She suddenly grinned. 'Spinach quiche. Better prizes here than you get at Carsely.'

'Think you'll win?'

'Bound to. Haven't any competition really.'

'Did Mr Cummings-Browne judge the home-baking here as well?'

'Nah. Dogs. Best of breed and all that. Look . . . ' Mrs Cartwright glanced furtively around. 'Want a bit of info?'

'I've paid you forty pounds to date and I haven't yet got my money's worth,' snapped Agatha. 'And you can tell that husband of yours to stop threatening me.'

'He's always threatening people and he thinks you're a nosy old tart. Still, if you don't want to know what went on at Ancombe . . . '

She began to move away.

'Wait,' said Agatha. 'What can you tell me?'

Mrs Cartwright's dark eyes rested greedily on Agatha's handbag.

Agatha clicked it open and took out her wallet. 'Ten if I think it's worth it.'

Mrs Cartwright leaned forward. 'The dog competition's always won by a Scottie.'

'So?'

'And the woman who shows the Scotties is Barbara James from Combe Farm. At the inquest her were, and crying fit to bust.'

'Are you saying . . . '

'Our Reg had to have a bit before he would favour someone year in and year out.'

Agatha handed over ten pounds. She studied her programme. The dog judging was due to begin in an arena near the tent. When she looked up from

her programme, Mrs Cartwright had gone.

Agatha sat on a bench just outside the roped-off arena. She opened her programme again. The Best of Breed competition was to be judged by a Lady Waverton. She looked up. A stout woman in tweeds and a deerstalker was sitting on a shooting-stick, her large tweed-encased bottom hanging down on either side of it, studying the dogs as they were paraded past her. A fresh-faced woman of about thirty-five with curly brown hair and rosy cheeks was walking a Scottish terrier past Lady Waverton. Must be Barbara James, thought Agatha.

It was all so boring, Agatha felt quite glassy-eyed. How nervous and pleading the contestants looked, like parents at prize-giving. Lady Waverton wrote something down on a piece of paper and a messenger ran with it to a platform, where a man seated on a chair was holding a microphone. 'Attention, please,' said the man. 'The awards for Best of Breed are as follows. Third place, Mr J. G. Feathers for his Sealyham, Pride of Moreton. Second, Mrs Comley, for her otter hound, Jamesy Bright Eyes. And the first is ...'

Barbara James picked up her Scottie and cuddled it and looked expectantly towards the two local newspaper photographers. 'The first prize goes to Miss Sally Gentle for her poodle, Bubbles Daventry of the Fosse.'

Miss Sally Gentle looked remarkably like her dog, having curly white hair dressed in bows. Barbara James strode from the arena, her face dark with fury.

Agatha rose to her feet and followed her. Barbara went straight to the beer tent. Agatha hovered in the background until the disappointed competitor had got herself a pint of beer. Agatha detested beer but she gamely ordered a half pint and joined Barbara at one of the rickety tables that were set about the beer tent.

Agatha affected surprise. 'Why, it's Miss James,' she cried. She leaned forward and patted the Scottie, who nipped her hand. 'Playful, isn't he?' said Agatha, casting a look of loathing at the dog. 'Such a good head. I was sure he would win.'

'It's the first time in six years I've lost,' said Barbara. She stretched her jodhpurred legs moodily out in front of her and stared at her toe-caps.

Agatha fetched up a sigh. 'Poor Mr Cummings-Browne.'

'Reg knew a good dog when he saw one,' said Barbara. 'Here, go on. Walkies.' She put the dog down. It strolled over to the entrance to the tent and lifted its leg against a rubbish bin. 'Did you know Reg?'

'Only slightly,' said Agatha. 'I had dinner with the Cummings-Brownes shortly before he died.'

'It should never have happened,' said Barbara. 'That's the trouble with these Cotswold villages. Too many people from the cities coming to settle. Do

you know how he died? Some bitch of a woman called Raisin bought a quiche and tried to pass it off at the competition as her own.'

Agatha opened her mouth to admit she was that Mrs Raisin when it started to rain again, suddenly, as if someone had switched on a tap. It was a long walk to where she had parked her car. A chill wind blew into the tent.

'Terrible,' said Agatha feebly. 'Did you know Mr Cummings-Browne well?'

'We were very good friends. Always good for a laugh, was Reg.'

'Have you entered anything in the home-baking competition?' asked Agatha.

Barbara's blue eyes were suddenly suspicious. 'Why should I?'

'Most of the ladies seem very talented at these shows.'

'I can't bake, but I know a good dog. Dammit, I should have won. What qualifications does this Lady Muck have for judging a dog show? I'll tell you . . . none. The organizers want a judge and so they ask any fool with a title. She couldn't even judge her own arse.'

As Barbara picked up her beer tankard, Agatha noticed the woman's rippling muscles and decided to retreat.

But at that moment, Ella Cartwright looked into the beer tent, saw Agatha and called out, 'Enjoying yourself, Mrs Raisin?'

Barbara slowly put down her tankard. 'You!' she hissed. She lunged across the table, her hands reaching for Agatha's throat.

Agatha leaped backwards, knocking her flimsy canvas-and-tubular-steel seat over. 'Now, don't get excited,' she said weakly.

But Barbara leaped on her and seized her by the throat. Agatha was dimly aware of the grinning faces of the drinkers in the tent. She got her knee into Barbara's stomach and pushed with all her strength. Barbara staggered back but then came at her again. She was blocking the way out. Agatha fled behind the serving counter, screaming for help while the men laughed and cheered. She seized a large kitchen knife and held it in front of her. 'Get away,' she said breathlessly.

'Murderer!' shrieked Barbara but she backed off. Then there came a blinding flash and the click of a camera. One of the local photographers had just snapped Agatha brandishing the kitchen knife.

Still holding the knife, Agatha edged around to the exit. 'Don't come near me again or I'll *kill* you,' shouted Barbara.

Agatha dropped the knife outside the tent and ran. Once in the safety of her car and with the doors locked, she sat panting. She thrust the key in the ignition and then paused, dismay flooding her. That photograph! She could already see it in her mind's eye on the front of some local paper. What if the London papers picked it up? Oh, God. She was going to have to get that film.

She felt shaken and tired as she reluctantly climbed out again and trekked

across the rain-sodden field.

Keeping a sharp eye out for Barbara James, she threaded her way through the booths selling old books, country clothes, dried flowers, local pottery, and, as usual, home-baking. In addition to the usual stands, there was one selling local country wines. The photographer was standing there with a reporter sampling elderberry wine. Agatha's heart beat hard. His camera case was on the ground at his feet, but the camera which had taken the photo of her was still around his neck. Agatha backed off in case he should see her. He stood there, sampling wine for a long time until the terrier racing was announced. He said something to the reporter and they headed off to the arena. Agatha followed them and waited until they were in the arena. She retreated to a stand and bought herself a waxed coat and a rain-hat. The rain was still drumming down. It was going to be a long day. The terrier racing was followed by show jumping. Agatha lurked at the edge of the thinning crowd, but feeling that the hat and coat she had just put on disguised her somewhat.

At the end of the show jumping, the rain stopped again and a chill yellow sunlight flooded the fair. Heart beating hard, Agatha saw the photographer wind the film from his camera, pop it in his case, and then reload with another. Slowly she took off her coat. The photographer and reporter headed out of the arena and back to the local wine stand. 'Try the birch wine,' the woman serving was urging them as Agatha crept closer. She dropped her coat over the camera case, mumbled something and bent and seized the handle of the camera case and lifted it up and scurried off round the back of a tent. She opened the case and stared down in dismay at all the rolls of film. Too bad. She took them all out after putting on her coat again so that she could stuff the rolls of film into her pocket.

She heard a faint yell of 'Police!' and hurried off, leaving the camera case on the ground. She felt sure that the woman serving the wine had not noticed her and the photographer and reporter had not even turned round. She felt lucky in that they were not from a national paper, otherwise they would have concentrated on her and Barbara James and would have referred back to the quiche poisoning. But local photographers and reporters knew that their job at these fairs was to get as many faces and prizewinners on their pages as possible so as to boost circulation. But if the picture of her brandishing a knife in the beer tent had turned out well, she knew they would use it, along, no doubt, with quotes from the enraged Barbara James.

She was just driving out of the car-park when a policeman flagged her down. Agatha let down the window and looked at him nervously. 'A photographer has had his camera case stolen,' said the policeman. 'Did you notice anything suspicious?' He peered into the car, his eyes darting this way and that. Agatha was painfully conscious of her coat pockets bulging with film. 'No,' she said. 'What a terrible thing to happen.'

There came a faint cry of 'We've found it.' The police man straightened up. 'That's that,' he said with a grin. 'These photographers are always drinking too much. Probably just forgot where he left it.'

He stood back. Agatha let in the clutch and drove off. She did not once relax until she was home and had lit a large fire. When it was blazing, she tipped all the rolls of film on to it and watched them burn merrily. Then she heard a car drawing up.

She looked out of the window. Barbara James!

Agatha dived behind the sofa and lay there, trembling. The knocking at the door, at first mild, became a fusillade of knocks and kicks. Agatha let out a whimper. Then there was silence. She was just about to get up when something struck her living-room window and she crouched down again. She heard what she hoped was Barbara's car driving off. Still she waited.

After ten minutes, she got up slowly. She looked at the window. Brown excrement was stuck to it, along with wisps of kitchen paper. Barbara must have thrown a wrapper full of the stuff.

She went through to the kitchen and got a bucket of water and took it outside and threw it at the window, returning to get more water until the window was clean. She was going back inside when she saw Mrs Barr standing at her garden gate, watching her, her pale eyes alight with malice.

Her rumbling stomach reminded Agatha that she had not eaten. But she did not have the courage to go out again. At least she had bread and butter. She made herself some toast.

The phone rang shrilly. She approached it and gingerly picked up the receiver. 'Hello,' came Roy's mincing voice. 'That you, Aggie?'

'Yes,' said Agatha, weak with relief. 'How are you?'

'Bit fed up.'

'How's Steve?'

'Haven't seen him. Gone all moody on me.'

'Buy him a book on village customs. That'll make his eyes light up.'

'The only way to make that one's eyes light up,' said Steve waspishly, 'is to shine a torch in his ear. I've been given the Tolly Baby Food account.'

'Congratulations.'

'On what?' Roy's voice was shrill. 'Baby food's not my *scene*, ducky. They're doing it deliberately. Hoping I'll fail. More your line.'

'Wait a bit. Isn't Tolly Baby Food the stuff that some maniac's been putting glass in and then blackmailing the company?'

'They've arrested someone, but now Tolly wants to restore their image.'

'Try going green,' suggested Agatha. 'Suggest to the advertising people a line of healthy baby food, no additives, and with a special safety cap. Get a cartoon figure to promote it. Throw a press party to show off the new vandal-proof top. "Only Tolly Baby Food keeps baby safe," that sort of thing. And

don't drink yourself. Take any journalist who has a baby out for lunch separately.'

'They don't have babies,' complained Roy. 'They give birth to bile.'

'There are a few fertile ones.' Agatha searched her memory. 'There's Jean Hammond, she's got a baby, and Jeffrey Constable's wife has just had one. You'll find out more if you try. Anyway, women journalists feel obliged to write about babies to show they're normal. They have to keep trying to identify with the housewives they secretly despise. You know Jill Stamp who's always rambling on about her godson? Hasn't got one. All part of the image.'

'I wish you were doing it,' said Roy. 'It was fun working for you, Aggie. How's things in Rural Land?'

Agatha hesitated and then said, 'Fine.'

This was greeted by a long silence. It suddenly struck Agatha with some amazement that Roy might possibly want an invitation.

'You know all that tat in my living-room?'

'What, the fake horse brasses and things?'

'Yes, I'm auctioning them all off in the name of charity. On the tenth of June, a Saturday. Like to come down and see me in action?'

'Love to.'

'All right. I'll meet the train on Friday evening, on the ninth. Wonder you can bear to leave London.'

'London is a *sink*,' said Roy bitterly.

'Oh, God, there's a car outside,' yelled Agatha. She looked out of the window. 'It's all right, it's only the police.'

'What *have* you been up to?'

'I'll tell you when I see you. Bye.'

Agatha answered the door to Bill Wong. 'Now what?' she asked. 'Or is this just a friendly call?'

'Not quite.' He followed her into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

'You were at the Ancombe Fair, I gather,' said Bill.

'So?'

'You were seen in the beer tent waving a knife at Miss Barbara James.'

'Self-defence. The woman tried to strangle me.'

'Why?'

'Because I believe she had been having an affair with Cummings-Browne and she learned my name and saw red.'

He flipped open a small notebook and consulted it. 'Photographer Ben Birkin of the *Cotswold Courier* snapped a picture and lo and behold, his camera case was snatched. No cameras taken but all the rolls of film.'

'Odd,' said Agatha. 'Coffee?'

'Yes, please. Then I had a call from Fred Griggs, your local bobby. He had

a report that a woman answering to Barbara James's description threw shit at your windows.'

'She's mad,' said Agatha, thumping a cup of instant coffee in front of Bill. 'Quite mad. And you still claim the death of Cummings-Browne was an accident. I regret that scene in the beer tent. I'm glad that photographer lost his film. I've suffered enough without having my photo on the front of some local rag. Oh, God, I suppose they'll run the story even if they don't have the picture to go with it.'

He looked at her speculatively. 'You are a very lucky woman. The editor was so furious with Ben Birkin that he didn't want to know about two women fighting in the beer tent. Furthermore, it so happens that John James, Barbara's father, owns shares in the company which owns the newspaper. The editor's only interested in cramming as many names and pictures of the locals into his paper as he can. Luckily, there were several amateur photographers at the fair and Bill was able to buy their film. Do you wish to charge Barbara James with assault or with throwing what possibly was dog-do at your window?'

Agatha shuddered. 'I never want to see that woman again. No.'

'I've been making more inquiries about Cummings-Browne,' said Bill. 'Seems he was quite a Lothario. You wouldn't think it to look at him, would you? Pointy head and jug ears. Oh, I've found the identity of the woman who was glaring at you at Warwick Castle.'

'Who is she?'

'Miss Maria Borrow, spinster of the parish, not this parish, Upper Cockburn.'

'And was *she* having an affair with Cummings-Browne?'

'Seems hardly believable. Retired schoolteacher. Gone a bit batty. Taken up witchcraft. Sixty-two.'

'Oh, well, sixty-two. I mean, even Cummings-Browne could hardly –'

'But for the past three years she has won the jam-making competition at Upper Cockburn, and Mr Cummings-Browne was the judge. Now don't go near her. Let well alone, Mrs Raisin. Settle down and enjoy your retirement.'

He rose to his feet, but instead of going to the front door he veered into the living-room and stood looking at the fire. He picked up the long brass poker and shifted the blazing wood. Little black metal film spools rattled through the fire-basket and on to the hearth.

'Yes, you are *very* lucky, Mrs Raisin,' said Bill. 'I happen to detest Ben Birkin.'

'Why?' asked Agatha.

'I was having a mild flirtation with a married lady and I was giving her a cuddle behind the abbey in Mircester. Ben took a photograph and it was published with the caption: "Safe in the Arms of the Law". Her husband



called on me and I had a job to talk my way out of that one.'

Agatha rallied. 'I'm not quite sure what you are getting at. I found a pile of old unused film in my luggage and I was burning it.'

Bill shook his head in mock amazement. 'One would think all your years in public relations would have taught you how to lie better. Mind your own business in future, Agatha Raisin, and leave any investigation to the law.'

The squally rain disappeared and clear blue skies shone over the Cotswolds. Agatha, shaken by the fight with Barbara James, put her bicycle in her car and went off to drive around the Cotswolds, occasionally stopping at some quiet lane to change over to her bicycle. Huge festoons of wisteria hung over cottage doors, hawthorn blossoms fell in snowy drifts beside the road, the golden stone of houses glowed in the warm sun and London seemed very far away.

At Chipping Campden, she forgot her determination to slim and ate steak and kidney pie in the antique cosiness of the Eight Bells before sauntering down the main street of the village with its green verges and houses of golden stone with gables, tall chimneys, archways, pediments, pillars, mullioned or sash windows, and big flat stone steps. Despite the inevitable groups of tourists, it had a serene, retiring air. Full of steak and kidney pie, Agatha began to feel a little sense of peace. In the middle stood the Market Hall of 1627 with its short strong pillars throwing black shadows on to the road. Life could be easy. All she had to do was to forget about Cummings-Browne's death.

During the next few days, the sun continued to shine and Agatha continued to tour about, occasionally cycling, occasionally walking, returning every evening with a new feeling of health and well-being. It was with some trepidation that she remembered she was to accompany the Carsely ladies to Mircester.

But no angry faces glared at her as she climbed aboard the bus. Mrs Doris Simpson was there, to Agatha's relief and surprise, and so she sat beside the cleaning woman and chatted idly of this and that. The women in the bus were mostly middle-aged. Some had brought their knitting, some squares of tapestry. The old bus creaked and clanked along the lanes. The sun shone. It was all very peaceful.

Agatha assumed that the entertainment to be provided for them by the ladies of Mircester would take the form of tea and cakes, and meant to indulge herself to the full, feeling all the exercise she had taken in the past few days merited a binge on pastry. But when they alighted at a church hall it was to find that a full-scale lunch with wine had been laid on. The wine had been made by members of the Mircester Ladies' Society and was extremely

potent. Lunch consisted of clear soup, roast chicken with chips and green peas, and sherry trifle, followed by Mrs Rainworth's apple brandy. Applause for Mrs Rainworth, a gnarled old crone, was loud and appreciative as the brandy went the rounds.

The chairwoman of the Mircester Ladies' Society got to her feet. 'We have a surprise for you.' She turned to Mrs Bloxby. 'If your ladies would take their bus to the Malvern Theatre, they will find seats have been booked for them.'

'What is the entertainment?' asked Mrs Bloxby.

There were raucous shouts from the Mircester ladies of 'Secret! You'll see.'

'I wonder what it is,' said Agatha to Doris Simpson as they climbed aboard their coach again. It was now Doris and Agatha.

'I don't know,' said Doris. 'There was some children's theatre giving a show. Might be that.'

'I've drunk so much,' said Agatha, 'I'll probably sleep through the lot.'

'Now that is a surprise,' exclaimed Doris when their ancient bus clanked to a halt outside the theatre. 'It says, "All-American Dance Troupe. The Spanglers."'

'Probably one of these modern ballet companies,' groaned Agatha. 'Everyone in black tights dancing around what looks like a bomb site. Oh, well, I hope the music's not too loud.'

Inside, she settled herself comfortably with the other members of the Carsely Ladies' Society.

To a roll of drums, the curtain rose. Agatha blinked. It was a show of male strippers. The music beat and pulsated and the strobe lights darted here and there. Agatha sank lower in her seat, her face scarlet with embarrassment. Mrs Rainworth, the inventor of the apple brandy, stood up on her seat and shouted hysterically, 'Get 'em orf.' The women were yelling and cheering. Agatha was dimly glad of the fact that Doris Simpson had taken out some knitting and was working away placidly, seemingly oblivious to what was going on on the stage or in the audience. The strippers were tanned and well-muscled. They did not strip completely. They had an arch teasing manner, more like bimbos than men. Naughty but nice. But most of the women were beside themselves. One middle-aged dyed blonde, one of the Mircester ladies, made a wild rush to the stage and had to be pulled back.

Agatha suffered in silence. But when the show finished, her agony was not over. Members of the audience who wanted their photographs taken with one of the strippers could do so for a mere fee of ten pounds. And with a few exceptions, the Carsely ladies all wanted photographs taken.

'Did you enjoy the show, Mrs Raisin?' asked the vicar's wife, Mrs Bloxby, as Agatha shakily got on board the bus.

'I was shocked,' said Agatha.

‘Oh, it was only a bit of fun,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘I’ve seen worse on television.’

‘I’m surprised you should find it amusing,’ said Agatha.

‘They’re such good boys. Do you know they did a special show for the Kurdish refugees and raised five thousand pounds? And all that money for the photographs goes towards restoring the abbey roof.’

‘How clever of them,’ said Agatha, who recognized good PR when she heard it. By donating occasionally to charity, the troupe of male strippers had made themselves respectable and allowed licensed lust to flourish in the breasts of the Cotswold ladies, who would turn up by the busload to cheer them on. Perhaps these Americans had started an English tradition, mused Agatha sourly. Perhaps in five hundred years’ time there would be male strippers performing in the squares of the Cotswold villages while tour guides lectured their clients on the beginnings of this ancient ritual.

Back to the church hall and down to business. Once more they were a large group of staid worthy women, discussing the arrangements of this fête and that to raise funds for charity. Mrs Bloxby got to her feet and said, ‘Our Mrs Raisin is running an auction on June tenth to raise money for charity. I hope you will all come and help to drive up the bidding. We are very grateful to Mrs Raisin and hope you will all do your best to support her.’ Agatha cringed, waiting for someone to say, ‘Not *that* Mrs Raisin, not the one who poisoned poor Mr Cummings-Browne,’ but all she got was a warm-hearted round of applause. Agatha felt quite weepy as she stood up and bowed in acknowledgement. Bill Wong was right. Retirement would be highly enjoyable just so long as she forgot all about Reg Cummings-Browne and that wretched quiche.

## Chapter Eight

Agatha kept to her determination to mind her own business as far as the death of Cummings-Browne was concerned. Instead, she turned her energies again on the local newspapers and dealers, rousing interest in the auction. The editors published paragraphs about the auction just to keep Agatha quiet, as journalists had done in the not so very long ago when she was selling some client or product.

In their good-natured way, the Carsely Ladies' Society contributed books, plates, vases and other worn-looking items which they had bought over the years at other sales and were now recycling. As the day of the auction approached, Agatha began to receive more and more visitors. Mrs Mason, the chairwoman of the group, called regularly with several of the other ladies with their contributions, until Agatha's living-room began to look more and more like a junk shop.

She was so engrossed in all this that she almost forgot about Roy's visit and had to rush to meet the train on the Friday evening. She wished he were not coming. She was beginning to feel part of this village life and did not want outrageous Roy to damage her new image of Lady Bountiful.

To her relief, he descended from the train looking as much a businessman as several of the other London commuters. He had a conventional hair-style, no earrings, and wore a business suit. Hanging baskets of flowers were ornamenting Moreton-in-Marsh station and roses bloomed in flower-beds on the platform. The sun was blazing down on a perfect evening.

'Like another world,' said Roy. 'I thought you'd made a ghastly mistake coming here, Aggie, but now I think you're lucky.'

'How's the baby-food thing going?' asked Agatha as he got in the car.

'I did what you said and it was a great success, so I've leaped to respectability with the firm. Do you know who the latest client is?'

Agatha shook her head.

'Handley's nursery chain.'

Agatha looked bewildered. 'More babies?'

'No, dear. Gardens. They've even given me a dress allowance, tweed sports jacket, cords and brogues, can you believe it? Do you know, I thought I quite liked flowers, but they've got all these poisonously long Latin names, like

chemical formulas, and I never took Latin at school. It's all so *boring*; garden sheds and gnomes and crazy paving as well.'

'I might like a gnome,' said Agatha. 'No, not for me,' she added, thinking of Mrs Simpson.

'We'd better sit in the kitchen,' she said when they arrived home. 'The living-room is chock-a-block with all the stuff for the sale.'

'Are you cooking?' asked Roy nervously.

'Yes, one of the members of the Carsely Ladies' Society, Mrs Mason, has been giving me some lessons.'

'What is this ladies' society?'

Agatha told him and then gave him a description of her outing to Mircester and he laughed till he cried.

The dinner consisted of vegetable soup, followed by shepherd's pie and apple crumble. 'Keep it simple,' Mrs Mason had said.

'This is remarkably good,' said Roy. 'You're even wearing a print dress, Aggie.'

'It's comfortable,' said Agatha defensively. 'Besides, I'm battling with a weight problem.'

'"Wider still and wider, shall her bounds be set,"' quoted Roy with a grin.

'I never believed in the middle-aged spread before,' said Agatha. 'I thought it was just an excuse for indulgence. But the very air seems to make me fat. I'm tired of bicycling and exercise routines. I feel like giving up and becoming really fat.'

'You can't get thin eating like this,' said Roy. 'You're supposed to snack on lettuce leaves like a rabbit.'

After dinner, Agatha showed him the pile of goods in the living-room. 'A delivery van is coming first thing in the morning,' she said, 'and then, after they've dropped the whole lot off at the school hall, they'll go to Cheltenham and pick up the new stuff. Perhaps when you learn about plants you can tell me what to do about the garden.'

'Not too late even now to put things in,' said Roy, airing his new knowledge. 'What you want is instant garden. Go to one of the nurseries and load up with flowers. A cottage garden. All sorts of old-fashioned things. Climbing roses. Go for it, Aggie.'

'I might. That is, if I really decide to stay.'

Roy looked at her sharply. 'The murder, you mean. What's been happening?'

'I don't want to talk about it,' said Agatha hurriedly. 'Best to forget about the whole thing.'

In the morning, Agatha stood with her hands on her hips and surveyed the

school hall with dismay. The contents of her living-room looked sparse now. Hardly an event. Mrs Bloxby appeared and said in her gentle voice, 'Now this looks really nice.'

'The hell it does,' said Agatha. 'No suggestion of an occasion. Not enough stuff. What about if the ladies put some more stuff in, anything at all? Any old junk.'

'I'll do what I can.'

'And the band, the village band, should be playing. Give a festive air. What about some morris dancers?'

'You should have thought of this before, Mrs Raisin. How can we organize all that in such a short time?'

Agatha glanced at her watch. 'Nine o'clock,' she said. 'The auction's at three.' She took out a notebook. 'Where does the bandmaster live? And the leader of the morris dancers?'

Bewildered, Mrs Bloxby supplied names and addresses. Agatha ran home and roused Roy, who had been sleeping peacefully. 'You've got to paint some signs quick,' said Agatha. 'Let me see, the signs for the May Day celebrations are stored at Harvey's, because I saw them in the back room of the shop. Get them and paint over them. Put, "Bargains, Bargains Bargains. Great Auction. Three o'Clock. Teas. Music. Dancing." Put the signs up on the A44 where the drivers can see them and have a big arrow pointing down to Carsely, and then you'll need more signs in the village itself pointing the way.'

'I can't do that,' protested Roy sleepily.

'Oh yes, you can,' growled the old Agatha. 'Hop to it.'

She got out the car and drove to the bandmaster's and ruthlessly told him it was his duty to have the band playing. 'I want last-night-of-the-prom stuff,' said Agatha, "'Rule, Britannia", "Land of Hope and Glory", "Jerusalem", the lot. All the papers are coming. You wouldn't want them to know that you wouldn't do anything for charity.'

The leader of the morris dancers received similar treatment. Mrs Doris Simpson was next on the list. To Agatha's relief, she had taken a day off work for the auction. 'It's the hall,' said Agatha feverishly. 'It looks so drab. It needs flowers.'

'I think I can get the ladies to do that,' said Doris placidly. 'Sit down, Agatha, and have a cup of tea. You'll give yourself a stroke going on like this.'

But Agatha was off again. Round the village she went, haranguing and bullying, demanding any items for her auction until her car was piled up with, she privately thought, the most dismal load of tat she had ever seen.

Roy, sweating in the already hot sun, crouched up on the A44, stabbing signs into the turf. The paint was still wet and his draughtsmanship was not of the best, but he had bought two pots of paint from Harvey's, one red and one

white, and he knew the signs were legible. He trudged back down to the village, thinking it was just like Agatha to expect him to walk, and started putting up signs around the village.

With a happy feeling of duty done, he returned to Agatha's cottage, meaning to creep back to bed for a few hours' sleep.

But Agatha fell on him. 'Look!' she cried, holding up a jester's outfit, cap and bells and all. 'Isn't this divine? Miss Simms, the secretary, wore it in the pantomime last Christmas, and she's as slim as you. Should be a perfect fit. Put it on.'

Roy backed off. 'What for?'

'You put it on, you stand up on the A44 beside the signs and you wave people down to the village. You could do a little dance.'

'No, absolutely not,' said Roy mulishly.

Agatha eyed him speculatively. 'If you do it, I'll give you an idea for those nurseries which will put you on the PR map for life.'

'What is it?'

'I'll tell you after the auction.'

'Aggie, I *can't*. I'd feel ever such a fool.'

'You're meant to look like a fool, man. For heaven's sake, you parade through London in some of the ghastliest outfits I've ever seen. Do you remember when you had pink hair? I asked you why and you said you liked people staring at you. Well, they'll all be staring at you. I'll get your photo in the papers and make them describe you as a famous public relations executive from London. Look, Roy, I'm not *asking* you to do it. I'm telling you!'

'Oh, all right,' mumbled Roy, thinking that at times like this Agatha Raisin reminded him forcefully of his own bullying mother.

'I'll tell you one thing,' he said, making a bid for some sort of independence, 'I'm not walking all that way back in all this heat. I'll need your car.'

'I might need it. Take my bike.'

'Cycle all the way up that hill? You must be mad.'

'Do it!' snapped Agatha. 'I'll get you the bike while you put on your costume.'

Well, it wasn't too bad. It wasn't too bad at all, thought Roy later as he capered beside the road and waved his jester's sceptre in the direction of Carsely. Motorists were honking and cheering, a busload of American tourists had stopped to ask him about it, and hearing the auction was 'chockful of rare antiques', they urged their tour guide to take them to it.

At ten minutes to three, he got on Agatha's bike and free-wheeled down the long winding road to the village. He had meant to remove his outfit, but everyone was looking at him and he liked that, so he kept it on. Outside, the morris dancers were leaping high in the sunny air. Inside, the village band was

giving 'Rule, Britannia' their best effort, and lo and behold, a sturdy woman dressed as Britannia was belting out the lyric. The school hall was jammed with people.

Then the band fell silent and Agatha, in a Royal Garden Party sort of hat, white straw embellished with blue asters, and wearing a black dress with a smart blue collar, stood at the microphone.

Agatha planned to start with the least important items and work up.

She sensed that the crowd had a slightly inebriated air, no doubt thanks to old Mrs Rainworth from Mircester, who had set up a stand outside the auction and was selling her apple brandy at fifty pence a glass.

Mrs Mason handed Agatha the first lot. Agatha looked down at it. It was a box of second-hand books, mostly paperback romances. There was one old hardback book on top.

Agatha picked it up and looked at it. It was *Ways of the Horse*, by John Fitzgerald, Esquire, and all the S's looked like F's, so Agatha knew it was probably eighteenth-century but still worthless. She opened it up and looked at the title page and affected startled surprise. Then she put the book back hurriedly and said, 'Nothing here. Perhaps we should start with something more interesting.'

She looked across the hall at Roy, who instinctively picked up his cue. 'No, you don't,' he shouted. 'Start with that one. I'll bid ten pounds.'

There was a murmur of surprise. Mrs Simpson, who, along with others, had been asked to do her best to force up the bidding, cheerfully called, 'Fifteen pounds.' A small man who looked like a dealer looked up sharply. 'Who'll offer me twenty?' said Agatha. 'All in a good cause. Going, going . . .' Mrs Simpson groaned audibly. The little man flapped his newspaper. 'Twenty,' said Agatha gleefully. 'Who'll give me twenty-five?'

The Carsely ladies sat silent, clutching their handbags. Another man raised his hand. 'Twenty-five it is,' said Agatha. The box of worthless books was finally knocked down for fifty pounds. Agatha was unrepentant. All in a good cause, she told herself firmly.

The bidding went on. The tourists joined in. More people began to force their way in. Villagers began to bid. It was such a big event that they all wanted now to say they had contributed. The sun beat down through the windows of the school hall. Occasionally from outside came the sound of fiddle and accordion as the morris dancers danced on, accompanied by the occasional raucous cry of old Mrs Rainworth, 'Apple brandy. Real old Cotswold recipe.'

Midlands Television turned up and Agatha spurred herself to greater efforts. The bidding was running wild. One by one, all the junk began to disappear. Her sofa and chairs went to a Gloucestershire dealer, even the fake horse brasses were snapped up and the Americans bid hotly for the farm



machinery, recognizing genuine antiques in their usual irritatingly sharp way.

When the auction was over, Agatha Raisin had made £25,000 for Save the Children. But she knew that she now had to soothe the savage breasts of those who felt they had been cheated.

‘I must thank you all,’ she said with a well-manufactured break in her voice. ‘Some of you may feel you have paid more than you should. But remember, you are helping charity. We of Carsely thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Now, if you will all join me in singing “Jerusalem”.’

The famous hymn was followed by Mrs Mason leading the audience in ‘Land of Hope and Glory’. The vicar then said a prayer, and everyone beamed happily in a euphoric state.

Agatha was surrounded by reporters. No nationals, she noticed, but what did it matter? She said to them, facing the Midlands Television camera, ‘I cannot take the credit for all this. The success of this venture is thanks to the freely given services of a London public relations executive, Roy Silver. Roy, take a bow.’

Flushed with delight, Roy leaped nimbly up on to the stage and cavorted in his cap and bells for the camera. The band then played selections from *Mary Poppins* as the crowds dispersed, some to the tea-room, some back to the apple brandy stall, the rest to watch the morris dancing.

Agatha felt a pang of regret and half wished she had not given Roy the credit. He was beside himself with joy and, followed by the television camera, had gone out to join the morris dancers, where he was turning cartwheels and showing off to his heart’s content.

‘Pity it won’t make the nationals,’ mourned Roy as he and Agatha sat later on Agatha’s new furniture.

‘If you make the locals, you’ll be lucky,’ said Agatha, made waspish by fatigue. ‘We’ll need to wait now until Monday. I don’t think there’s a local Sunday paper, and then there’s hardly any news coverage on television at the weekends.’

‘Put on the telly,’ said Roy. ‘They do the Midlands news for a few minutes after the national.’

‘They only do about three minutes in all,’ said Agatha, ‘and they’re hardly going to cover a local auction.’

Roy switched on the television. The local news covered another murder in Birmingham, a missing child in Stroud, a pile-up on the M6, and then, ‘On a lighter note, the picturesque village of Carsely raised a record sum . . .’ And there was Roy on the road waving down motorists and then a shot of Agatha running the auction, the singing of ‘Jerusalem’ and then a quick shot of Roy with the morris dancers, ‘Roy Silver, a London executive,’ and Roy stopping his cavorting to say seriously, ‘One does what one can for charity.’

‘Well,’ said Agatha, ‘even I’m surprised.’

‘There’s another news later,’ said Roy, searching through the newspaper. ‘Must video it and show it to old Wilson.’

‘I looked fat,’ said Agatha dismally.

‘It’s the cameras, love, they always put *pounds* on. By the way, did you ever discover who that woman was, the one on the tower of Warwick Castle?’

‘Oh, her. Miss Maria Borrow of Upper Cockburn.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing. I’ve decided to let the whole thing rest. Bill Wong, a detective constable, seems to think that the attacks on me have been caused by my Nosy-Parkering.’

Roy looked at her curiously. ‘You’d better tell me about it.’

Wearily, Agatha told him what had been happening since she had last seen him.

‘I wouldn’t just let it go,’ said Roy. ‘Tell you what, if you can borrow a bicycle for me, we could both cycle over to this village, Upper Cockburn, and take a look-see. Get exercise at the same time.’

‘I don’t know . . .’

‘I mean, we could just ask around, casual like.’

‘I’ll think about it after church,’ said Agatha.

‘Church!’

‘Yes, church service, Roy. Early tomorrow.’

‘I’ll be glad to get back to the quiet life of London,’ said Roy with feeling. ‘Oh, what about the idea for my nurseries?’

‘Oh, that! Well, what about this. Get some new plant or flower and name it after Prince William.’

‘Isn’t there a rose or something already?’

‘There’s a Charles, I think. I don’t know if there’s a William.’

‘And they usually do things like that at the Chelsea Flower Show.’

‘Don’t be so defeatist. Get them to find some new plant of any kind. They’re always inventing new things. Fake it if necessary.’

‘Can’t give gardeners fakes.’

‘Then don’t. Find something, call it the Prince William, hold a party in one of the nurseries. Anything to do with Prince William gets in the papers.’

‘Wouldn’t I need permission?’

‘I don’t know. Find out. Phone up the press office at the Palace and put it to them. Take it from me, they’re not going to object. It’s a flower, for God’s sake, not a Rottweiler.’

His eyes gleamed. ‘Might work. When does Harvey’s open in the morning to sell newspapers?’

‘They open for one hour on Sundays. Eight till nine. But you won’t find anything, Roy. The nationals weren’t at the auction.’

‘But if the locals have a good photo, they send it to the nationals.’

Agatha stifled a yawn. 'Dream on. I'm going to bed.'

When they walked to church the next morning, Agatha felt she ought to tie Roy down before he floated away. A picture of him had appeared in the *Sunday Times*. He was dancing with the morris men. Three old village worthies with highly photographable wizened faces were watching the dancing. It was a very good photo. It looked like a dream of rural England. The caption read, 'London PR executive, Roy Silver, 25, entertaining the villagers of Carsely, Gloucestershire, after running a successful auction which raised £25,000 for charity.'

It was all *my* work, thought Agatha, regretting bitterly having given Roy the credit.

But at the morning service, the vicar gave credit where credit was due and offered a vote of thanks to Mrs Agatha Raisin for all her hard work. Roy looked sulky and clutched the *Sunday Times* to his thin chest.

After the service, Mrs Bloxby when appealed to said she had an old bicycle in the garden shed which Roy could use. 'The least I can do for you, Mrs Raisin,' said Mrs Bloxby gently. 'Not only did you do sterling work but you let your young friend here take all the credit.'

Roy was about to protest that he had stood for hours on the main road looking like an idiot in the name of charity, but something in Mrs Bloxby's gentle gaze silenced him.

Upper Cockburn was six miles away and they pedalled off together under the hot sun. 'Going to be a scorcher of a summer,' said Roy. 'London seems thousands of miles away from all this.' He took one hand off the handlebars and waved around at the green fields and trees stretched out on either side.

Agatha suddenly wished they were not going to Upper Cockburn. She wanted to forget about the whole thing now. There had been no further attacks on her, no nasty notes.

The tall steeple of Upper Cockburn church came into view, rising over the fields. They cycled into the sun-washed peace of the main street. 'There's a pub,' said Roy, pointing to the Farmers Arms. 'Let's have a bite to eat and ask a few questions. Did this Miss Borrow go in for village competitions?'

'Yes, jam-making,' said Agatha curtly. 'Look, Roy, let's just have lunch and go home.'

'Think about it.'

The pub was low and dark, smelling of beer, with a flagged floor and wooden settles dark with age. They sat in the lounge bar. From the public bar Tina Turner was belting something out on the juke-box and there came the click of billiard balls. A waitress, in a very short skirt and with long, long legs and a deep bosom revealed by the low neck of her skimpy dress, bent over

them to take their orders. Roy surveyed her with a frankly lecherous look. Agatha gazed at him in dawning surprise.

‘What’s made your friend, Steve, moody?’ she asked.

‘What? Oh, woman trouble. Got involved with a married woman who’s decided that hubby is better after all.’

Well, thought Agatha, these days, with women looking more like men and men looking more like women, you never can tell. Perhaps in thousands of years’ time there would be a unisex face and people would have to go around with badges to proclaim their gender. Or maybe the women could wear pink and the men blue. Or maybe.

‘What are you thinking about?’ demanded Roy.

Agatha gave a guilty start. ‘Oh, about the Borrow woman,’ she said mendaciously.

Roy took her now empty gin glass and went to the bar to get her a refill. Agatha saw him talking to the landlord.

He came back, looking triumphant. ‘Miss Maria Borrow lives in Pear Trees, which is the cottage to the left of this pub. There!’

‘I don’t know, Roy. It’s such a lovely day. Couldn’t we just take a look around the village and then go back?’

‘I’m doing this for your own good,’ said Roy severely. ‘Gosh, this steak and kidney pudding is great. You know, there’s nothing like these English dishes when they’re done well.’

‘I should have had a salad,’ mourned Agatha. ‘I can feel every calorie.’

I’m weak-willed, she thought when she had eaten every scrap of the steak and kidney pudding and she realized she had let Roy talk her into a helping of hot apple pie with cream, real cream, and not that stuff like shaving soap.

The waitress came up when they had finished the pie, her high heels clacking on the stone flags of the floor. ‘Anything else?’ she asked.

‘Just coffee,’ said Roy. ‘That was an excellent meal.’

‘Yes, I reckon the part-timer on Sundays does a better job than our Mrs Moulson during the week,’ she said.

‘Who’s your part-timer?’

‘That’s John Cartwright from over Carsely way.’

She clacked off. ‘What’s the matter?’ asked Roy, seeing Agatha’s startled face.

‘John Cartwright’s the husband of Ella Cartwright, who was having an affair with Cummings-Browne. Who ever would have thought he could cook? He’s a great dirty ape of a man. You see, it could have been done. Someone could have replaced my quiche with one of their own.’

‘Again, I have to point out that you would be intended as the victim,’ said Roy patiently.

‘Wait a bit. Maybe it was intended for Cummings-Browne. Why not?’

Everyone knew he was to be the judge. Perhaps there wasn't enough cowbane in that little piece he nibbled at the show.'

'I'm sure any murderer would have thought of that.'

'But John Cartwright struck me as having the IQ of a plant.'

The waitress brought coffee. When she had gone again, Roy said, 'Have you ever wondered about Economides?'

'What? Why should the owner of The Quicherie, who didn't even know Cummings-Browne or where I was taking the quiche, decide to put cowbane in it?'

'But from what I've gathered,' said Roy, 'Economides didn't shriek and complain. Did he demand to see the quiche?'

'I don't think so. But he would want to let the matter drop. Perhaps the John Cartwright in the kitchen is another John Cartwright?'

'Finish your coffee,' urged Roy, 'and let's stroll round the back of the pub and take a look in the kitchen door.'

Agatha paid the bill and they walked together into the sunlight. 'How do you know the kitchen's at the back?' she asked.

'Just a guess. We'll try to the right because the car-park's to the left.'

They walked round the building. Agatha was about to enter a small area of dustbins and outhouses when she drew back with a yelp and collided into Roy. 'It *is* John Cartwright,' she said. 'He's standing outside the kitchen door smoking a cigarette.'

'Let me see.' Roy pushed her aside and peered cautiously round the corner of the building. John Cartwright was leaning against the doorway, holding a home-made cigarette in one large dirty hand. His apron was stained with grease and gravy. The sun shone on the tattoos on his black hairy arms.

'I feel sick,' said Roy, retreating. 'He looks filthy. Food poisoning oozing out of every dirty pore.'

'I think we've done enough for one day,' said Agatha. 'Let's leave this Borrow woman alone.'

'No,' said Roy stubbornly. 'We're so close.'

Maria Borrow's cottage was low and thatched and very old. The small diamond-paned windows winked in the sunlight and the little garden was a riot of roses, honeysuckle, snapdragons, delphiniums and busy Lizzies. Roy nudged Agatha and pointed to the brass doorknocker, which was in the shape of a grinning devil.

'What are we going to say?' asked Agatha desperately.

'Nothing like the truth,' retorted Roy, seizing the door-knocker.

The low door creaked open, and Miss Maria Borrow stood there. Her greyish hair was scraped up into a knot on the top of her head. Her eyes were pale. They looked past Roy to where Agatha stood cringing behind him.

'I knew you would come,' she said and she stood aside to let them enter.

They found themselves in a low-beamed living-room crowded with furniture and photographs in silver frames. From the beams hung bunches of dried herbs and flowers. On a low table in front of a chair on which Maria Borrow placed herself was a crystal ball.

Roy giggled nervously. 'See us coming in that?' he asked.

Maria nodded her head several times. 'Oh, yes.' She was wearing a long purple woollen gown despite the heat of the day. 'You have come to make amends,' she said, turning to Agatha. 'You and *your* fancy man.'

'Mr Silver is a young friend,' said Agatha. 'In fact, Mr Silver is *considerably* younger than I.'

'A lady is as young as the gentleman she feels,' said Roy and cackled happily. 'Look,' he said, becoming serious, 'we were visiting Warwick Castle and took a video on one of the towers. When we ran it, there you were, glaring at Aggie here like poison. We want to know why.'

'You poisoned my future husband,' said Maria.

There was a silence. A trapped fly buzzed against one of the windows and from the village green outside came muted shouts and the thud of cricket ball on bat.

Agatha cleared her throat. 'You mean Mr Cummings-Browne.'

Maria nodded her head madly. 'Oh, yes, yes; we were engaged to be married.'

'But he was married already,' exclaimed Roy.

Maria waved a thin hand. 'He was divorcing her.'

Agatha shifted uneasily. Vera Cummings-Browne was not much of a looker, but she was streets ahead of Maria Borrow, with her greyish face, thin lips, and pale eyes.

'Had he told her?' asked Roy.

'I believe so.'

Agatha looked at her uneasily. Maria seemed so calm.

'Were you lovers?' asked Roy.

'Our union was to be consummated on Midsummer's Eve,' said Maria. Her pale eyes shifted to Agatha. 'I am a white witch but I know evil when I see it. You, Mrs Raisin, were an instrument of the devil.'

Agatha rose to her feet. 'Well, we needn't keep you any longer,' she said. She felt claustrophobic. All she wanted to do was to escape into the sunlight, into the sights and sounds of ordinary village life.

'But you will be punished,' went on Maria, as if Agatha had not spoken. 'Evil deeds are always punished. I will see to that.'

Roy forced a light note. 'So if anything happens to Aggie here, we'll know where to look.'

'You will not know where to look,' said Maria Borrow, 'for it will be done by the supernatural powers I conjure up.'

Agatha turned on her heel and walked out. There was a game of cricket taking place on the village green, leisurely, placid, with little knots of spectators standing about.

‘I’m scared,’ she said when Roy joined her. ‘The woman’s barking mad.’

‘Let’s walk away from the cottage a bit,’ said Roy. ‘I’m beginning to think that Reg Cummings-Browne would have screwed the cat.’

‘He probably took what he could,’ said Agatha. ‘He was hardly an Adonis. We shouldn’t have come, Roy. Something always happens to me after I’ve been asking questions. Let’s just enjoy the rest of the day.’

They went to get their bikes, which were chained to a fence beside the pub. As they were mounting, John Cartwright came around the side of the pub. Lunch-time was over. He had discarded his apron. He stopped short at the sight of them and glowered. They pedalled off as fast as they could.

On the road home, Roy struck a rock and catapulted over the handlebars, fortunately landing on the soft grass at the side of the road. He was winded but unhurt. ‘You see what can happen?’ he said. ‘You really ought to wear a cycling helmet, Aggie.’

The rest of the day passed pleasantly, until Agatha ran him into Oxford and waved goodbye to him at the station.

The next day, she remembered his remark about cycling helmets and bought one at a shop in Moreton-in-Marsh. Although she had a cottage cheese salad for lunch and a chicken salad for dinner, she still felt fat. Exercise was called for. She put on her new helmet and got out her bike and pedalled up out of the village, having to get off several times and push. The light was fading as clouds were beginning to build up in the evening sky. At the top of the road, Agatha turned her bike about, looking forward to the long free-wheeling ride down into Carsely. The air was warm and sweet. Tall hedges and trees flew past. She felt she was flying, flying like a witch on her broomstick.

So exhilarated was she by the feeling of speed and freedom that she did not see the thin wire stretched chest-high across the road. Her bike went flying on as she crashed on her head on the road. She was dimly aware of rapid footsteps approaching her and her terrified mind registered that the wire had been no accident and that someone was probably coming now to kill her.

## Chapter Nine

Dazed, Agatha sensed rather than saw her assailant coming nearer and something made her summon up all her efforts and roll across the hard surface of the road just as a heavy weapon smashed down where she had been lying.

‘Stop!’ shouted a voice. Agatha’s attacker ran off and she dizzily hoisted herself up on one elbow. She got a glimpse of a dark figure breaking through a gap in the hedge at the side of the road and then she was blinded with the light of a bicycle lamp.

Bill Wong’s voice came loud and clear. ‘Where did he go?’

‘Over there,’ said Agatha faintly, waving an arm in the direction in which her assailant had fled. Bill left his bike by the side of the road and then plunged off through the hedge.

Agatha slowly moved her arms and legs, then she sat up and groggily took off her helmet. Her first coherent thought was, Damn Roy, why didn’t he let me leave things as they were? She slowly got up on her feet and then was violently sick. Shakily she inched along the road until she came to her bike. She picked it up and then stood trembling. An owl sailed across in front of her and she yelped with fear. The heavy silence of the countryside pressed in on her. Suddenly she knew she could not wait for Bill Wong to return. Hoping her bike was undamaged, she mounted and free-wheeled slowly down into Carsely. No one was about the deserted village. She turned into Lilac Lane, noticing that there were no lights burning in Mrs Barr’s cottage.

She let herself into her own and then shut and locked the door. How flimsy that Yale lock now looked. She would get a security firm to put in burglar alarms and those lights which came on the minute anyone even approached the cottage. She went into her living-room and poured herself a stiff brandy and lit a cigarette. She tried to think but her mind seemed numb with fright. A knocking at the door made her start and spill some of her brandy. She didn’t even have a spyhole. ‘Who is it?’ she quavered.

‘Me. Bill Wong.’

Agatha opened the door. Bill Wong stood there with Fred Griggs, the local policeman, behind him. ‘There’ll be reinforcements along soon,’ said Bill. ‘Fred, you’d best get back and block off that bit of the road where the attack



took place. I'm slipping. I should have thought of that. Wilkes will have my guts for garters.'

Bill and Agatha went into the living-room. 'Thank God you happened along,' said Agatha. 'What were *you* doing on a bike?'

'I'm too fat,' said Bill. 'I saw you on yours and took a leaf out of your book. I was coming to pay you a visit. Now, I happen to know you were over in Upper Cockburn asking where Miss Maria Borrow lives, and Miss Borrow was the woman in that photograph you gave me. Not only that, you had lunch in the pub where John Cartwright acts as part-time cook.'

'You've been checking up on me,' said Agatha hotly.

'Not I. Word gets around.'

Agatha shivered. 'It was that Borrow woman, I'll swear. She's quite mad. She says Cummings-Browne promised to marry her.'

'I'm beginning to think Cummings-Browne was a bit touched himself,' said Bill drily. 'Anyway, Wilkes will soon be here and you will be asked all sorts of questions. But I think I can tell you now who had a go at you.'

'Barbara James? Maria Borrow?'

'No, I think it was John Cartwright, and do you know why?'

'Because he killed Cummings-Browne.'

'No, because you've been ferreting about. I swear he knows his wife had an affair with Cummings-Browne and he doesn't want it to get out.'

'Then the logical way to put a stop to it would have been to kill Cummings-Browne in the first place!'

'But he is not a logical man. He's a great ape. Now begin at the beginning and tell me what happened.'

So Agatha told him about the wire stretched across the road, about how someone had brought something crashing down near her which would have struck her if she hadn't rolled away.

'But look,' ended Agatha, 'the horrible Boggles, a couple of pensioners I took out for the day, they knew about the affair, so surely it was generally known in the village about the goings-on between Ella Cartwright and Cummings-Browne.'

'Look at it this way. Cartwright may have suspected something was going on but he could never prove it. She would deny it. Then Cummings-Browne dies, so that's over. But you turn up asking questions, and he gets scared. That sort of man couldn't bear the idea of his wife having an affair – no, I mean the idea of anyone else *knowing*. Pride does not belong exclusively to the upper classes, you know. Here's the rest of them arrived. You'll need to answer questions all over again.'

Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes and Detective Sergeant Friend came in. 'We did as you suggested and went straight to Cartwright's house,' said Wilkes. 'He's gone. Dived in the door, the wife says, grabbed a few clothes,

shoved them in a bag, and off he went. Took that old car of theirs. She says she doesn't know what's going on. She says he was getting a bee in his bonnet about Mrs Raisin here and kept saying he would shut her mouth. Anyway, we searched the house. She said we needed a warrant but I told her I could get that, so she may as well let us save time. In the bedroom upstairs we found a stack of cash in a box, a sawn-off shotgun, and one of those giant bottles filled with change, the kind they have in bars for charity. This one was for Spastics. There was a robbery last month from the Green Man over at Twigsley. Masked man with sawn-off shotgun emptied the till and swiped the charity bottle off the bar. Looks like Cartwright did it. Ella Cartwright broke down. Her husband thought Mrs Raisin here was on to that and that was the reason she was snooping around. So much for all your theories about the cheated husband. We've put out a call for him but I'll bet that car of his is found abandoned quite near. He did time over in Chelmsford in Essex ten years ago for armed robbery, and it was assumed he'd gone straight. Funny, we'd never have got on to him if this hadn't happened. It was Ella Cartwright who told us about the prison sentence.'

'But when Mr Cummings-Browne died,' exclaimed Agatha, 'surely you looked to see if anyone in the village had a record?'

'Even then, it would have meant nothing. Before we knew it was an accident, we would have been looking for a more domestic poisoner.'

Agatha stared at him. It was as if the blow to her head had cleared her brain. 'Of course,' she said, 'Vera Cummings-Browne did it. She saw the opportunity when I left my quiche at the competition. She took it home, threw it away, and substituted one of her own.'

Wilkes gave her a pitying look. 'That was the first thing we thought of. We checked her dustbin, her cooking utensils, every surface of her kitchen, and her drains. Nothing had been cooked in that kitchen the day before Cummings-Browne was found dead. Now, will you just describe to us what happened this evening, Mrs Raisin?'

Wearily, Agatha went over it all again.

At last Wilkes was finished. 'We should be thankful to you, Mrs Raisin, for leading us to Cartwright. He might have killed you, although I suspect he only meant to beat you up.'

'Thanks a lot,' said Agatha bitterly.

'On the other hand, I am sure we would have caught up with him sooner or later. You really must leave investigations to the police. Everyone has something to hide, and if you are going to go around shoving your nose into affairs which do not concern you, you are going to be hurt. Now, do you wish to be taken to hospital for an examination?'

Agatha shook her head. She hated and feared hospitals quite illogically, for she had never been treated in one.

‘Very well. If we have any further questions, we will call on you tomorrow. Have you a friend who can stay the night with you?’

Again, Agatha shook her head. She wanted to ask Bill to stay but, off duty or not, he was obviously expected to leave with his superiors. He threw her a sympathetic look as he went out.

When they had gone, she switched on every light in the house. She felt as weak as a kitten. She turned on the television and then switched it off again, fearing that the sound would drown out the sounds of anyone creeping up on the house. She sat by the fire, clutching the poker, too frightened to go to bed.

And then she thought of Mrs Bloxby, the vicar’s wife. She rang up the vicarage. The vicar answered. ‘Could I speak to your wife? It’s Agatha Raisin.’

‘It’s a bit late,’ said the vicar, ‘and I don’t know . . . oh, here she is.’

‘Mrs Bloxby,’ said Agatha in a timid voice, ‘I wonder if you can help me.’

‘I hope so,’ said the vicar’s wife in her gentle voice.

So Agatha told her of the assault and ended up bursting into tears.

‘There, there,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘You must not be alone. I will be along in a minute.’

Agatha put down the phone and dried her eyes. She felt suddenly silly. What had come over her, crying like a child for help, she who had never asked anyone for help before?

But soon she heard a car drawing up outside and immediately all her fears left her. She knew it was Mrs Bloxby.

The vicar’s wife came in carrying a small case. ‘I’ll just stay the night,’ she said placidly. ‘You must be very shaken. Why don’t you go to bed and I’ll bring you up a drink of hot milk and sit with you until you go to sleep?’

Gratefully Agatha agreed. Soon she lay upstairs until Mrs Bloxby came into the bedroom carrying a hot-water bottle in one hand and a glass of hot milk in the other. ‘I brought along the hot-water bottle,’ she said, ‘because when you have had a fright, no amount of central heating seems to warm you up.’

Agatha, with the hot-water bottle on her stomach and the hot milk inside her, and Mrs Bloxby sitting on the end of her bed, felt soothed and secure. She told the vicar’s wife all about John Cartwright and how they had found the money from the robbery in his house. ‘Poor Mrs Cartwright,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘We will all need to call on her tomorrow to see what we can do. She will need to get a job now. He did not allow her very much money but it would be very good for her to have something to do, other than playing bingo. We will all rally round. Try to sleep now, Mrs Raisin. The weather forecast is good and things look so much simpler when the sun is shining. We have a meeting of the Carsely Ladies’ Society at the vicarage tomorrow night. You must come. Mr Jones – you do not know him, such a charming man and a

gifted photographer – is going to give us a slide show of the village past and present. We are all looking forward to it.’

Agatha’s eyelids begin to droop and with the sound of Mrs Bloxby’s gentle voice in her ears, she fell fast asleep.

She awoke once during the night, immediately gripped with terror. Then she remembered the vicar’s wife was in the spare bedroom across the landing and felt the fear and tension leaving her body. Mrs Bloxby’s goodness was a bright shining weapon against the dark things of the night.

The next day, Agatha went along to Mrs Cartwright’s, mindful of her promise to Mrs Bloxby that morning to help out. But in the clear light of a sunny day, she felt sure Ella Cartwright would be more interested in money than sympathy.

‘Come in,’ said Ella Cartwright wearily. ‘Coppers are crawling around upstairs. Have a gin.’

‘This must have been a sad blow,’ said Agatha, finding it hard to find the right words after a lifetime of not bothering.

‘It’s a bloody relief.’ Mrs Cartwright lit a cigarette and then rolled up the sleeve of her cotton dress. ‘See these bruises? That was him, that was. Never marked my face, the cunning sod. I hope the p’lice catch him before he comes snooping back round here. I told him you only wanted to know about Reg, but he thought you’d got wind of the robbery. Fair paranoid, he was.’

Agatha accepted a pink gin. ‘I felt guilty about Mr Cummings-Browne’s death, that was all,’ she said. ‘And there was a rumour that you and he were . . . friends.’

Mrs Cartwright grinned. ‘Oh, Reg liked his bit o’ slap and tickle. No harm in it, is there? Took me out to a few posh restaurants. Said he’d marry me. I laughed like a drain. He wanted women to be crazy about him, so he usually made a pass at spinsters and widows. Didn’t quite know what to make of me at first. We was good pals, for he knew I didn’t believe a word he said.’

‘Weren’t you worried about his wife finding out?’

‘Nah. I s’pose her knew. Didn’t bother her, none of it, I reckon.’

‘But you said they hated each other.’

‘I was trying to give you your money’s worth. Tell you something, though. You never can tell what a married couple really think about each other. One says one thing, t’other says something else. Fact is, they got along pretty well. They was two of a kind.’

‘You mean, she had affairs as well?’

‘Nah. She liked to play lady of the manor and he liked to play Lord Muck, judging competitions, trying to rub shoulders with the aristocracy. You should have seen the pair of them if someone had a title. Scraping and simpering and

my-lording the chap to death.'

'What will you do now?'

'Get a job, I reckon. Mrs Bloxby's coming to run me over to Mircester. There's a new Tesco's supermarket and they're hiring people. Don't want to go but you find you're doing what Mrs Bloxby wants whether you wants to do it or not.'

Agatha finished her gin and took her leave. Somehow what Ella had said about the Cummings-Brownes' marriage made sense. There was no reason for any further investigation. Agatha realized that, deep in her heart, she must have thought Vera Cummings-Browne the murderess all along. This time she really would take Bill Wong's advice.

But as she walked back to her own cottage, she saw to her surprise that there was a large FOR SALE notice outside Mrs Barr's cottage. Mrs Barr saw her coming and stood at her garden gate waiting for her.

'You have driven me away,' said Mrs Barr. 'I cannot continue to live next door to a murderess.'

'Fat chance you'll have of selling it,' said Agatha. 'No body's buying these days, and who the hell is going to want a twee cottage called New Delhi anyway?'

She marched to her own cottage and went in and slammed the door.

But Agatha felt bleak. She had poked a stick into the village ponds and stirred up a lot of mucky feelings.

That evening, before the Carsely Ladies' Society meeting, she went to the Red Lion for dinner. The landlord, Joe Fletcher, gave her a cheerful good evening and then asked her what all this business about John Cartwright trying to kill her had been. Immediately several of the villagers crowded around to hear the story. Agatha told them everything – about the wire across the road and how Bill Wong had come to her rescue and how the police had found the money from the robbery in Cartwright's house – while they all pressed closer, occasionally making sure her glass was refilled. 'I gather his last crime was in Essex,' said Agatha. 'Does that mean he wasn't from here?'

'Born and brought up here,' said a large farmer called Jimmy Page. 'Decent people, his folks were. Lived down the council houses. Died a while back. Couldn't do a thing with him, not since he was so high. Got Ella in the family way and her father came after him with a shotgun and that's how they got married. Kept going off to make his fortune, he said, and sometimes he'd come back flush and sometimes he wouldn't. Bad lot.'

Agatha realized dimly that she had not eaten but she did not want to leave the bar and the company. She knew also that she was sinking an unusually large amount of gin.

'I see Mrs Barr has put her house up for sale,' she remarked.

'Oh, aye, her's been left a bigger cottage over Ancombe way,' said the

farmer. 'Aunt of hers died.'

'What!' Agatha stared. 'She let me believe it was to get away from me.'

'Wouldn't pay no heed to her,' said Farmer Page comfortably. A small man popped his head over Mr Page's beefy shoulder. 'Her hasn't been the same since that play.' His voice rose to a falsetto. "'Oh, Reg, Reg, kiss me.'"

'That be enough now, Billy,' admonished another man. 'We all makes a fool o' ourself sometime or t'other. No cause to throw stones. Turning into a scorcher of a summer, ain't it?'

In vain did Agatha try to find out about Mrs Barr. Gossip was over for the night. Farming and the weather were the subjects allowed. The old grandfather clock in the corner of the pub gave a small apologetic cough and then chimed out the hour.

'Goodness!' Agatha scrambled down from the bar stool. 'I'm late.'

She felt very tipsy as she hurried to the vicarage. 'You're not terribly late,' whispered Mrs Bloxby after she had opened the door to her. 'Miss Simms has just finished reading the minutes.'

Agatha accepted a cup of tea and two dainty sandwiches and sat down as near to the rest of the eats as she could get.

'Now,' said Mrs Mason, 'our guest of the evening, Mr Jones.'

Polite applause while Mr Jones set up a screen and a slide projector. He was a small spry man with white hair and horn-rimmed glasses.

'For my first slide,' he said, 'here is Bailey's grocery store in the 1920s.' A picture, at first fuzzy, came into focus: a store with striped awnings, and grinning villagers standing in front of it. Delighted cries from the older members. 'Reckon that's Mrs Bloggs; you see that liddle girl standing to the right?'

Agatha stifled a yawn and slowly reached out in the gloom for a hefty slice of plum cake. She felt sleepy and bored. All the frights of the past few weeks which had kept her adrenalin flowing had faded away. The attacks on her had been made by a burglar who was now on the run. Maria Borrow was a crazy old fright. Barbara James was a pain in the neck. Something nasty had happened in the wood-shed of Mrs Barr's past. Who gave a damn? And what was she, the high-powered Agatha Raisin, doing sitting in a vicarage eating plum cake and being bored to death?

Slide followed slide. Even when photos of 'our village prize-winners' jerked on to the screen, Agatha remained in a stupor of boredom. There was Ella Cartwright being presented with a ten-pound note by Reg Cummings-Browne, looking as long dead as the old photos of villagers she had already seen. Then Vera Cummings-Browne getting a prize for flower arranging, then Mrs Bloxby getting a prize for jam. Mrs Bloxby? Agatha looked at the photo of the vicar's wife standing with Reg Cummings-Browne and then relapsed back into her torpor. Mrs Bloxby? Not in a hundred years!

And then she fell asleep and in her dreams she cycled down into Carsely in the fading light and standing in the middle of the road waiting for her and brandishing a double-barrelled shotgun was Mrs Barr. Agatha awoke with a shriek of fear and found the slide show was over and everyone was looking at her.

‘Sorry,’ she mumbled.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Miss Simms, who was next to her. ‘It was that nasty fright you had.’

When Agatha made her way homeward, she decided to get some sort of alarm system installed the very next day and then wondered why. Somewhere at the back of her mind, she had decided to leave the village.

The next day, she phoned a security firm and placed an order for their best of everything in the way of burglar-proofing and then went around opening the doors and the windows to try to get a breath of cool air. The heat was building up. Before, when it had been fine, the days had been sunny and the nights cool, but now the sky burnt blue, deep blue above the twisted cottage chimneys and the sun beat down. By lunch-time, the heat was fierce. She took a small thermometer outside and watched as it shot up over the 100 degrees Fahrenheit mark and disappeared. Mrs Simpson was vacuuming busily upstairs, having changed her cleaning day to fit in a dentist’s appointment. Agatha remembered the talk about Mrs Barr and climbed the stairs. ‘Can I have a word with you?’ she shouted over the noise of the vacuum. Mrs Simpson reluctantly turned the machine off. She was proud of doing a good job and felt she had already wasted too much time earlier hearing Agatha’s adventures.

‘I was asking in the pub last night why Mrs Barr was selling up and I heard an aunt had died and left her a larger cottage over Ancombe way.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’ Doris Simpson’s hand hovered longingly over the vacuum switch.

‘Why don’t you come down to the kitchen and have a cup of coffee, Doris?’

‘Got too much to do, Agatha.’

‘Skip for once. I’m still getting over my fright and I want to talk,’ said Agatha firmly.

‘I meant to clean the windows.’

‘It’s too hot. I’ll hire a window cleaner. Doris!’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Doris ungraciously.

Would anyone in this day and age believe you had to beg a cleaner to leave her work? marvelled Agatha.

Once in the kitchen and with coffee poured, Agatha said, ‘Now tell me

about Mrs Barr.'

'What's to tell?'

'Someone in the pub said something about her having disgraced herself and then said in a high voice as if imitating her, "Reg, Reg, kiss me."'

'Oh, that!'

'Oh, what, Doris? I'm dying of curiosity.'

'Curiosity killed the cat,' said Doris sententiously. 'Well, there was this young chap over at Campden and he wrote a play, sort of old-fashioned type thing it were, you know, where they has long cigarette holders and talks like them old British war films. He was a protégé of Vera Cummings-Browne. Anyway, Mrs Cummings-Browne said she would get the dramatic society to put it on. Two of the parts were about a middle-aged couple remembering the passion of their youth, or that's how the programme put it. This was played by Mrs Barr and Mr Cummings-Browne. Dead boring that whole play was. Anyway, they were supposed to be on a liner and there they was sat, in deck chairs and with travel rugs over their knees saying things like, "Remember India, darling?"'

'Sort of fake Noel Coward?'

'I s'pose. I wouldn't know. Anyways, Mrs Barr suddenly turns to him and says, "Reg, Reg, kiss me." Well, that warden't in the scrip' and what's more, the character Mr Cummings-Browne was playing was called Ralph. He muttered something and she threw herself at him, his deck chair went over, and we all cheered and laughed, thinking it was the first funny thing that evening, but the playwright screamed awful words and tried to climb up on the stage and Mrs Cummings-Browne closed the curtains. We could hear the most awful row going on backstage and then Mrs Cummings-Browne came out in front of the curtains and said the rest of the play was cancelled.'

'So Mrs Barr must have been having an affair with Cummings-Browne!'

'You know, I often wonder if that one did more than have a bit of a kiss and cuddle. I mean, take Ella Cartwright; for all she looks like a slut, all she really cares about is getting money for the bingo. Now can I go back to work?'

The security firm arrived and Agatha paid over a staggering sum and then they began to fit lights and alarms and pressure pads.

'Going to be like Fort Knox here,' grumbled Doris.

Agatha went out and sat in the garden to get away from the workmen, but the sun was too fierce. The air of the Cotswolds is very heavy and on that day the sun seemed to have burnt all the oxygen out of it. She felt as isolated as if she were on a desert island, even with Doris working away and men bustling about fixing the alarm system. She moved her chair into a patch of shade. She would not make any rash decisions. She would see how quickly Mrs Barr sold her house and try to find out how much she got for it. If the sale was a healthy one, then she would put her own cottage on the market. She would move back



to London and start all over again in the PR business. She would try to lure Roy away from Pedmans. He was shaping up nicely.

Although the news bulletins said the tar was melting on the streets of London under the heat, she saw it under rainy skies with the pavements glistening in the wet, reflecting the colours of the goods in the shop windows. She had become used to the international population of London, to the different-coloured faces, to the exotic restaurants. Here she was surrounded by Anglo-Saxon faces and Anglo-Saxon ways. The scandal of John Cartwright was over, she knew that. Already plans were being made for the annual village band concert, money to Famine Relief this time. Apart from sending money off to the distressed of the outside world, the villagers were not much concerned with anything that went on which disturbed the slow, easy tenor of their days. Suffocating! That's what it was. Suffocating, thought Agatha, striking the arm of her chair.

'Someone to see you,' called one of the workmen.

Agatha went into the house. Bill Wong was standing at the front door.

'Come in,' called Agatha. 'Have they caught him?'

'Not yet. See you're getting every security system going.'

'They've started, so they may as well finish,' said Agatha. 'Let's hope it adds to the price of the house, for I mean to leave.'

He followed her into the kitchen and sat down. 'Leave? Why? Anyone else been trying to murder you?'

'Not yet.' Agatha sat down opposite him. 'I'm bored.'

'Some would think you were leading a very exciting life in the country.'

'I don't fit in here,' said Agatha. 'I mean to go back to London and start in business again.'

His almond-shaped eyes studied her without expression. Then he said, 'You know, you haven't given it much time. It takes about two years to settle in anywhere. Besides, you're a different person. Less prickly, less insensitive.'

Agatha sniffed. 'Weak, you mean. No, nothing will change my mind now. Why are you here?'

'Just to ask after your health.' He fished in the pocket of the jacket which he had been carrying over his arm when he arrived and which was now on the back of the chair. He produced a jar of home-made jam. 'It's my mother's,' he said awkwardly. 'Thought you might like some. Strawberry.'

'Oh, how lovely,' said Agatha. 'I'll take it up to London with me.'

'You're surely not leaving right away!'

'No, but I thought while you were talking that it would do me good to take a short holiday from Carsely – book into some hotel in London.'

'How long for?'

'I don't know. Probably a week.'

'So this means your life as an amateur detective is over.'

‘It never really got started,’ said Agatha. ‘I thought the fuss I was causing was because there was a murderer in the village. But all I was doing was riling people up.’

Bill studied her for a few moments and then said, ‘Perhaps you might find you have changed. Perhaps you will find London doesn’t suit you any more.’

‘Now, that I very much doubt,’ laughed Agatha. ‘I tell you what I’ll do when I get back. I’ll invite you for dinner.’ She looked at him, suddenly shy. ‘That is, if you want to come.’

‘I’d like that . . . provided it isn’t quiche.’

After he had gone, Agatha paid Doris Simpson and told her she would be away the following week but gave her a spare key and got the head workman to instruct both of them in the mysterious working of the burglar alarms. Then she phoned up a small but expensive London hotel and booked herself in for a week. She was lucky they had just received a cancellation, and as it was, she had to reserve a double room.

Then she began to pack. The evening brought little respite from the heat and a good deal of nuisance. The news that all the lights outside Agatha’s cottage went on when anyone passed on the road quickly spread amongst the village children, who ran up and down with happy swooping screams like giant swallows until the local policeman turned up to drive them away.

Agatha went along to the Red Lion. ‘We all need air-conditioning,’ she said to the landlord.

‘Happen you’re right,’ he said, ‘but what’s the point of the expense? Won’t see another summer like this in England for years. Fact is, maybe we’ll get a bad winter. Old Sam Sturret was just in here and he was saying how the winter’s going to be mortal bad. We’ll be snowed up for weeks, he says.’

‘Don’t the snow-ploughs come around?’

‘Not from the council, they don’t, Mrs Raisin m’dear. Us relies on the farmers with their tractors to try to keep the roads clear.’

Agatha was about to protest that considering what they paid in council tax, they ought to have proper gritting and salting lorries, not to mention council snow-ploughs, and was about to say she would get up a petition to hand in to the council when she remembered she would probably be living in London by the winter.

One by one, the locals began to drift into the pub. The landlord told them all he had put out tables in the garden and so they moved out there and Agatha was asked to join them. One man had brought along an accordion and he began to play and soon more villagers came in, drawn by the sound of the music, and then all began to sing along. Agatha was surprised, when the last orders were called, to realize she had been out in the pub garden all evening.

As she walked home, she felt muddled. That very afternoon, the burning ambition she had lived with so long had returned in full force and she had felt

her old self again. Now she began to wonder whether she wanted to be her old self again. Her old self didn't sit singing in pubs or, she thought as she saw Mrs Bloxby outside her cottage door under the glare of the new security lights, get visits from the vicar's wife.

'I heard you were leaving for London tomorrow,' said Mrs Bloxby, 'and came to say goodbye.'

'Who told you?' asked Agatha, unlocking her front door.

'That nice young detective constable, Bill Wong.'

'He always seems to be about. Doesn't he have any work to do in Mircester?'

'Oh, he often calls round the villages,' said Mrs Bloxby vaguely. 'He also said something very distressing – about you leaving us for good.'

'Yes, I plan to go back into business. I should never have retired so early.'

'Well, that's a great pity for Carsely. We planned to make more use of your organizing skills. You will be back by next Saturday afternoon?'

'I doubt it,' said Agatha, when they were both seated in the living-room. 'Why next Saturday afternoon?'

'That's the day of the village band concert. Mrs Mason is doing the cream teas. Quite an event.'

Agatha gave her a rather pitying smile, thinking that it was a sad life if all you had to look forward to was a concert by the village band.

They talked for a little longer and then Mrs Bloxby left. Agatha packed a suitcase, carefully putting the pot of strawberry jam in one corner. She lay awake for a long time with the bedroom windows wide open, hoping for a breath of air, but buoyed up by the thought of London and a return from the grave that was Carsely.

## Chapter Ten

London! And how it smelt! Awful, thought Agatha, sitting in the dining-room of Haynes Hotel. She lit a cigarette and stared bleakly out at the traffic grinding past through Mayfair.

The man at the table behind her began to cough and choke and flap his newspaper angrily. Agatha looked at her burning cigarette and sighed. Then she raised a hand and summoned the waiter. 'Remove that man from the table behind me,' she said, 'and find him somewhere else. He's annoying me.'

The waiter looked from the man's angry face to Agatha's pugnacious one and then bent over the man and said soothingly that there was a nice table in the corner away from the smoke. The man protested loudly. Agatha continued to smoke, ignoring the whole scene, until the angry man capitulated and was led away.

Imagine living in London and complaining about cigarette smoke, marvelled Agatha. One had only to walk down the streets to inhale the equivalent of four packs of cigarettes.

She finished her coffee and cigarette and went up to her room, already suffocatingly hot, and phoned Pedmans and asked for Roy.

At last she was put through to him. 'Aggie,' he cried. 'How are things in the Cotswolds?'

'Hellish,' said Agatha. 'I need to talk to you. What about lunch?'

'Lunch is booked. Dinner?'

'Fine. I'm at Haynes. See you at seven thirty in the bar.'

She put down the phone and looked around. Muslin curtains fluttered at the window, effectively cutting off what oxygen was left in the air. She should have gone to the Hilton or somewhere American, where they had air-conditioning. Haynes was small and old-fashioned, like a country house trapped in the middle of Mayfair. The service was excellent. But it was a very English hotel and very English hotels never planned on a hot summer.

She decided, for want of anything better to do, to go over to The Quicherie and see Mr Economides. The traffic was congested as usual and there wasn't a taxi in sight, so she walked from Mayfair along through Knightsbridge to Sloane Street, down Sloane Street to Sloane Square, and so along the King's Road to the World's End.

Mr Economides gave her a guarded greeting, but Agatha had come to expect friendship and set herself to please in a way that was formerly foreign to her. The shop was quiet and relatively cool. It was the slack part of the day. Soon the lunch-time rush of customers would build up, buying coffee and sandwiches to take back to their offices. Agatha asked about Mr Economides's wife and family and he began to relax perceptibly and then asked her to take a seat at one of the little marble-topped tables while he brought her a coffee.

'I really should apologize for having brought all that trouble down on your head,' said Agatha. 'If I hadn't decided to cheat at that village competition by passing one of your delicious quiches off as my own, this would never have happened.'

At that moment, for some reason, the full shock of the attack on her by John Cartwright suddenly hit her and her eyes shone with tears.

'Now, then, Mrs Raisin,' said Mr Economides. 'I'll tell you a little secret. I cheat, too.'

Agatha dabbed at her eyes. 'You? How?'

'You see, I have a sign up there saying "Baked on the Premises", but I often visit my cousin in Devon at the weekends. He has a delicatessen just like mine. Well, you see, sometimes if I'm going to be back late on a Sunday night after visiting him and I don't want to start baking early on Monday, I bring a big box of my cousin's quiches back with me if he has any left over. He does the same if he's visiting me, for his trade, unlike mine, is at the weekends with the tourists, while mine is during the week with the office people. So it was one of my cousin's quiches you bought.'

'Did you tell the police this?' asked Agatha.

The Greek looked horrified. 'I didn't want to put the police on to my cousin.' He looked at Agatha solemnly.

Agatha stared at him in bafflement and then the light dawned. 'Is it the immigration police you're frightened of?'

He nodded. 'My cousin's daughter's fiancé came on a visitor's visa and they married in the Greek Orthodox Church but haven't yet registered with the British authorities and he is working for his father-in-law without a work permit and so . . .'

 He gave a massive shrug.

Agatha did not know anything about work permits but she did know from her dealings with foreign models in the past that they were paranoid about being deported. 'So it was just as well Mrs Cummings-Browne didn't sue,' she said.

A shutter came down over his eyes. Two customers walked into the shop and he said a hurried goodbye before scuttling back behind the counter.

Agatha finished her coffee and took a stroll around her old haunts. She had a light lunch at the Stock Pot and then decided an air-conditioned cinema

would be the best way to pass the afternoon. A little voice in her head was telling her that if she was determined to move back to London, she should start looking for a flat to live in and business premises to work from, but she shrugged the voice away. There was time enough, and besides, it was too hot. She bought an *Evening Standard* and discovered that a cinema off Leicester Square was showing a rerun of Disney's *Jungle Book*. So she went there and enjoyed the film and came out with the pleasurable prospect of seeing Roy, feeling sure that he would galvanize her into starting her new business.

It was hard, she thought, when she descended to the hotel bar at seven thirty, to get used to the new Roy. There he was with a conventional haircut and a sober business suit and an imitation of a Guards regimental tie.

He hailed her affectionately. Agatha bought him a double gin and asked him how his nursery project was going and he said it was coming along nicely and that they had made him a junior executive and had given him a private office and a secretary because they were so impressed by his getting his photo in the *Sunday Times*. 'Have another gin,' said Agatha, wishing that Roy were still unhappy at Pedmans.

He grinned. 'You forget I've seen the old Aggie in action. Fill 'em up with booze and then go in for the kill over coffee. Break the habit, Aggie. Hit me with whatever is on your mind before we get to dinner.'

'All right,' said Agatha. She looked around. The bar was getting crowded. 'Let's take our drinks to that table over there.'

Once they were both settled, she leaned forward and looked at him intently. 'I'll come straight out with it, Roy. I'm coming back to London. I'm going to set up in business again and I want you to be my partner.'

'Why? You're through with the mess. You've got that lovely cottage and that lovely village . . .'

'And I'm dying of boredom.'

'You haven't given it time, Aggie. You haven't settled in yet.'

'Well, if you're not interested,' said Agatha sulkily.

'Aggie, Pedmans is big, one of the biggest. You know that. I've got a great future in front of me. I'm taking it seriously now instead of camping about a few pop groups. I want to get out of pop groups. One of them hits the charts and then, two weeks later, no one wants to know. And you know why? The pop business has become all hype and no substance. No tunes. All thump, thump, thump for the discos. Sales are a fraction of what they used to be. And do you know why I want to stick with Pedmans? I'm on my way up and fast. And I plan to get what you've got – a cottage in the Cotswolds.'

'Look, Aggie, no one wants to live in cities any more. The new generation is getting Americanized. Get up early enough in the morning and you don't need to live in London. Besides, I'm thinking of getting married.'

'Oh, pull the other one,' said Agatha rudely. 'I don't think you've ever

taken a girl out in your life.'

'That's all you know. The thing is that Mr Wilson likes his execs to be married.'

'And who's the lucky girl?'

'Haven't found her yet. But some nice quiet girl will do. There are lots around. Someone to cook the meals and iron the shirts.'

Really, thought Agatha crossly, under the exterior of every effeminate man beats the heart of a real chauvinist pig. He would find a young girl, meek, biddable, a bit common so as not to make him feel inferior. She would be expected to learn to host little dinner parties and not complain when her husband only came home at weekends. They would learn to play golf. Roy would gradually become plump and stuffy. She had seen it all happen before.

'But as my partner, you could earn more,' she said.

'You've lost your clients to Pedmans. It would take ages to get them back. You know that, Aggie. You'd have to start small again and build up. Is that what you really want? Let's go in for dinner and talk some more. I'm famished.'

Agatha decided to leave the subject for the moment and began to tell him about the attack on her by John Cartwright and how he had turned out to be a burglar.

'Honestly, Aggie, don't you see – London would be *tame* by comparison. Besides, a friend tells me you're never alone in the country. The neighbours care what happens to you.'

'Unless they're like Mrs Barr,' said Agatha drily. 'She's selling up. The cow had the cheek to claim I had driven her off, but in fact she was left a bigger cottage by an aunt in Ancombe.'

'I thought she was an incomer,' said Roy. 'Now you tell me she's had at least one relative living close by.'

'If you haven't been born and brought up in Carsely itself, take it from me, you're an incomer,' reported Agatha. 'Oh, something else about her.'

She told Roy about the play and he shrieked with laughter. 'Oh, it must be murder, Aggie,' he gasped.

'No, I don't think it was any more, and I don't care now. I visited Economides today and the reason he's glad to let the whole business blow over is that the quiche he sold me was actually baked on his cousin's premises down in Devon and the cousin has a new son-in-law working for him who doesn't have a work permit.'

'Ah, that explains that, and the burgling John Cartwright explains his behaviour, but what of the women that Cummings-Browne was philandering with? What of the mad Maria?'

'I think she's just mad, and Barbara James is a toughie and Ella Cartwright is a slut and Mrs Barr has a screw loose as well, but I don't think any of them

murdered Cummings-Browne. Here I go again. Bill Wong was right.'

'Which leaves Vera Cummings-Browne.'

'As for her, I was suddenly sure she had done it, that it was all very simple. She thought of the murder when I left my quiche. She went home and dumped mine and baked another.'

'Brilliant,' said Roy. 'And she wasn't found out because Economides was so frightened about work permits and things that he didn't look at or examine the quiche that was supposed to be his!'

'That's a good theory. But the police exploded that. They checked everything in her kitchen, her pots and pans, her dustbin and even her drains. She hadn't been baking or cooking anything at all on the day of the murder. Let it go, Roy. You've got me calling it murder and I had just put it all behind me. To get back to more interesting matters . . . Are you determined to stay with Pedmans?'

'I'm afraid so, Aggie. It's all your fault in a way. If you hadn't arranged that publicity for me, I wouldn't have risen so fast. Tell you what I'll do, though. You get started and I'll drop a word in your ear when I know any client who's looking for a change . . . not one of mine, of course. But that's all I can do.'

Agatha felt flat. The ambition which had fuelled her for so long seemed to be draining away. After she had said goodbye to Roy, she went out and walked restlessly about the nighttime streets of London, as if searching for her old self. In Piccadilly Circus, a couple of white-faced drug addicts gazed at her with empty eyes and a beggar threatened her. Heat still seemed to be pulsing up from the pavements and out from the buildings.

For the rest of the week, she took walks in the parks, a boat trip down the Thames, and went to theatres and cinemas, moving through the stifling heat of London feeling like a ghost, or someone who had lost her cards of identity. For so long, her work had been her character, her personality, her identity.

By Friday evening, the thought of the village band concert began to loom large in her mind. The women of the Carsely Ladies' Society would be there, she could trot along to the Red Lion if she was lonely, and perhaps she could do something about her garden. Not that she was giving up her idea! A pleasant-looking garden would add to the sale price of the house.

She arose early in the morning and settled her bill and made her way to Paddington station. She had left her car at Oxford. Once more she was on her way back. 'Oxford. This is Oxford,' intoned the guard. With a strange feeling of being on home ground, she eased out of the carpark and drove up Worcester Street and then Beaumont Street and so along St Giles and the Woodstock Road to the Woodstock Roundabout, where she took the A40 bypass to Burford, up over the hills to Stow-on-the-Wold, along to the A44 and so back down into Carsely.



As she drove along Lilac Lane to her cottage, she suddenly braked hard outside New Delhi. SOLD screamed a sticker across the estate agent's board.

Wonder how much she got, mused Agatha, driving on to her own cottage. That was quick! But good riddance to bad rubbish anyway. Hope someone pleasant moves in. Not that it matters for I'm leaving myself, she reminded herself fiercely.

Urged by a superstitious feeling that the village was settling around her and claiming her for its own, she left her suitcase inside the door and drove off again to the estate agent's offices in Chipping Campden, the same estate agent who had sold Mrs Barr's house.

She introduced herself and said she was putting her house on the market. How much for? Well, the same amount as Mrs Barr got for hers would probably do. The estate agent said he was not allowed to reveal how much Mrs Barr had got but added diplomatically that she had been asking for £400,000 and was very pleased with the offer she had received.

'I want £450,000 for mine,' said Agatha. 'It's thatched and I'll bet it's in better nick than that tart's.'

The estate agent blinked, but a house for sale was a house for sale, and so he and Agatha got down to business.

I don't need to sell to just anyone, thought Agatha. After all, I owe it to Mrs Bloxby and the rest to see that someone nice gets it.

The village band was playing outside the school hall. Before Agatha went to hear it, she carried a present she had bought for Doris Simpson along to the council estate. When she pushed open the gate of Doris's garden, she noticed to her surprise that all the gnomes had gone. But she rang the bell and when Doris answered, put a large brown paper parcel in her arms.

'Come in,' said Doris. 'Bert! Here's Agatha back from London with a present. It's ever so nice of you. You really shouldn't have bothered.'

'Open it, then,' said Bert, when the parcel was placed on the coffee-table in their living-room.

Doris pulled off the wrappings to reveal a large gnome with a scarlet tunic and green hat. 'You really shouldn't have done it,' said Doris with feeling. 'You really shouldn't.'

'You deserve it,' said Agatha. 'No, I won't stay for coffee. I'm going to hear the band.'

Inside the school hall, stalls had been set up. Agatha went in and wandered about, amused to notice that some of the items from her auction were being recycled. And then she stopped short in front of a stall run by Mrs Mason. It was covered in garden gnomes.

'Where did you get all these?' asked Agatha, filled with an awful suspicion.

'Oh, that was the Simpsons,' she said. 'The gnomes were there when they moved into that house and they've been meaning to get rid of them for ages.'

Can I interest you in buying one? What about this jolly little fellow with the fishing rod? Brighten up your garden.'

'No, thanks,' said Agatha, feeling like a fool. And yet how could she have known the Simpsons didn't like gnomes?

She wandered into the tea-room, which was off the main hall, to find Mrs Bloxby helping Mrs Mason. 'Welcome back,' cried Mrs Bloxby. 'What can I get you?'

'I haven't had lunch,' said Agatha, 'so I'll have a couple of those Cornish pasties and a cup of tea. You must have been up all night baking.'

'Oh, it's not all mine, and when we have a big affair like this, we do it in bits and pieces. We bake things and put them in the freezer, that big thing over there, and then just defrost them in the microwave on the day of the event.'

Agatha picked up her plate of pasties and her teacup and sat down at one of the long tables. Farmer Jimmy Page joined her and introduced his wife. Various other people came over. Soon Agatha was surrounded by a group of people all chatting away.

'You'll know soon enough,' she said at last. 'I'm putting my cottage up for sale.'

'Well, that's a pity,' said Mr Page. 'You off to Lunnon again?'

'Yes, going to restart in business.'

'S'pose it's different for you, Mrs Raisin,' said his wife. 'I once went up there and I was so lonely. Cities are lonely places. Different for you. You must have scores of friends.'

'Yes,' lied Agatha, thinking bleakly that the only friend she had was Roy and he had only become a friend since she had moved to the Cotswolds. The heat was still fierce. Agatha felt too lazy to think what to do next and somehow she found she had accepted an invitation to go back to Jimmy Page's farm with a group of them. Once at the farm, which was up on a rise above the village, they all sat outside and drank cider and talked idly about how hot the weather was and remembered summers of long ago, until the sun began to move down the sky and someone suggested they should move to the Red Lion and so they did.

Walking home later, slightly tipsy, Agatha shook off doubts about selling the house. Once the winter came, things in Carsely would look different, bleaker, more shut off. She had done the right thing. But Jimmy Page had said her cottage was seventeenth-century. Nothing fake about it, he had said, apart from the extension.

She kicked off her shoes and reached out a hand to switch on the lights when the security lights came on outside the house, brilliant and dazzling. She stood frozen. There came soft furtive sounds as though someone were retreating quietly from the door. All she had to do was to fling open the door and see who it was. But she could not move. She felt sure something dark and

sinister was out there. It could not be children. Young people in Carsely went to bed at good old-fashioned times of the evening, even on holiday.

She sank down on to the floor and sat there with her back against the wall, listening hard. And then the security lights went off again, plunging the house into darkness.

She sat there for a long time before slowly rising and switching on the house lights, moving from room to room, switching them all on as she had done before when she was frightened.

Agatha wondered whether to call Mrs Bloxby. It was probably one of the young men of the village, or someone walking a dog. Slowly her fear left her, but when she went up to bed, she left all the lights burning.

In the morning she was heartened to see a huge removal van outside New Delhi and the removal men hard at work. Obviously Mrs Barr did not see anything wrong in moving house on the Sabbath. Agatha was just wondering whether to go to church or not when the phone rang. It was Roy.

‘I’ve got a surprise for you, love.’

Agatha felt a sudden surge of hope. ‘You’ve decided to leave Pedmans?’

‘No, I’ve bought a car, a Morris Minor. Got it for a song. Thought I’d drive down and bring the girlfriend to see you.’

‘Girlfriend? You haven’t got one.’

‘I have now. Can we come?’

‘Of course. What’s her name?’

‘Tracy Butterworth.’

‘And what does she do?’

‘She’s one of the typists in the pool at Pedmans.’

‘When will you get here?’

‘We’re leaving now. Hour and a half if the roads aren’t bad. Maybe two.’

Agatha looked in the fridge after she had rung off. She hadn’t even any milk. She went to a supermarket in Stow-on-the-Wold which opened on Sundays and bought milk, lettuce and tomatoes for salad, minced meat and potatoes to make shepherd’s pie, onions and carrots, peas, a frozen apple pie and some cream.

There was no need to do any cleaning when she returned. Doris had been in while she had been in London and the place was impeccable. As she drove down into Carsely, the removal van passed her, followed by Mrs Barr in her car. They must have been at it since six in the morning, thought Agatha, making a mental note of the removal firm.

She put away her groceries when she got home, found a pair of scissors, edged through the hedge at the back into Mrs Barr’s garden, and cut bunches of flowers to decorate her cottage.

She prepared the shepherd's pie after she had arranged the flowers, thinking that she really must do something about the garden. It would look lovely in the spring if she put in a lot of bulbs – but, of course, she would not be in Carsely in the spring.

As she was still an inexperienced cook, the simple shepherd's pie took quite a long time and she was just putting it in the oven when she heard a car draw up.

Tracy Butterworth was all Agatha had expected. She was thin and pallid, with limp brown hair. She was wearing a white cotton suit with a pink frilly blouse and very high-heeled white shoes. She had a limp handshake and said, 'Please ter meet you,' in a shy whisper and then looked at Roy with devotion.

'I see a removal van outside that awful woman's cottage,' said Roy.

'What!' Agatha cast an anguished look at the vases of flowers. 'I thought she'd gone.'

'Relax. Someone's moving in, not out. Say something, Tracy. She won't eat you.'

'You've got ever such a lovely cottage,' volunteered Tracy. She dabbed at her forehead with a scrap of lace-edged handkerchief.

'It's too hot to be dressed up,' said Agatha. Tracy winced and Agatha said with new kindness, 'Not that you don't look very smart and pretty. But make yourself at home. Kick off your shoes and take off your jacket.'

Tracy looked nervously at Roy.

'Do as she says,' he ordered.

Tracy had very long thin feet, which she wriggled in an embarrassed way once her shoes were off. Poor thing, thought Agatha. He'll marry her and turn her into the complete Essex woman. Two children called Wayne and Kylie at minor public schools, house in some twee builder's close called Loam End or something, table-mats from the Costa Brava, ruched curtains, jacuzzi, giant television set, boredom, out on Saturday night to some road-house for scampi and chips washed down with Beaujolais nouveau and followed by tiramisu. Yes, Essex it would be and not the Cotswolds. Roy would be happier with his own kind. He too would change and take up weight-lifting and squash and walk around with a mobile glued to his ear, speaking very loudly into it in restaurants.

'Let's go along to the pub for a drink,' said Agatha, after Roy had been talking about the days when he worked for her, elaborating every small incident for Tracy's benefit. Agatha wondered whether to offer Tracy a loose dress to wear but decided against it. The girl would take it as a criticism of what she was wearing.

In the pub, Agatha introduced them to her new-found friends and Tracy blossomed in the undemanding company which only expected her to talk about the weather.

The heat was certainly bad enough to be exciting. The sun beat down fiercely outside. One man volunteered that a temperature of 129 degrees Fahrenheit had been recorded at Cheltenham.

Back at the cottage Tracy helped with the lunch, her high heels stabbing little holes into the kitchen linoleum until Agatha begged her to take them off. There was some shade in the garden after lunch and so they moved there, drinking coffee and listening idly to the sounds of the new neighbour moving in.

‘Don’t you even want to peek over the hedge or take a cake along or something?’ asked Roy. ‘Aren’t you curious?’

Agatha shook her head. ‘I’ve seen the estate agent and this house goes up for sale next week.’

‘You’re selling?’ Tracy looked at her in amazement. ‘Why?’

‘I’m going back to London.’

Tracy looked around the sunny garden and then up to the Cotswold Hills above the village, shimmering in a heat haze. She shook her head in bewilderment. ‘Leave all this? I’ve never seen anywhere more beautiful in all me life.’ She looked back at the cottage and struggled to express her thoughts. ‘It’s so old, so settled. There’s somethink peaceful about it, know what I mean? Of course, I s’pose it’s diff’rent for you, Mrs Raisin. You’ve probably travelled and seen all sorts of beautiful places.’

Yes, Carsely *was* beautiful, thought Agatha reluctantly. The village was blessed with many underground springs, and so, in the middle of all the drought around, it glowed like a green emerald.

‘She doesn’t like it,’ crowed Roy, ‘because people keep trying to murder her.’

Tracy begged to be told all about it and so Agatha began at the beginning, talking at first to Tracy and then to herself, for there was something nagging at the back of her mind.

That evening, Roy took them out for dinner to a pretentious restaurant in Mircester. Tracy only drank mineral water, for she was to drive Roy home. She seemed intimidated by the restaurant but admiring of Roy, who was snapping his fingers at the waiters and, as far as Agatha was concerned, behaving like a first-class creep. Yes, thought Agatha, Roy will marry Tracy and she will probably think she is happy and Roy will turn out to be someone I can’t stand. I wish I had never got him that publicity.

When she waved goodbye to them, it was with a feeling of relief. The time was rapidly approaching when Roy would phone expecting an invitation and she would make some excuse.

But of course she wouldn’t need to bother. For she would be back in London.

## Chapter Eleven

On Monday morning, Agatha rose late, wondering why she had slept so long and wishing she had risen earlier to catch any coolness of the day. She put on a loose cotton dress over the minimum of underwear, went downstairs and took a mug of coffee out into the garden.

She had been plagued with dreams of Maria Borrow, Barbara James, and Ella Cartwright, who had appeared as the three witches in *Macbeth*. 'I have summoned the evil spirits to kill you,' Maria Borrow had croaked.

Agatha sighed and finished her coffee and went for a walk to the butcher's which was near the vicarage. The sign saying 'New Delhi' had been taken down. There was no evidence of the new owner, but Mrs Mason and two other women were standing on the step, carrying cakes to welcome the new comer. Agatha walked on, reflecting that nobody had called on *her* when she had first arrived.

She was about to go into the butcher's when she stiffened. A little way away, Vera Cummings-Browne was standing talking to Barbara James, who had a Scottie on a leash. Agatha dived for cover into the butcher's shop and almost collided with Mrs Bloxby.

'Seen your new neighbour yet?' asked Mrs Bloxby.

'No, not yet,' said Agatha, keeping a wary eye on the door in case Barbara should leap in and savage her. 'Who is he?'

'A retired colonel. Mr James Lacey. He doesn't use his title. Very charming.'

'I'm not interested,' snapped Agatha. Mrs Bloxby looked at her in pained surprise and Agatha coloured.

'Sorry,' she mumbled. 'I just saw Vera Cummings-Browne with Barbara James. Barbara James tried to attack me.'

'She always had a dreadful temper,' said Mrs Bloxby placidly. 'Mrs Cummings-Browne is just back from Tuscany. She is very brown and looks fit.'

'I didn't even know she was away,' commented Agatha. 'I'm wondering what to buy. My cooking skills are still very limited.'

'Get some of those lamb chops,' advised the vicar's wife, 'and put them under the grill with a little mint. I have fresh mint in the garden. Come back

with me for a coffee and I'll give you some. You just cook the chops slowly on either side until they are brown. Very simple. And I shall give you some of my mint sauce, too.'

Agatha obediently bought the chops but hesitated in the doorway. 'Do you mind seeing if the coast is clear?'

Mrs Bloxby looked out. 'They've both gone.'

Over the coffee cups in the vicarage garden, under the shade of a cypress tree, Mrs Bloxby asked, 'Are you still determined to move?'

'Yes,' said Agatha bleakly, wishing some of her old ambition and drive would come back to her. 'The estate agents should be putting a "For Sale" board up this morning.'

Mrs Bloxby looked at her over the rim of her coffee cup. 'Strange how things work out, Mrs Raisin. I thought your being here had something to do with Divine Providence.'

Agatha gave a startled grunt.

'First I felt you had been brought here for your own benefit. You struck me as a lady who had never known any real love or affection. You seemed to carry a weight of loneliness about with you.'

Agatha stared at her in deep embarrassment.

'Then of course there is the death of Mr Cummings-Browne. My husband, like the police, maintains it was an accident. I felt that God had sent you here to find out the culprit.'

'Meaning you think it's murder!'

'I've tried not to. So much more comfortable to believe it an accident and settle back into our ways. But there is something, some atmosphere, something *wrong*. I sense evil in this village. Now you are going, no one will ask questions, no one will care, and the evil will remain. Call me silly and superstitious if you like, but I believe the taking of a human life is a grievous sin which should be punished by law.' She gave a little laugh. 'So I shall pray that if murder has been done, then the culprit will be revealed.'

'But you've got nothing concrete to go on?' asked Agatha.

She shook her head. 'Just a feeling. But you are going, so that is that. I feel that Bill Wong shares my doubts.'

'He's the one that has been urging me to leave the whole thing alone!'

'That is because he is fond of you and does not want to see you get hurt.'

Agatha turned the conversation over in her mind. The 'For Sale' notice was up when she got back, giving her a temporary feeling, as if she had already left the village.

She got out a large notebook and pen and sat down at the kitchen table and began to write down everything that had happened since she came to the village. The long hot day wore on and she wrote busily, going back and back over her notes, looking for some clue. Then she tapped the pen on the paper.

For a start, there was one little thing. The body had been found on Sunday. On Tuesday – it must have been Tuesday, for on the Wednesday the police had told her that Mrs Cummings-Browne did not mean to sue The Quicherie – the bereaved widow had gone to Chelsea *in person*. Agatha sat back and chewed the end of her pen. Now wasn't that odd behaviour? If your husband has just been murdered and you are collapsing about the place with grief and everyone is talking about how stricken you are, how do you summon up the energy to go all the way to London? She could just as easily have phoned. Why? Agatha glanced at the kitchen clock. What exactly had Vera Cummings-Browne *said* to Mr Economides? She went to the phone, lifted the receiver and put it back down again. Despite his confession about his relative without the work permit, the Greek had still looked guarded. The shop didn't close till eight. Agatha decided to motor up to London and catch him before he shut the shop for the evening.

She had just locked the door behind her when she found on turning round that a family consisting of ferrety husband, plump wife, and two spotty teenagers were surveying her.

'We've come to look round the house,' said the man.

'You can't.' Agatha pushed past the family.

'It says "For Sale",' he complained.

'It's already sold,' lied Agatha. She heaved the board out of the ground and dropped it on the grass. Then she got into her car and drove off, leaving the family staring after her.

The hell with it, thought Agatha, I wouldn't want to inflict that lot on the village anyway.

She made London in good time, for most of the traffic was going the other way.

She parked on a double yellow line outside The Quicherie.

She went into the shop. Mr Economides was clearing his cold shelf of quiches for the night. He looked at Agatha and again that wariness was in his eyes.

'I want to talk to you,' said Agatha bluntly. 'Don't worry,' she lied. 'I've got friends in the Home Office. You won't come to any harm.'

He took off his apron and walked around the counter.

They both sat down at one of his little tables. There was no offer of coffee. His dark eyes surveyed her mournfully.

'Look, tell me exactly what happened between you and Mrs Cummings-Browne when she called on you.'

'Can't we forget the whole thing?' he pleaded. 'All ended well. No bad publicity in the London papers.'

'A man was poisoned,' said Agatha. 'Don't worry your head about immigration. I'll keep you out of it. Just tell me.'



‘All right. She came in in the morning. I forget what day it was. But mid-morning. She started shouting that I had poisoned her husband and that she would sue me for every penny I’d got. She told me about the quiche you had bought. I cried and pleaded innocence. I threw myself on her mercy. I told her the quiche was not one of mine but had come down from Devon. I told her my cousin grew all the vegetables for his shop in his own market garden. Some of that cowbane must have got mixed in with the spinach. I told her about my cousin’s son-in-law. She went very quiet. Then she said she was overwrought. She said she hardly knew what she was saying. She was a different woman, calm and sad. No action would be taken against me or my cousin, she said.

‘But the next day, she came back.’

‘What!’

Agatha leaned forward, clenching her hands in excitement.

‘She said that if I ever told anyone that the quiche had come from Devon, then she would change her mind and sue and she would also report my relative to the Home Office and get him deported.’

‘Goodness!’ Agatha looked at him in bewilderment. ‘She must be mad.’

Two people came into the shop. Mr Economides rose to his feet. ‘You will not tell? I only told you before because I thought the whole thing was over.’

‘No, no,’ gabbled Agatha.

She went out into the heat and drove off, heading automatically back to the Cotswolds, her brain in a turmoil. Vera Cummings-Browne didn’t want the police to know that the quiche had come from Devon. Why?

And then the light dawned. A phrase from the book on poisonous plants leaped into her mind. ‘Cowbane is to be found in marshy parts of Britain . . . East Anglia, West Midlands, and southern Scotland.’ But not Devon.

But, wait a bit. The police had been thorough. They had searched her kitchen and even her drains for traces of cowbane. And they had said that Vera Cummings-Browne probably didn’t know cowbane from a palm tree. But couldn’t she just have looked up a book, as she, Agatha, had done? If she had, she would not only know what it looked like and where to get it, she would know it did not grow in Devon.

When she got home, Agatha wondered whether to phone Bill Wong but then decided against it. He would have all the answers. There had been no trace of cowbane in Vera’s house. Her brain had been unhinged by the death and that was why she had gone to see Economides.

She put the estate agent’s display board back in place and then tried to get a good night’s sleep, but the days and days of heat had made the old stone walls of her cottage radiate like a furnace.

Agatha awoke, tired and listless, but dutifully got out her notes again and added what she had found out.

Cowbane. What about the local library? she thought with a jolt. Would they know whether Vera Cummings-Browne had taken out a book on poisonous plants? Would there be a record? Of course there must be! How else could they write to people who had failed to return books?

As she trudged along to the library, Agatha reflected that her standard of dressing was slipping. In London, she had favoured power dressing and always wore crisp dresses and business suits. Now her loose print dress flopped about her and her bare feet were thrust into sandals.

The library was a low stone building. A plaque above the door stated it had originally been the village workhouse. Agatha pushed open the door and went in. She recognized the lady behind the desk as being Mrs Josephs, one of the members of the Carsely Ladies' Society.

Mrs Josephs smiled brightly. 'Were you looking for anything in particular, Mrs Raisin? We've got the latest Dick Francis.'

Agatha plunged in. 'I was upset by Mr Cummings-Browne's death,' she said.

'As were we all,' murmured Mrs Josephs.

'I'd hate a mistake like that to happen again,' said Agatha. 'Have you a book on poisonous plants?'

'Now, let me see.' Mrs Josephs extracted a microfiche nervously from a pile and slotted it into the viewing screen. 'Yes, Jerome on *Poisonous Plants of the British Isles*. Number K-543. Over to your left by the window, Mrs Raisin.'

Agatha searched the shelves until she found the book. She opened it at the front and studied the dates stamped there. It had last been taken out a whole ten days before the death. Still . . .

'Could you tell me who was the last to take this out, Mrs Josephs?'

'Why?' The librarian looked anxious. 'I hope it wasn't Mrs Boggle. She *will* leave the pages stuck together with marmalade.'

'I was thinking of getting up a lecture on local poisonous plants,' said Agatha, improvising. 'Whoever had it out before might show equal interest,' she continued, looking at the illustrations in the book as she spoke.

'Oh, well, let me see. We still have the old-fashioned card system.' She drew out long drawers and flicked through the listed book cards until she drew out the one on poisonous plants. 'That was last taken out by card holder number 27. We don't have many members. I fear this is a *television* village. Let me see. Number 27. Why, that's Mrs Cummings-Browne!' Her mouth fell a little open and she stared through her glasses at Agatha.

And at that moment, the library door opened and Vera Cummings-Browne walked in. Agatha seized the book and returned it to the shelves and then said brightly to Mrs Josephs, 'I'll let you know about the Dick Francis.'

'You'll need to join the library first, Mrs Raisin. Would you like a card?'

‘Later,’ muttered Agatha. She looked over her shoulder. Vera was standing some distance away, looking through the returned books. ‘Not a word,’ hissed Agatha and shot out.

So she did know about cowbane, thought Agatha triumphantly. And she certainly knew what it looked like. She saw clearly in her mind’s eye the coloured illustration in the book. Then she stopped in the middle of the main street, too shocked to notice that a handsome middle-aged man had come out of the butcher’s and was looking at her curiously.

She had seen cowbane recently, but in black and white. What? Where? She began to walk home, cudgelling her brains.

And then, just at her garden gate, she had it. The slide show. Mr Jones’s slide show. Mrs Cummings-Browne getting the prize for the best flower arrangement, an arty thing of wild flowers and garden flowers and, snakes and bastards, *with a piece of cowbane right in the middle of it!*

The handsome middle-aged man was turning in at the gate of what had so recently been Mrs Barr’s cottage. He was the new tenant, James Lacey.

‘Mr Jones,’ said Agatha aloud. ‘Must find Mr Jones.’

Batty, thought James Lacey. I don’t know that I like having a neighbour like that.

Into Harvey’s went Agatha. ‘Where do I find Mr Jones, the one who takes the photographs?’

‘That’ll be the second cottage along Mill Pond Edge,’ said the woman behind the till. ‘Do be uncommon hot, Mrs Raisin.’

‘Sod the weather,’ said Agatha furiously. ‘Where’s Mill Pond Edge?’

‘Second lane on your right as you go out the door.’

‘I know the heat’s getting us down,’ said the woman in Harvey’s to Mrs Cummings-Browne later, ‘but there was no need for Mrs Raisin to be so rude. I was only trying to tell her where Mr Jones lives.’

Agatha was fortunate in finding Mr Jones at home because he was also a keen gardener and liked to spend most of the day touring the local nurseries. He had all his photographs neatly filed and found the one Agatha asked for without any trouble.

She looked greedily at the flower arrangement. ‘Mind if I keep this for a few days?’

‘No, not at all,’ said Mr Jones.

And Agatha shot off without warning him not to say anything to Mrs Cummings-Browne.

She went to the Red Lion, clutching the photo in a brown manila envelope, her brain buzzing with thoughts.

She ordered a double gin and tonic. ‘Someone said as how he’d seen that detective, the Chinese one, heading your way with a basket,’ said the landlord.

Agatha frowned. She did not want to tell Bill anything. Not now. Not until she had it all worked out.

Bill Wong turned away from Agatha's cottage, disappointed. He glared up at the 'For Sale' sign. He felt sure she was making a mistake. A faint miaow came from inside the basket. 'Shh,' he said gently. He had brought Agatha a cat. His mother's cat had produced a litter and Bill, as usual, could not bear to see the little creatures drowned, so had started to inflict them on his friends as presents.

He was walking past the cottage next door when he saw James Lacey. 'Good morning,' said Bill. He eyed the newcomer to Carsely shrewdly and wondered what Agatha thought of him. James Lacey was surely handsome enough to strike any middle-aged woman all of a heap. He was over six feet tall, with a strong tanned face and bright blue eyes. His thick black hair, fashionably cut, had only a trace of grey. 'I was looking for your neighbour, Mrs Raisin,' said Bill.

'I think the heat's got to her,' said James in a clear upper-class voice. 'She went past me muttering, "Mr Jones, Mr Jones." Whoever Mr Jones is, I feel sorry for him.'

'Anyway, I've brought her this cat,' said Bill, 'as a present, and a litter tray. It's house-trained. Would you be so good as to give it to her when she returns? My name is Bill Wong.'

'All right. Do you know when that will be?'

'Shouldn't be long,' said Bill. 'Her car's outside.'

He handed over the cat in its carrying basket and the litter tray and went off. Jones, he thought. What's she up to now?'

He went into Harvey's to buy a bar of chocolate and asked the woman behind the till, 'Who's Mr Jones?'

'Not you too,' she said crossly. 'Mrs Raisin was in here to find out, and quite rude she was. We're all suffering from this heat, but there's no call to behave like that.'

Bill waited patiently until the complaints were over and he could find out about Mr Jones. He didn't really know why he was bothering except that Agatha Raisin had a way of stirring things up.

Agatha was quite depressed as she walked home. She thought she had solved the case, as she had begun to call it in her mind, but while in the pub, that great stumbling block had risen up in front of her again. There was no way Vera Cummings-Browne could have cooked a poisoned quiche in her kitchen without the police forensic team finding a trace of it.

She let herself wearily into her hot house. Better put the whole business to the back of her mind and go down to Moreton and buy a fan of some kind.

There was a knock at the door. She looked through the new spyhole installed by the security people and found herself looking at the middle of a man's checked shirt. She opened the door on the chain.

'Mrs Raisin,' said the man. 'I am your new neighbour, James Lacey.'

'Oh.' Agatha took in the full glory of James Lacey and her mouth dropped open.

'A Mr Wong called but you were out.'

'What do the police want now?' demanded Agatha.

'I did not know he was from the police. He was plain clothes. He asked me to give you this cat.'

'Cat!' echoed Agatha, amazed.

'Yes, cat,' he said patiently, thinking, She really is nuts.

Agatha dropped the chain and opened the door. 'Come in,' she said, suddenly aware of her loose print dress and her bare, unshaven legs.

They walked into the kitchen. Agatha knelt down and opened the basket. A small tabby kitten strolled out, looked around and yawned. 'That's a sweet little fellow,' he said, edging towards the door. 'Well, if you'll excuse me, Mrs Raisin . . .'

'Won't you stay? Have a cup of coffee?'

'No, I really must go. Oh, there's someone at your door.'

'Could you wait just for a moment,' said Agatha, 'and watch the kitten until I see who that is?'

She left the kitchen before he could reply. She opened the door. A woman stood there, looking as fresh as a spring day despite the heat. She was wearing a white cotton dress with a red leather belt around her slender waist. Her legs were tanned and unhairly. Her expensively dyed blonde hair shone in the sunlight. She was about forty, with a clever face and hazel eyes. She was exactly the sort of woman, Agatha thought, who would be bound to catch the eye of this glamorous new neighbour.

'What is it?' demanded Agatha.

'I've come to view the house.'

'It's sold. Goodbye.' Agatha slammed the door.

'If your house is sold,' said James Lacey when she returned to the kitchen, feeling more of a frump than ever, 'you should get the estate agents to put a "Sold" sign up.'

'I didn't like the look of her,' muttered Agatha.

'Indeed? I thought she looked very pleasant.'

Agatha looked at the wide-open kitchen door, which gave a perfect view of whoever was standing at the front door, and blushed.

'Now you really must excuse me,' he said, and before Agatha could protest,

he had made his escape.

The cat made a faint pleading sound. ‘What am I going to do with you?’ demanded Agatha, exasperated. ‘What is Bill Wong thinking of?’

She poured the cat some milk in a saucer and watched it lapping it up. Well, she would need to feed it until she decided how to get rid of it. She went back into the heat. Her neighbour was working in his front garden. He saw her coming, smiled vaguely, and retreated into his cottage.

Damn, thought Agatha angrily. No wonder all these women were crawling on to his doorstep with gifts. She went to Harvey’s, where the woman behind the till gave her a hurt look, and bought cat food, extra milk, and cat litter for the tray.

She returned home and fed the kitten and then took a cup of coffee into the garden. Her handsome neighbour had knocked all thoughts of murder out of her head. If only she had been properly dressed. If only he hadn’t heard her being so rude to that woman who wanted to see the house.

The kitten was rolling over in the sun. She watched it moodily. She, too, could have taken along a cake. In fact, she still could. She scooped up the kitten and carried it inside and then went back to Harvey’s to find that it was early-closing day.

She could go down to Moreton and buy a cake, but one should really take home-baking along. Then she remembered the freezer in the school hall. That was where the ladies of Carsely stored their home-baking for fêtes to come. There would be no harm in just *borrowing* something. Then she could go home and put on something really pretty and take along the cake.

The school hall was fortunately empty. She went through into the kitchen and gingerly lifted the lid of the freezer. There were all sorts of goodies: tarts, angel cakes, chocolates cakes, sponges and – she shuddered – even quiches.

She took out a large chocolate cake, feeling every bit the thief she was, looking about her, expecting any moment to be surprised. She gently lowered the lid and slipped the frozen cake into a plastic bag she had brought with her for the purpose. Back home again.

She took a shower and washed her hair, dried it and brushed it until it shone. She put on a red linen dress with a white collar and tan high-heeled sandals. Then she gave the kitten some more milk and defrosted the cake in the microwave after taking it out of its cellophane wrapper. She arranged it on a plate and marched along to James Lacey’s cottage.

‘Oh, Mrs Raisin,’ he said when he opened the door and reluctantly accepted the cake. ‘How good of you. Perhaps you would like to come in, or,’ he added hopefully, ‘perhaps you are too busy.’

‘No, not at all,’ said Agatha cheerfully.

He led the way into his living-room and Agatha’s curious eyes darted from side to side. There were books everywhere, some already on banks of shelves,

some in open boxes on the floor, waiting to be stored away.

‘It’s like a library,’ said Agatha. ‘I thought you were an army man.’

‘Ex. I am settling down in my retirement to write military history.’ He waved a hand to a desk in the corner which held a computer. ‘If you’ll excuse me a moment, I’ll make some coffee to go with that delicious cake. You ladies are certainly champion bakers.’

Agatha settled herself carefully in a battered old leather armchair, hitching her skirt up slightly to show her legs to advantage.

It had been years since Agatha Raisin had been interested in any man. In fact, up until she had set eyes on James Lacey, she would have sworn that all her hormones had lain down and died. She felt excited, like a schoolgirl on her first date.

She hoped the cake was a good one. How fortunate she had remembered that kitchen in the school hall.

And then she froze and clutched tightly at the leather arms of the chair. The kitchen. Did it have a cooker? It had a microwave oven, for that was where they defrosted the goodies when they were setting up the tea-room for one of their endless charity drives.

She had to go back. She shot out of her chair and out of the door of the cottage just as James Lacey entered his living-room, carrying a tray with a coffee-pot and two mugs.

He carefully set down the tray and walked to his front door and looked out.

Agatha Raisin, with her skirts hitched up, was running down Lilac Lane as if all the fiends of hell were after her.

Might be inbreeding, he thought. He sat down and cut a slice of cake.

Agatha ran into the school-hall kitchen and looked feverishly about. There it was, what she had been hoping to see – a large gas cooker. She opened the low cupboards next to the sink. They were full of cups and saucers, mixing bowls, pie dishes, pots and pans.

She sat down suddenly. That’s how it could have been done. That’s how it must have been done.

She racked her memory. Mrs Mason had been in the kitchen on the day of the auction, for example, beating up a fresh batch of cakes. The kitchen was also used for cooking. But wouldn’t people remember if Vera Cummings-Browne had been in there on the day of the quiche competition, cooking a quiche?

But she didn’t have to be, thought Agatha. All she had to do was cook it any time before and put it in the freezer and keep an eye on it to make sure it was not used until she needed it. The remains of her, Agatha’s, quiche would have been dumped with all the other rubbish left over from the tea-room. All

Vera had to do was take out her poisoned quiche, carry it home, pop it in the microwave, cut a slice out of it to match the missing slice that had been taken out at the competition, wrap it up and take it with her when she went out and dump it somewhere. Agatha was willing to bet the forensic men hadn't gone through the widow's clothes looking for poisoned crumbs.

How to prove it?

Confront her with it, thought Agatha, and get myself wired for sound. Trap her into a confession.



## Chapter Twelve

Mr James Lacey looked uneasily out of his window. There was that Agatha Raisin woman, hurrying back. Her lips were moving soundlessly. He shrank back behind the curtains, but to his relief she went on, and shortly afterwards he heard her front door slam.

He thought she would be back at his door, but the day wore on and there was no sign of her. Early in the evening, when he was weeding the front garden, he heard her car starting up and soon he saw her drive past. She did not look at him or wave.

He continued to work steadily, straightening up as he heard someone hurrying down the road. He looked over the hedge. And there came Agatha, on foot this time. He ducked below the hedge. On she went and again he heard her door slam.

An hour later, just as he was about to go inside for the night, a police car raced past and stopped outside Agatha's door and three men got out, one of whom he recognized as Bill Wong. They hammered at the door but for some reason the mysterious Mrs Raisin did not answer it. He heard Bill Wong say, 'Her car's gone. Maybe she's gone to London.'

All very odd. He wondered if Agatha was wanted for some crime or had simply been discovered missing from a lunatic asylum.

Inside her cottage, Agatha crouched down until the police car had gone. She had deliberately hidden her car off one of the side roads at the top of the hill out of Carsely in case Bill Wong came calling. She had no intention of seeing him until she presented him with full proof that Vera Cummings-Browne was a murderess. She was slightly thrown when she looked out of her bedroom window to see the three of them, but assumed that it was because John Cartwright had been found. All that could wait. Agatha Raisin, detective, was going to solve The Great Quiche Mystery all by herself.

The next morning James Lacey found he was persuading himself that his front garden needed more attention, although he had already pulled up every single weed. He did find, however, that the small patch of grass needed edging and got out the necessary tools, all the while keeping a curious eye on the cottage next door.

Soon he was rewarded. Out came Agatha and walked along the road. This

time he leaned over the garden gate.

‘Good morning, Mrs Raisin,’ he called.

Agatha focused on him, gave him a brief ‘Good morning,’ and walked on. Love could wait, thought Agatha.

She located her car and drove to Oxford through Moreton-in-Marsh, Chipping Norton, and Woodstock while the brassy sun glared down. She parked the car in St Giles and walked along Cornmarket and down to the Westgate Shopping Centre until she found the shop she wanted. She bought a small but expensive tape recorder which she could wear strapped to her body and which could be activated by switches concealed in her pockets. She then bought a loose man’s blouson with inside pockets.

‘Now for it,’ she muttered as she drove back to Carsely. ‘I hope the bitch hasn’t gone back to Tuscany.’

As she topped a rise on the road after leaving Chipping Norton, she saw that black clouds were piling up on the horizon. She decided to drive straight home and run the risk of being visited by the police.

When she let herself into her cottage, the kitten scampered about in welcome, and Agatha found she was delaying her preparations by giving the little creature milk and food and then letting it out into the garden to play in the sun. She strapped on the tape recorder and arranged the switches in her pockets and then tested the machine to make sure it worked properly, which it did.

Now for Vera Cummings-Browne!

It came as a let-down to find there was no answer to her knock at the door of Vera’s cottage. She asked at Harvey’s if anyone had seen her and one woman volunteered that Mrs Cummings-Browne had said she was going out of the village to do some shopping. Agatha groaned. All she could do was wait.

At Mircester Police Headquarters, Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes stopped at Bill Wong’s desk. ‘Have you phoned your friend Mrs Raisin to tell her we caught John Cartwright?’

‘I forgot about it,’ said Bill. ‘I was more interested in this.’ He held up a black-and-white photograph of Vera Cummings-Browne receiving first prize for her flower arrangement.

‘What’s that?’

‘That is what Mrs Raisin was after yesterday. I heard she had called on a Mr Jones and thought I would call on him too to find out if she had stirred anything up. She had taken a photograph from him but he gave me the negative. I’ve just had it printed. And that’ – Bill stabbed a stubby finger in the middle of the flower arrangement – ‘looks exactly like cowbane, the plant Mrs Cummings-Browne professed to know nothing about. Mrs Raisin’s hit on something. Maybe I’d better get over there.’

How many times, wondered Agatha, had she trekked through the stifling heat up to Vera's cottage, only to find it locked and silent? She was sweating under her blouson.

And then, at last, she saw Vera's Range Rover parked on the cobbles outside the door.

With a quickening feeling of excitement, Agatha knocked at the cottage door.

There was a long silence punctuated by a rumble of thunder from overhead. Agatha knocked again. A curtain at a side window twitched and then the door was opened.

'Oh, Mrs Raisin,' said Mrs Cummings-Browne blandly. 'I was just going out.'

'I want to talk to you,' said Agatha pugnaciously.

'Well, wait a moment while I put the car away. I think it's going to rain at last.'

A stab of doubt assailed Agatha. Vera looked completely calm. But then Vera could not possibly know why she had called.

To be on the safe side, she followed her out and watched her put the car away in a garage at the end of the row of cottages.

Vera came back with a brisk step. 'I've just got time for a cup of tea, Mrs Raisin, and then I really must go. I am setting up a flower-arranging competition at Ancombe and someone needs to show these silly village women what to do.'

She bustled into the kitchen to make tea. 'Take a seat in the drawing-room, Mrs Raisin. Won't be long.'

Agatha sat down in the small living-room and looked about. Here was where it had all happened. A bright flash of lightning lit up the dark room and then there was a tremendous crash of thunder.

'How dark it is in here!' exclaimed Vera, coming in with a tray of tea-things. She set them down on a low table. 'Milk and sugar, Mrs Raisin?'

'Neither,' said Agatha gruffly. 'Just tea.' Now it had come to it, she felt almost too embarrassed to begin. There was something so *normal* about Vera as she poured tea – from her well-coiffed hair to her Liberty dress.

'Now, Mrs Raisin,' said Vera brightly. 'What brings you? Starting another auction? Do you know, it's actually getting *cold*. The fire's made up. I'll just put a match to it. In fact, the fire's been made up for *weeks*. Hasn't this weather been fierce? But it's broken now, thank goodness. Just listen to that storm.'

Agatha nervously sipped her tea and wished Vera would settle down so that she could get the whole distasteful business over and done with.

Trickles of sweat were running down inside her clothes. How on earth could Vera find the room cold? The fire crackled into life.

Vera sat down, crossed her legs and looked with bright curiosity at Agatha. 'Mrs Cummings-Browne,' said Agatha, 'I know you murdered your husband.'

'Oh, really?' Vera looked amused. 'And how am I supposed to have done that?'

'You must have had it planned for some time,' said Agatha heavily. 'You had already baked a poisoned quiche and put it in the freezer in the school hall along with the other goodies that the ladies use when the tea-room is in operation. You were waiting for a good chance to use it. Then I gave you that chance. You naturally did not want your husband to die after appearing to eat one of your own quiches. When I said I was leaving mine, you saw your chance and took it. You got rid of mine with the rest of the rubbish left over after the competition. You took your own quiche home, defrosted it, and left two slices for your husband's supper. I don't know whether you checked to see whether he had died when you came home.'

'Then you heard I had actually bought that quiche in London. You're a greedy woman, I know that, from the way I was conned into paying for that expensive meal in a lousy restaurant in which you own part of the business. You saw an opportunity of getting money out of poor Mr Economides, and so you went straight to London to tell him you were suing him. Who knows? You probably hoped he would settle out of court. But he confessed that the quiche had come from his cousin's shop in Devon. His cousin grew his own vegetables and there is no cowbane in Devon. So you told the police you had decided to forgive him and not press charges. You said you did not know what cowbane looked like. But you borrowed a book on poisonous plants from the library, and furthermore, I found out from a photo Mr Jones had given me that you had used cowbane already in one of your floral arrangements. So that's how it was done!'

Agatha triumphantly drained her teacup and stared defiantly at Vera.

To her surprise, Vera's only reaction was to get up and put coal on the blazing wood on the fire.

Vera sat down again. She looked at Agatha.

'As a matter of fact, you are quite right, Mrs Raisin.' She raised her voice above the noise of the thunder. 'You just had to go and cheat in that competition, didn't you, you silly bitch? So I thought I'd get some financial mileage out of it and yes, I did hope that Greek would volunteer to settle out of court. Then he let fall the bit about Devon. But at least I had him so frightened, he didn't even examine the quiche closely. I had a bad moment thinking he would and that he would say it wasn't his. So everything looked safe. I was tired of Reg's bloody philandering, but I turned a blind eye to it until that Maria Borrow came on the scene. She turned up here one day and told me Reg was going to marry her. Her! Pathetic mad old spinster. It was the

ultimate shame. I knew he didn't mean to divorce me but sooner or later this Borrow fright was going to tell everyone he did and I wasn't standing for that. Do you know I thought it hadn't worked? I came home and saw the lights burning and the television on but no sign of Reg. I was a bit relieved. He'd gone out before and left everything on. So I just went to bed. When they told me in the morning he was dead, I couldn't believe I had caused it. I used to dream of getting rid of him and I almost thought that the baking of that poisoned quiche and the substitution for yours had all been in my mind and that they would tell me he'd died of a stroke. What's the matter, Mrs Raisin? Feeling drowsy?'

Agatha felt her head swimming. 'The tea,' she croaked.

'Yes, the tea, Mrs Raisin. Think you're so bloody clever, don't you? Well, only a crass fool would drop in to accuse a poisoner and drink tea.'

'Cowbane,' gasped Agatha.

'Oh, no, dear. Just sleeping pills. I found out from Jones what you had been asking, and from that woman in the library. I followed you to Oxford. I had seen your car the night before parked up in one of the lanes. I was waiting for you when you drove off. So I went to Oxford, too, to a quack I'd heard of, a private doctor who gives all sorts of pills to anyone. I said I was Mrs Agatha Raisin and couldn't sleep. Here are the pills.' Vera dug in a pocket of her dress and held up a pharmacist's bottle. And with your name on them.'

She stood up. 'And so I just spread a few of these leaflets advertising the flower-arranging competition about the floor, and I help a live coal to roll out of the fire on top of them. I will tell everyone that I told you to make yourself comfortable and wait until I returned. Such a sad accident. Everything is tinder-dry with the heat. You'll have quite a funeral pyre. I'll just drop what's left of these sleeping pills into your handbag and put it in the kitchen by the window and hope it survives the blaze.'

It was like a dream of hell, thought Agatha. She could not move. But she could see . . . just. Vera spread the leaflets about, frowned down at them, and then went into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of cooking oil. She sprinkled some of that about and then took the bottle back to the kitchen. 'Such a good thing this cottage is heavily insured,' she remarked.

She picked up a glowing coal from the fire with the brass tongs and dropped it on the leaflets and then stood patiently while it smouldered on the floor. With a click of annoyance, Vera struck a match and dropped it on the leaflets, which leaped into flame. She edged towards the door. There was a stack of magazines in a rack by the fire. It burst into flames. Then she locked the living-room windows. With a little smile, Vera said, 'Bye, Mrs Raisin,' and let herself out of the cottage. She walked to her garage, glancing over her shoulder. She had taken the precaution of closing the curtains. She would have to get away quickly all the same.

With one superhuman effort, Agatha shoved one finger down her throat and was violently sick. She fell off the chair on to the blazing carpet. Whimpering and sobbing, she crawled away from the roaring fire, dragging herself to the kitchen. Vera had locked the front door. No use trying that way. Agatha feebly kicked the kitchen door closed behind her. The noise in her ears was deafening. The thunder was crashing outside, the fire was roaring inside.

Agatha's weak hands scrabbled upwards until she grasped the edge of the kitchen sink. Sinks had water and behind the sink was the kitchen window, which that hellcat might have forgotten to lock.

But despite the fact she had been sick, Agatha had swallowed quite a large amount of sleeping pills, or draught, or whatever it was that Vera had put in her tea. Blackness overcame her and she made one last effort heaving herself up, gazing out of the window, her mouth silently opening to form the word 'Help,' before she fell back on to the kitchen floor, unconscious.

'I don't see why we're working overtime on this Raisin woman, Bill,' grumbled the detective chief inspector. 'The fact that Mrs Cummings-Browne had cowbane in her flower arrangement could be coincidence.'

'I've always been sure she had done it,' said Bill. 'I told Mrs Raisin to mind her own business because I didn't want her getting hurt. We've got to ask Vera Cummings-Browne about this photograph. What a storm!'

They were cruising in the police car slowly along Carsely's main street. Bill peered through the windscreen. A flash of lightning lit up the street, lit up the approaching Range Rover, and lit up the startled face of Vera behind the wheel. Almost without thought, Bill swung the wheel and blocked the street.

'What the hell!' shouted Wilkes.

Vera jumped out of her car and began to run off down one of the lanes leading off the main street. 'It's Mrs Cummings-Browne. After her,' shouted Bill. Wilkes and Detective Sergeant Friend scrambled out of the car, but Bill ran instead through the pounding rain towards Vera's cottage, cursing under his breath as he saw the fierce red glow of a fire behind the drawn curtains of the living-room.

The kitchen window was to the left of the door. He ran to it to try to force a way in and was just in time to see the white staring face of Agatha Raisin rising above the kitchen sink and disappearing again.

There was a narrow strip of flower-bed outside the cottage, edged with round pieces of marble rock. He seized one of these and threw it straight at the kitchen window, thinking wildly that it was only in films that the whole window shattered, for the rock went straight through, leaving a jagged hole.

He seized another one and hammered furiously at the glass until he had broken a hole big enough to crawl through.

Agatha was lying on the kitchen floor. He tried to pick her up. At first she seemed too heavy. The roar of the fire from the other room was tremendous. He got Agatha up on her feet and shoved her head in the kitchen sink. Then he got hold of her ankles and heaved, so that her heels went over her head and out through the window. He seized her by the hair and, panting and shoving, thrust the whole lot of her through the broken glass and out on to the cobbles outside and then dived through the window himself just as the kitchen door fell in and raging tongues of flames scorched through the room.

He lay for a moment on top of Agatha while the rain drummed down on both of them. Doors were opening, people were coming running. He heard a woman shout, 'I phoned the fire brigade.' His hands were bleeding and Agatha's face was cut from where he had shoved her through the broken glass. But she was breathing deeply. She was alive.

Agatha recovered consciousness in hospital and looked groggily around. There seemed to be flowers everywhere. Her eyes focused on the Asian features of Bill Wong, who was sitting patiently beside the bed.

Then Agatha remembered the horror of the fire. 'What happened?' she asked feebly.

From the other side of the bed came the stern voice of Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes. 'You nearly got burnt to a crisp, that's what,' he said, 'and would have been if Bill here hadn't saved your life.'

'You've got to lose weight, Mrs Raisin,' said Bill with a grin. 'You're a heavy woman. But you'll be pleased to know that Vera Cummings-Browne is under arrest, although whether she'll stand trial is another matter. She went barking mad. But you did a silly and dangerous thing, Mrs Raisin. I gather you went to accuse her of murder and then you calmly drink a cup of tea which she had made.'

Agatha struggled up against the pillows. 'It's thanks to me you got her. I suppose you found her taped confession on my body.'

'We found a blank tape on your body,' said Bill. 'You had forgotten to switch the damn thing on.'

Agatha groaned. 'So how did you get her to confess?' she said.

'It was like this,' said Bill. 'I wondered what you were up to seeing this Mr Jones. I found out about the photograph you had taken, he gave me the negative, I got it developed and found the cowbane in it. We were heading to her cottage to ask her a few questions when we saw her driving along. I blocked the street. She got out and ran for it, and when Mr Wilkes caught up with her, she broke down and confessed and said it would be all worth it if you died in the fire. I managed to get you out.'

'What put you on to her in the first place?' asked Wilkes crossly. 'Surely

not one piece of cowbane in a photograph?’

Agatha thought quickly. She had not switched on the tape. There was no need for them to know that her quiche had come from Devon or anything about Mr Economides’s cousin. So instead, she told them about the school-hall kitchen and the library book.

‘You should have brought information like that straight to us,’ said Wilkes crossly. ‘Bill here got his hands cut badly rescuing you and you were nearly killed. For the last time, leave investigations to the police.’

‘Next time I won’t be so amateur,’ said Agatha huffily.

‘Next time?’ roared Wilkes. ‘There won’t *be* a next time.’

‘The thing that puzzles me,’ said Agatha, ‘is why didn’t I notice the taste of the sleeping pills in the tea? I mean, if she had ground all those pills up, at least it surely would have tasted gritty.’

‘She got gelatine capsules of Dormaron, a very powerful sleeping pill, from some quack in Oxford who is being questioned. The stuff’s tasteless. She simply cut open the capsules and put the liquid in your tea,’ said Wilkes. ‘I’ll be back when you get home to question you further, Mrs Raisin, but don’t ever try to play detective again. By the way, we got John Cartwright. He was working on a building site in London.’

He stomped out. ‘I’d better be going as well,’ said Bill. For the first time Agatha noticed his bandaged hands.

‘Thank you for saving my life,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry about your hands.’

‘I’m sorry about your face,’ he said. Agatha raised her hands to her face and felt strips of sticking plaster. ‘There’s a couple of stitches in a cut in your cheek. But the only way I could get you out was by shoving you through the window, and I’m afraid I tore a handful of your hair out as well.’

‘I’ve given up worrying about my appearance,’ said Agatha. ‘Oh, my kitten. How long have I been here?’

‘Just overnight. But I called on your neighbour, Mr Lacey, and he offered to keep the cat until your return.’

‘That’s good of you. Mr Lacey? Does he know what happened?’

‘I hadn’t time to explain. I simply handed over the cat and said you’d had an accident.’

Agatha’s hands flew up to her face again. ‘Do I look awful? Did you tear out much hair? Is there a mirror in here?’

‘I thought you didn’t care about your appearance.’

‘And all those flowers? Who are they from?’

‘The big one is from the Carsely Ladies’ Society, the small bunch of roses is from Doris and Bert Simpson, the elegant gladioli from Mrs Bloxby, the giant bouquet from the landlord of the Red Lion and the regulars, and that weedy bunch is from me.’

‘Thank you so much, Bill. Er . . . anything from Mr Lacey?’



‘Now how could there be? You barely know the man.’

‘Is my handbag around? I must look a fright. I need powder and lipstick and a comb and I’ve some French perfume in there.’

‘Relax. They’re letting you home tomorrow. You can paint your face to your heart’s content. Don’t forget that dinner invitation.’

‘Oh, what? Oh, yes, that. Of course you must come. Next week. Perhaps I might be able to help you with some of your cases?’

‘No,’ said Bill firmly. ‘Don’t ever try to solve a crime again.’ Then he relented. ‘Not but what you haven’t done me a favour.’

‘In what way?’

‘I confess I’d been following you around on my time off and getting the local bobby to report anything to me. Like you, I never could really believe it to be an accident. But Wilkes is more or less crediting me with solving the case because he would rather die than admit a member of the public could do anything to help. So when’s that dinner?’

‘Next Wednesday? Seven o’clock, say?’

‘Fine. Go back to sleep. I’ll see you then.’

‘Am I in Moreton-in-Marsh?’

‘No, Mircester General Hospital.’

After he had gone, Agatha fished in the locker beside her bed and found her handbag. The pills had been taken out of it, she noticed. She opened her compact and stared at her face in the mirror and let out a squawk of dismay. She looked a wreck.

‘Ere!’ Agatha looked across at the next bed. It contained an elderly woman who looked remarkably like Mrs Boggle. ‘What you done?’ she asked avidly. ‘All them police in ’ere.’

‘I solved a case for them,’ said Agatha grandly.

‘Garn,’ said the old horror. ‘Last one in that bed thought she was Mary Queen of Scots.’

‘Shut up,’ snarled Agatha, looking in the mirror and wondering whether the sticking plaster did not look, in fact, well, heroic.

The day wore on. The television set at the end of the beds flickered through soap opera after soap opera. No one else called. Not even Mrs Bloxby.

Well, that’s that, thought Agatha bleakly. Why did they bother to send flowers? Probably thought I was dead.

## Chapter Thirteen

Agatha was told next day that an ambulance would be leaving the hospital at noon to take her home. She was rather pleased about that. Her home-coming in an ambulance should make the village sit up and take notice.

She took the greetings cards off the bouquets of flowers around her bed to keep as a souvenir of her time in the Cotswolds. How odd that she had volunteered to help Bill with his cases, just as if she meant to stay. She asked a nurse to take the flowers to the children's ward and then got dressed and went downstairs to wait for the ambulance. There was a shop in the entrance hall selling newspapers. She bought a pile of the local ones but there was no mention of Vera Cummings-Browne's arrest. Perhaps it all leaked out too late for them to do anything about it.

To her dismay, the 'ambulance' turned out to be a minibus which was taking various geriatric patients back to their local villages. Why does the sight of creaking old people make me feel so cruel and impatient? thought Agatha, watching them fumbling and stumbling on board. I'll be old myself all too soon. She forced herself to get up to help an old man who was trying to get into the bus. He leered at her. 'Keep your hands to yourself,' he said. 'I know your sort.'

The rest of the passengers were all old women who shrieked with laughter and said, 'You are a one, Arnie,' and things like that, all of them evidently knowing each other very well.

It was a calm, cool day with great fluffy clouds floating across a pale-blue sky. The old woman next to Agatha caught her attention by jabbing her painfully in the toes with her stick. 'What happened to you then?' she asked, peering at Agatha's sticking-plaster-covered face. 'Beat you up, did he?'

'No,' said Agatha frostily. 'I was solving a murder case for the police.'

'It's the drink,' said the old woman. 'Mine used ter come home from the pub and lay into me something rotten. He's dead now. It's one thing you've got to say in favour of men, they die before we do.'

'Cept me,' said Arnie. 'I'm seventy-eight and still going strong.'

More cackles. Agatha's announcement about solving a murder case had bitten the dust. The minibus rolled lazily to a stop in a small hamlet and the woman next to Agatha was helped out. She looked at Agatha and said in

farewell, 'Don't go making up stories to protect him. I did that. Different these days. If he's bashing you, tell the police.'

There was a murmur of approval from the other women.

The bus moved off. It turned out to be a comprehensive tour of Cotswold villages as one geriatric after another was set down.

Agatha was the last passenger. She felt dirty and weary as the bus rolled down into Carsely. 'Where to?' shouted the driver.

'Left here,' said Agatha. 'Third cottage along on the left.'

'Something going on,' called the driver. 'Big welcome. You been in the wars or something?'

The ambulance stopped outside Agatha's cottage. There was a big cheer. The band began to play 'Hello Dolly.' They were all there, all the village, and there was a banner hanging drunkenly over her doorway which said, WELCOME HOME.

Mrs Bloxby was the first with a hug. Then the members of the Carsely Ladies' Society. Then the landlord, Joe Fletcher, and the regulars from the Red Lion.

Local photographers were busy clicking their cameras, local reporters stood ready.

'Everyone inside,' called Agatha, 'and I'll tell you all about it.'

Soon her living-room was crowded, with an overflow stretching into the dining-room and kitchen as she told a rapt audience how she had solved The Case of the Poisoned Quiche. It was highly embroidered. But she did describe in glorious Technicolor how the brave Bill Wong had dragged her from the burning house, 'his clothes in flames and his hands cut to ribbons.'

'Such bravery,' said Agatha, 'is an example of the fine men we have in the British police force.'

Some reporters scribbled busily; the more up-to-date used tape recorders. Agatha was about to hit the nationals, or rather, Bill Wong was. There had been two nasty stories recently about corrupt policemen, but the newspapers knew there was nothing people liked to read about more than a brave bobby.

Next door, James Lacey stood in his front garden, burning with curiosity. The visit from Agatha had been enough. He had called on the vicarage and told Mrs Bloxby sternly that although he was grateful for the welcome to the village, he now wanted to be left strictly alone. He enjoyed his own company. He had moved to the country for peace and quiet. Mrs Bloxby had done her work well. So although he had watched the preparations for Agatha's return, he did not know what she had done or what it had all been about. He wanted to walk along and ask someone but felt shy of doing so because he had said he wanted to be alone and he remembered he had added that he had no interest in what went on in the village or in anyone in it.

One by one Agatha's fan club was leaving. Doris Simpson was among the

last to go. She handed Agatha a large brown paper parcel.

‘Why, what’s this, Doris?’ asked Agatha.

‘Me and Bert got talking about that gnome you gave us,’ said Doris firmly. ‘Those things are expensive and we don’t really have much interest in our garden and we know you must have liked it because you bought it. So we decided to give it back to you.’

‘I couldn’t possibly accept it,’ said Agatha.

‘You must. We haven’t felt right about it.’

Agatha, who had long begun to suspect that her cleaning lady had a will of iron, said feebly, ‘Thank you.’

‘Anything else?’ called Joe Fletcher from the doorway.

Agatha made a sudden decision. ‘Yes, there is,’ she said. ‘Take that “For Sale” sign down.’

At last they had all gone. Agatha sat down, suddenly shivering. The full horror of what had happened to her at Vera’s hit her. She went upstairs and took a hot bath and changed into a nightgown and an old shabby blue wool dressing-gown. She peered in the bathroom mirror. There was a bald sore red patch at the front of her hair where Bill had pulled it out. She switched on the central heating and then threw logs on the fire, lit a match and then shuddered and blew the match out. It would be a while before she could bear the sight of a fire.

There was a tentative knock at the door. Still shivering and holding her dressing-gown tightly about her, she went to open it. James Lacey stood there, holding the kitten in its basket and the litter tray.

‘Bill Wong asked me to look after the cat for you,’ he said. He eyed her doubtfully. ‘I could look after it for another day if you’re not up to it.’

‘No, no,’ babbled Agatha. ‘Come in. I wonder how Bill got the cat? Of course, he would have taken the keys out of my bag in the hospital. How very good of you.’

She caught a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror. How awful she looked, and not a scrap of make-up on either!

She carried the cat into the living-room and stooped and let it out of its basket and then took the litter tray into the kitchen. When she returned, James was sitting in one of her chairs staring thoughtfully at the large gnome which Doris had returned and Agatha had unwrapped. It was standing on the coffee-table leering horribly, like old Arnie on the minibus.

‘Would you like a gnome?’ asked Agatha.

‘No, thank you. It’s an unusual living-room ornament.’

‘It’s not really mine. You see . . .’

There was a hammering at the door. Agatha swore under her breath and went to answer it. Midlands Television and the BBC. ‘Can’t you come back later?’ pleaded Agatha, casting a longing look towards the living-room. But

then she saw the police car driving up as well. Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes had called.

The television interviewers had a more understated version of Agatha's story than the villagers had heard. Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes was interviewed saying sternly that the public should leave police matters to the police, as Mrs Raisin had nearly been killed and he had nearly lost one of his best officers, Agatha shrewdly guessing that when that appeared on the screens, his comments would be cut down to the simple fact that he had nearly lost one of his best officers. Everyone wanted a hero, and Bill Wong was to be the hero. Somehow in the middle of it all, James Lacey had slipped out. The television teams rushed off to find Bill Wong in Mircester, a policewoman with a recorder came in from the police car, and Wilkes got down to exhaustive questioning.

At last they left, but the phone rang and rang as various nationals phoned up to add to the stories sent in by the local men. By eleven o'clock, the phone fell silent. Agatha fed the cat and then carried it up to bed. It lay on her feet, purring gently. I'd better think of a name for it, she thought sleepily.

The phone rang downstairs. 'Now what?' groaned Agatha aloud, gently lifting the cat off her feet and wondering why she had not bothered to get a phone extension put in the bedroom. She went downstairs and picked up the receiver.

'Aggie!' It was Roy, his voice sharp with excitement. 'I thought I'd never get through. I saw you on the telly.'

'Oh, that,' said Agatha. She shivered. 'Can I call you back tomorrow, Roy?'

'Look, sweetie, there seems to be more publicity comes out of that little village than out of all the streets of London. The idea is this. Maybe the telly will be back for a follow-up. I'll run down there tomorrow and you can tell them how I helped you to solve the mystery. I phoned Mr Wilson at home and he thinks it's a great idea.'

'Roy, the story will be dead tomorrow. You know it, I know it. Let me go back to bed. I won't be up to seeing visitors for some time.'

'Well, I must say I thought you might have mentioned me,' complained Roy. 'Who was it went with you to Ancombe? I've phoned round all the papers but the night-desks say if you want to volunteer a quote about me, fine, but they're not interested in taking it from me, so be a sweetie and phone them, there's a dear.'

'I am going to bed, Roy, and that's that. Finish.'

'Aren't we being just a bit of a selfish bitch hogging all the limelight?'

'Good night, Roy,' said Agatha and put down the receiver. Then she turned back and lifted it off the hook.

‘Well, I want to meet this Raisin woman,’ said James Lacey’s sister, Mrs Harriet Camberwell, a week later. ‘I know you want to be left alone. But I’m dying of curiosity. They gave a lot of play to that detective, Wong, but she solved it, didn’t she?’

‘Yes, I suppose she did, Harriet. But she’s very odd. Do you know, she keeps a garden gnome on her coffee-table as an ornament! She walks down the street muttering and talking to herself.’

‘How sweet. I simply must meet her. Run along and ask her to drop by for a cup of tea.’

‘If I do that, will you go back to your husband and leave me alone?’

‘Of course. Go and get her and I’ll make the tea and cut some sandwiches.’

Agatha was still recovering from the shock of being nearly burnt to death. She had not bothered about trying to see James, waiting until her cuts healed up and her hair grew back. When that happened, she thought, she would plan a campaign.

The weather had turned pleasantly warm instead of the furnace heat of the days before the storm. She had the doors and windows open and was lying in her old loose cotton dress on the kitchen floor, tossing balls of foil into the air to amuse the kitten, when James walked in.

‘I should have knocked,’ he said awkwardly, ‘but the door was open.’ Agatha scrambled to her feet. ‘I wonder whether you would like to step along for a cup of tea.’

‘I must change,’ said Agatha wildly.

‘I’ve obviously come at a bad moment. Maybe another time.’

‘No! I’ll come now,’ said Agatha, frightened he would escape.

They walked along to his cottage. No sooner was she seated, no sooner was Agatha admiring his handsome profile, which was turned towards the kitchen door, when an elegant woman walked in carrying a tea-tray.

‘Mrs Raisin, Mrs Camberwell. Harriet, darling, this is Mrs Raisin. Harriet’s dying to hear all about your adventures, Mrs Raisin.’

Agatha felt small and dingy. But then women like Harriet Camberwell always made her feel small and dingy. She was a very tall woman, nearly as tall as James, slim, flat-chested, square hunting shoulders, clever upper-class face, expensive hair-style, tailored cotton dress, cool amused eyes.

Agatha began to talk. The villagers would have been amazed to hear her dull rendering of her adventures. She stayed only long enough to briefly recount her story, drink one cup of tea, eat one sandwich, and then she firmly took her leave.

At least Bill Wong was coming for dinner. Be thankful for small comforts, Agatha, she told herself sternly. But she had thought of James Lacey a lot and her days had taken on life and colour. Still, there was no need to look a fright simply because her guest was only Bill.

She did her hair and put on make-up and changed into the dress she had worn for the auction. Dinner – taught this time by Mrs Bloxby – was to be simple: grilled steaks, baked potatoes, fresh asparagus, fresh fruit salad and cream. Champagne on ice for the celebration, for Bill Wong had been elevated to detective sergeant.

It was a new, slimmer Bill who walked in the door at seven o'clock. He had been keeping in shape rigorously ever since he had seen his rather chubby features on television.

He talked of this and that, noticing that Agatha's bearlike eyes were rather sad and she seemed to have lost a great deal of animation. He reflected that the attempt on her life must have hit her harder than he would have expected.

She was not contributing much to the conversation and so he searched around for another topic to amuse her. 'Oh, by the way,' he said as she slid the steaks under the grill, 'your neighbour has given up breaking hearts in the village. He told Mrs Bloxby he wanted to be left alone and was quite sharpish about it. Then, when the ladies of Carsely back off, he is visited by an elegant woman whom he introduces to all and sundry in Harvey's as Mrs Camberwell. He calls her "darling". They make a nice pair. Mrs Mason was heard to remark crossly that she had always thought him an odd sort of man anyway and that she had only taken around a cake to be friendly.

'And guess what?'

'What?' said Agatha testily.

'Your old persecutor, Mrs Boggle, ups and asks him point-blank in the middle of Harvey's if he means to marry Mrs Camberwell, everyone thinking her a widow. And *he* replies in surprise, "Why the devil should I marry my own sister?" So I gather the ladies of Carsely are now thinking that although they cannot really call on him after what he said to Mrs Bloxby, perhaps they can get up a little party or dinner and lure him into one of their homes.' Bill laughed heartily.

Agatha turned around, her face suddenly radiant. 'We haven't opened the champagne and we must celebrate!'

'Celebrate what?' asked Bill in sudden suspicion.

'Why, your promotion. Dinner won't be long.'

Bill opened the champagne and poured them a glass each.

'Is there anything you would like me to do, Mrs Raisin, before dinner? Lay the table?'

'No, that's done. But you could start off by calling me Agatha, and there is something else. There's a sign in the front garden and a sledge hammer beside it. Could you hammer it into the ground?'

'Of course. Not selling again, are you?'

'No, I'm naming this cottage. I'm tired of everyone still calling it Budgen's cottage. It belongs to me.'

He went out into the garden and picked up the sign and hammered its pole into the ground and then stood back to admire the effect.

Brown lettering on white, it proclaimed boldly: RAISIN'S COTTAGE.

Bill grinned. Agatha was in Carsely to stay.



Agatha Raisin  
and the  
Vicious Vet

M. C. Beaton

ROBINSON  
London

The author wishes to thank her  
pet vet, Anne Wombill, of  
Cirencester for all her help. This  
book is for Anne and her  
husband, Robin, with love.

# Chapter One

Agatha Raisin arrived at Heathrow Airport with a tan outside and a blush of shame inside. She felt an utter fool as she pushed her load of luggage towards the exit.

She had just spent two weeks in the Bahamas in pursuit of her handsome neighbour, James Lacey, who had let fall that he was going to holiday there at the Nassau Beach Hotel. Agatha in pursuit of a man was as ruthless as she had been in business. She had spent a great deal of money on a fascinating wardrobe, had slimmed furiously so as to be able to sport her rejuvenated middle-aged figure in a bikini, but there had been no sign of James Lacey. She had hired a car and toured the other hotels on the island to no avail. She had even called at the British High Commission in the hope they had heard of him. A few days before she was due to return, she had put a long-distance call through to Carsely, the village in the Cotswolds in which she lived, to the vicar's wife, Mrs Bloxby, and had finally got around to asking for the whereabouts of James Lacey.

She still remembered Mrs Bloxby's voice, strengthening and fading on a bad line, as if borne towards Agatha on the tide. 'Mr Lacey changed his plans at the very last minute. He decided to spend his holiday with a friend in Cairo. He did say he was going to the Bahamas, I remember, and Mrs Mason said, "What a surprise! That's where our Mrs Raisin is going." And the next thing we knew this friend in Egypt had invited him over.'

How Agatha had squirmed and was still squirming. It was plain to her that he had changed his plans simply so as not to meet her. In retrospect, her pursuit of him had been rather blatant.

And there was another reason she had not enjoyed her holiday. She had put her cat, Hodge, a present from Detective Sergeant Bill Wong, into a cattery and somehow Agatha found she was worrying that the cat might have died.

At the Long-Stay Car-Park, she loaded in her luggage and then set out to drive to Carsely, wondering again why she had ever retired so young – well, these days early fifties *was* young – and sold her business to bury herself in a country village.

The cattery was outside Cirencester. She went up to the house and was greeted ungraciously by the thin rangy woman who owned the place. 'Really,

Mrs Raisin,' she said, 'I am just going out. It would have been more considerate of you to phone.'

'Get my animal . . . *now*,' said Agatha, glaring balefully, 'and be quick about it.'

The woman stalked off, affront in every line of her body. Soon she came back with Hodge mewling in his carrying basket. Totally deaf to further recriminations, Agatha paid the fee.

Being reunited with her cat, she decided, was a very comforting thing, and then wondered if she was reduced to the status of village lady, drooling over an animal.

Her cottage, crouched under its heavy weight of thatch, was like an old dog, waiting to welcome her. When the fire had been lit, the cat fed, and with a stiff whisky inside her, Agatha felt she would survive. Bugger James Lacey and all men!

She went to the local store, Harvey's, in the morning to get some groceries and to show off her tan. She ran into Mrs Bloxby. Agatha felt uncomfortable about that phone call but Mrs Bloxby, ever tactful, did not remind her of it, merely saying that there was a meeting of the Carsely Ladies' Society at the vicarage that evening. Agatha said she would attend, although thinking there must be more to social life than tea at the vicarage.

She had half a mind not to go. Instead she could go to the Red Lion, the local pub, for dinner. But on the other hand, she had promised Mrs Bloxby that she would go, and somehow one did not break promises to Mrs Bloxby.

When she made her way out that evening, a thick fog had settled down on the village, thick, freezing fog, turning bushes into crouching assailants and muffling sound.

The ladies were all there among the pleasant clutter of the vicarage sitting-room. Nothing had changed. Mrs Mason was still the chairwoman – chairpersons did not exist in Carsely because, as Mrs Bloxby pointed out, once you started that sort of thing you didn't know where to stop, and things like manholes would become personholes – and Miss Simms, in Minnie Mouse white shoes and skimpy skirt, still the secretary. Agatha was pressed for details about her holiday and so she bragged about the sun and the sand until she began to feel she had actually had a good time.

The minutes were read, raising money for Save the Children was discussed, an outing for the old folks, and then more tea and cake.

That was when Agatha heard about the new vet. The village of Carsely had a veterinary surgery at last. An extension had been built on to the library building. A vet, Paul Bladen, from Mircester, held a surgery there twice a week on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons.

‘We weren’t going to bother at first,’ said Miss Simms, ‘because we usually go to the vet at Moreton, but Mr Bladen’s ever so good.’

‘And ever so good-looking,’ put in Mrs Bloxby.

‘Young?’ asked Agatha with a flicker of interest.

‘Oh, about forty, I think,’ said Miss Simms. ‘Not married. Divorced. He’s got these searching eyes, and such beautiful hands.’

Agatha was not particularly interested in the vet, for her thoughts were still on James Lacey. She wished he would return so that she could show him she did not care for him at all. So, as the ladies gushed their praise for the new vet, she sat writing scripts in her head about what he would say and what she would say, and imagining how surprised he would be to find out that ordinary neighbourly friendliness on her part had been mistaken on his for pursuit.

But as the fates would have it, Agatha was destined to meet Paul Bladen the very next day.

She decided to go to the butcher’s and get herself a steak and buy some chicken livers for Hodge. ‘Marnin’, Mr Bladen,’ said the butcher, and Agatha turned round.

Paul Bladen was a good-looking man in his early forties with thick wavy fair hair dusted with grey, light-brown eyes which crinkled up as though against the desert sun, a firm, rather sweet mouth, and a square chin. He was slim, of medium height, and wore a tweed jacket with patches and flannels and, for it was a freezing day, an old London University scarf about his neck. He reminded Agatha of the old days when university students dressed like university students, before the days of T-shirts and frayed jeans.

For his part, Paul Bladen saw a stocky middle-aged woman with shiny brown hair and small, bearlike eyes in a tanned face. Her clothes, he noticed, were very expensive.

Agatha thrust out her hand and introduced herself, welcoming him to the village in her best lady-of-the-manor voice. He smiled into her eyes, holding on to her hand, and murmuring something about the dreadful weather. Agatha forgot all about James Lacey. Or nearly. Let him rot in Egypt. She hoped he’d got gippy tummy, she hoped a camel bit him.

‘As a matter of fact,’ cooed Agatha, ‘I was coming to see you. With my cat.’

Did a frost settle momentarily on those crinkled eyes? But he said, ‘There is a surgery this afternoon. Why don’t you bring the animal along? Say, two o’clock?’

‘How lovely to have our own vet at last,’ enthused Agatha.

He gave her that intimate smile of his again and Agatha went out treading on air. Fog was still holding the countryside in its grip although, far, far above, a little red disc of a sun struggled to get through, casting a faint pink light on the frost-covered landscape, which reminded Agatha of the Christmas

calendars of her youth where the winter scenes were decorated with glitter.

She hurried past James Lacey's cottage without a glance, thinking what to wear. What a pity all those new clothes had been meant for hot weather.

While the tabby, Hodge, watched curiously, she studied her face in the dressing-table mirror. A tan was all very well, but there was a lot to be said for thick make-up on a middle-aged face. There was a pouchy softness under her chin which she did not like and the lines down the side of her mouth appeared more pronounced since before she had gone away, reminding her of all the dire warnings about what sun-bathing did to the skin.

She slapped on skin-food and then rummaged through her wardrobe, settling at last on a cherry-red dress and black tailored coat with a velvet collar. Her hair was shiny and healthy, so she decided not to wear a hat. It was a bitterly cold day and she should wear her boots, but she had a new pair of Italian high heels and she knew her legs were good.

It was only after two hours of diligent preparation that she realized she had first to catch her cat, eventually running the animal to earth in a corner of the kitchen and shoving him ruthlessly in the wicker carrying basket. Hodge's wails rent the air. But deaf for once to her pet, Agatha tripped along to the surgery in her high heels. By the time she reached the surgery, her feet were so cold she felt she was walking on two lumps of pain.

She pushed open the surgery door and went into the waiting-room. It seemed to be full of people: Doris Simpson, her cleaning woman, with her cat; Miss Simms with her Tommy; Mrs Josephs, the librarian, with a larger mangy cat called Tewks; and two farmers, Jack Page, whom she knew, and a squat burly man she only knew by sight, Henry Grange. There was also a newcomer.

'Her be Mrs Huntingdon,' whispered Doris. 'Bought old Droon's cottage up back. Widow.'

Agatha eyed the newcomer jealously. Despite the efforts of Animal Liberation to stop women from wearing furs, Mrs Huntingdon sported a ranch mink coat with a smart mink hat. A delicate French perfume floated from her. She had a small pretty face like that of an enamelled doll, large hazel eyes with (false?) eyelashes, and a pink-painted mouth. Her pet was a small Jack Russell which barked furiously, swinging on the end of its lead as it tried to get at the cats. Mrs Huntingdon seemed unaware of the noise or of the baleful looks cast at her by the cat owners. She was also sitting blocking the only heater.

There were 'No Smoking' signs all over the walls, but Mrs Huntingdon lit up a cigarette and blew smoke up into the air. In a doctor's waiting-room, where patients had only themselves to worry about, there would have been protests. But a vet's waiting-room is a singularly unmanning or unwomanning place, people made timid by worry about their pets.

Along one side of the waiting-room was a desk with a nurse-cum-receptionist behind it. She was a plain girl with lank brown hair and the adenoidal accents of Birmingham. Her name was Miss Mabbs.

Doris Simpson was the first to go in and was only out of sight for five minutes. Agatha surreptitiously rubbed her cold feet and ankles. This would not take long.

But Miss Simms was next and she was in there for half an hour, emerging at last with her eyes shining and her cheeks pink. Mrs Josephs had her turn. After a very long time she came out, murmuring, 'Such a firm hand Mr Bladen does have,' while her ancient cat lay supine in its basket as one dead.

Agatha went to the counter after Mrs Huntingdon was ushered in and said to Miss Mabbs, 'Mr Bladen told me to call at two. I have been waiting a considerable time.'

'Surgery starts at two. That's probably what he meant,' said Miss Mabbs. 'You'll need to wait your turn.'

Determined not to have got all dressed up for nothing, Agatha sulkily picked up a copy of *Vogue*, June 1997, and retreated to her hard plastic chair.

She waited and waited for the merry widow plus dog to reappear, but the minutes ticked past and Agatha could hear a ripple of laughter from the surgery and wondered what was going on in there.

Three quarters of an hour went by while Agatha finished the copy of *Vogue* and a well-preserved 1990 copy of *Good Housekeeping* and was absorbed in a story in an old *Scotch Home* annual about the handsome laird of the Scottish highlands who forsook his 'ain true love' Morag of the glens for Cynthia, some painted harlot from London. At last Mrs Huntingdon came out, holding her dog. She smiled vaguely all around before leaving and Agatha glowered back.

There were only the two farmers and Agatha left. 'Reckon I won't be coming here again,' said Jack Page. 'Waste a whole day, this would.'

But he was dealt with very quickly, having come to collect a prescription for antibiotics, which he handed over to Miss Mabbs. The other farmer also wanted drugs and Agatha brightened as he reappeared after only a few moments. She had meant to berate the vet for having kept her waiting so long but there was that sweet smile again, that firm clasp of the hand, those searching, intimate eyes.

Feeling quite fluttery and at the same time guilty, for there was nothing up with Hodge, Agatha smiled back in a dazed way.

'Ah, Mrs Raisin,' said the vet, 'let's have the cat out. What's his name?'

'Hodge.'

'Same as Dr Johnson's cat.'

'Who's he? Your partner at Mircester?'

'Dr *Samuel* Johnson, Mrs Raisin.'

‘Well, how was I to know?’ demanded Agatha crossly, her private opinion being that Dr Johnson was one of those old farts like Sir Thomas Beecham that people always seemed to be quoting loftily at dinner parties. James Lacey had suggested the name.

To hide her irritation, she raised Hodge’s basket on to the examining table and undid the latch and opened the front. ‘Come on now, out you come,’ cooed Agatha to a baleful Hodge who crouched at the back of the basket.

‘Let me,’ said the vet, edging Agatha aside. He thrust a hand in and brutally dragged Hodge out into the light and then held the squirming, yowling animal by the scruff up in the air.

‘Oh, don’t do that! You’re scaring him,’ protested Agatha. ‘Let me hold him.’

‘Very well. He looks remarkably healthy. What’s up with him?’

Hodge buried his head in the opening of Agatha’s coat. ‘Er, he’s off his food,’ said Agatha.

‘Any sickness, diarrhoea?’

‘No.’

‘Well, we’d best take his temperature. Miss Mabbs!’

Miss Mabbs came in and stood with head lowered. ‘Hold the cat,’ ordered the vet.

Miss Mabbs detached the cat from Agatha and pinned him down with one strong hand on the examining table.

The vet advanced on Hodge with a rectal thermometer. Could it be, wondered Agatha, that the thermometer was thrust up poor Hodge’s backside with unnecessary force? The cat yowled, struggled free, sprang from the table and crouched in a corner of the room.

‘I’ve made a mistake,’ said Agatha, now desperate to get her pet away. ‘Perhaps if he shows any severe signs I’ll bring him back.’

Miss Mabbs was dismissed. Agatha tenderly put Hodge back in the basket.

‘Mrs Raisin.’

‘Yes?’ Agatha surveyed him with bearlike eyes from which the love-light had totally fled.

‘There is quite a good Chinese restaurant in Evesham. I’ve had a hard day and feel like treating myself. Would you care to join me for dinner?’

Agatha felt gratified warmth coursing through her middle-aged body. Bigger all cats in general and Hodge in particular. ‘I’d love to,’ she breathed.

‘Then I’ll meet you there at eight o’clock,’ he said, smiling into her eyes. ‘It’s called the Evesham Diner. It’s in an old house in the High Street, seventeenth century, can’t miss it.’

Agatha emerged grinning smugly into the now empty waiting-room. She wished she had been the first ‘patient’ so she could have told all those other women she had a date.



But she stopped at the store on the road home and bought Hodge a tin of the best salmon to ease her conscience.

By the time she had reached home and cosseted Hodge and settled him in front of a roaring fire, she had persuaded herself that the vet had been firm and efficient with the cat, not deliberately cruel.

The desire to brag about her date was strong, so she phoned the vicar's wife, Mrs Bloxby.

'Guess what?' said Agatha.

'Another murder?' suggested the vicar's wife.

'Better than that. Our new vet is taking me out for dinner this evening.'

There was a long silence.

'Are you there?' demanded Agatha sharply.

'Yes, I'm here. I was just thinking . . .'

'What?'

'Why is he taking you out?'

'I should have thought that was obvious,' snarled Agatha. 'He fancies me.'

'Forgive me. Of *course* he does. It's just that I feel there is something cold and calculating about him. Do be careful.'

'I am not sweet sixteen,' said Agatha huffily.

'Exactly.'

That 'exactly' seemed to Agatha to be saying, 'You are a middle-aged woman easily flattered by the attentions of a younger man.'

'In any case,' Mrs Bloxby went on, 'do go very carefully on the roads. It's starting to snow.'

Agatha rang off, feeling flat, and then she began to smile. Of course! Mrs Bloxby was jealous. All the women in the village were smitten by the vet. But what was that she had said about snow? Agatha twitched back the curtain and looked out. Wet snow was falling, but it was not lying on the ground.

At seven thirty she drove off in all the discomfort of a tight body stocking under a gold silk Armani dress embellished with a rope of pearls. Her heels were very high, so she kicked them off and drove up the hill from the village in her stockinged feet.

The snow was getting thicker and suddenly, near the top of the hill, she crossed over a sort of snow-line and found herself driving over thick snow. But ahead lay the tempting vision of dinner with the vet.

She pressed her foot on the brake to slow down as she neared the A44 and quite suddenly the car went into a skid. It was all so quick, so breathlessly fast. Her headlights whirled crazily round the winter landscape, and then there was a sickening crunch as she hit a stone wall on her left. She switched off the lights and the engine with a trembling hand and sat still.

A car going the other way, towards the village, stopped. A door opened and closed. Then a dark figure loomed up on Agatha's side of the car. She opened

the window. 'Are you all right, Mrs Raisin?' came James Lacey's voice.

Before the vet, before the fiasco of the Bahamas, Agatha had often fantasized about James Lacey rescuing her from some accident. But all she could think about now was that precious date.

'I think nothing's broken,' said Agatha and then struck the wheel in frustration. 'Bloody, bloody snow. I say, can you run me into Evesham?'

'You must be joking. It's to get worse, or so the weather forecast said. Fish Hill will be closed.'

'Oh, no,' wailed Agatha. 'Maybe we could go another way. Maybe through Chipping Campden.'

'Don't be silly. Does your engine still work?'

Agatha switched it on and it sprang into life.

'What about the lights?'

Agatha switched them on, glaring out at a snow-covered wilderness.

James Lacey inspected the damage to the front of the car. 'The glass in your headlamps is all shattered and you'll need a new bumper, radiator, and number-plate. You'd best back out and follow me down to the village.'

'If you won't run me, then I'll get a cab.'

'You can try.' He walked off to his own car and Agatha heard him starting up. She reversed and followed him. He parked outside his own house, waved to her, and strode indoors.

Agatha leaped out of her own car, forgetting she was in her stockinged feet, and ran into the house. She seized the phone and, looking at a list of taxi-cab companies pinned to the wall, she began to phone them one after the other, but no taxi driver was prepared to go to Evesham or anywhere else on such a night.

Dammit, thought Agatha furiously, my car still works. I'm going.

She pulled on a pair of boots over her wet feet and went out again. But she was half-way up the hill again when both her headlamps blew, leaving her crawling along in snowy darkness.

Wearily, she turned the car and headed back down to the village again. Back indoors, she phoned the Chinese restaurant. No, came a voice at the other end, Mr Bladen had not turned up. Yes, he had booked a table. No, he had definitely not arrived.

Feeling very flat, Agatha phoned Directory Enquiries and got a Mircester number for the vet. A woman answered the phone. 'I am afraid Mr Bladen is busy at the moment.' The voice was cool and amused.

'This is Agatha Raisin,' snapped Agatha. 'He was to meet me in a restaurant in Evesham tonight.'

'You could hardly have expected him to drive in such weather.'

'Who is speaking, please?' demanded Agatha.

'This is his wife.'

‘Oh!’ Agatha dropped the receiver like a hot coal.

So he was still married after all! What was it all about? But if he were married, then he should not have asked her out. Agatha had very firm views about dating married men.

She felt somehow as if he had set out to deliberately make a fool of her. Men! And James Lacey! He had simply gone indoors without calling to see if she were indeed unharmed after her accident.

Agatha felt silly and now she had only a ruined car to show for her dreams of a date with a handsome man. She passed the rest of the evening filling in an accident claim form, the purring Hodge on her lap.

The next day dawned foggy as well as snowy. Once more Agatha felt that old trapped feeling. She waited and waited for the phone to ring, sure that Paul Bladen would call her to say *something*. But it sat there, squat in its silence.

At last she decided to pay a visit to her neighbour, James Lacey, if only to explain to him, subtly, that she had not been pursuing him. But although a thin column of smoke rose from his chimney, although his snow-covered car was parked outside, he did not answer the door.

Agatha felt well and truly snubbed. She was sure he was in there.

Hodge, in the selfish way of cats, played happily in the snow in the garden, stalking imaginary prey.

In the afternoon, the doorbell went. Agatha peered at herself in the hall mirror, grabbed a lipstick she always kept ready on the hall table and painted her mouth. Then, smoothing down her dress, she opened the door.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she said, looking down into the round oriental features of Detective Sergeant Bill Wong.

‘That’s not much of a greeting,’ he said. ‘Any chance of a cup of coffee?’

‘Come in,’ said Agatha, leaning over his shoulder and peering hopefully up and down the lane.

‘Who were you expecting?’ he asked, when they were seated in the kitchen.

‘I was expecting an apology. Our new vet, Paul Bladen, invited me out for dinner in Evesham last night, but I had a skid at the top of the road and couldn’t make it. But as it turned out, he didn’t even get to the restaurant. I phoned his home and a woman answered it. She said she was his wife.’

‘Couldn’t be,’ said Bill. ‘He was separated from his wife for about five years and the divorce came through last year.’

‘What’s he playing at?’ cried Agatha, exasperated.

‘You mean, who’s he playing with. Snowy night, no way of getting to Evesham, had a bit of fun at home instead.’

‘Well, he should have phoned anyway,’ said Agatha.

‘Talking about your love life, how did you get on in the Bahamas?’

‘Nice,’ said Agatha. ‘Got some sun.’

‘See anything of Mr Lacey?’

‘Didn’t expect to. He’d gone to Cairo.’

‘And you knew that before you left?’

‘What is this?’ exclaimed Agatha. ‘A police interrogation?’

‘Just friendly questions. Glad to see Hodge is happy. Looking very fit.’

‘Oh, Hodge is in the best of health.’

The almond-shaped eyes studying her so intently glittered slightly in the white light from the snow coming in the kitchen window.

‘Then why did poor Hodge have to go to this vet?’

‘Have you been spying on me?’

‘No, I just happened to be passing yesterday and I saw you carrying Hodge in a basket to the surgery. You should wear more sensible footwear in this weather.’

‘I just wanted to check the cat had all his shots,’ said Agatha, ‘and what I choose to wear on my feet is my business.’

He raised his hands and let them fall. ‘Sorry. Funny thing about Bladen, though.’

‘What?’

‘He went into partnership with Peter Rice, the vet in Mircester, some time ago. What a queue of women there were during the first weeks! Right out in the street. But then they stopped coming. Seems Bladen is no good with pets. He’s a whiz with farm animals and horses, but he loathes cats and small dogs.’

‘I don’t want to talk about the man,’ said Agatha hotly. ‘Haven’t you got anything else to talk about?’

So Bill told her all about the trouble with the increase in car theft in the area and how a lot of the crime was being increasingly committed by juveniles, while Agatha listened with half an ear and hoped the phone would ring to salve her pride. But by the time Bill left, the wretched machine was still silent.

She phoned the local garage and told them to come and tow her broken car away and give her an estimate, and then, after she had seen her vehicle carried off down the street on the back of a truck, she decided to go down to the Red Lion. There was no reason to dress up any more. For months now she had worn only her best and smartest clothes when passing James Lacey’s door. She put on a thick sweater, a tweed skirt and boots. But just as she was shrugging herself into a sheepskin coat, the telephone suddenly shrilled, making her jump.

She picked it up, sure it would be Paul Bladen at last, but a voice she did not recognize said tentatively, ‘Agatha?’

‘Yes, who is it?’ said Agatha, made cross by disappointment.

‘It’s Jack Pomfret. Remember me?’

Agatha brightened. Jack Pomfret had run a rival public relations company to her own, but they had always been on amicable terms.

‘Of course. How’s things?’

‘I sold out about the same time as you,’ he said. ‘Decided to take a leaf out of your book, have early retirement, have a bit of fun. But it get’s boring, know what I mean?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Agatha with feeling.

‘I’m thinking of starting up again and wondered if you would like to be my partner.’

‘Bad time,’ said Agatha cautiously. ‘Middle of a recession.’

‘Big companies need PR and I’ve got two lined up, Jobson’s Electronics and Whiter Washing Powder.’

Agatha was impressed. ‘Are you anywhere near here?’ she asked. ‘We need to sit down together and discuss this properly.’

‘What I thought,’ he said eagerly, ‘was if you could take a trip up to London, we could get down to business.’

The thought of fleeing the village, of getting away from lost romantic hopes, made Agatha say, ‘I’ll do that. I’ll book a place in town. What’s your number? I’ll call you back.’

She wrote down his phone number and then, about to phone her favourite hotel, paused. Damn Hodge. She couldn’t really dump that poor animal back in the cattery. Then she remembered a block of expensive service flats into which she had once booked visiting foreign clients and phoned them and managed to get a flat for two weeks. She was sure they did not allow pets but she wasn’t even going to ask them. Hodge could survive indoors for two weeks. The weather was lousy anyway.

## Chapter Two

Agatha could not immediately plunge into business affairs, for Hodge, who had kept all his destruction to the outdoors in Carsely, had started to scratch the furniture in the service flat in Kensington, and so Agatha had to buy a scratching post and spend some time crouched on the floor in front of it, raking it with her fingernails, to show the cat what to do.

Having seen her pet settled at last, she phoned Jack Pomfret, who said he would meet her at the Savoy Grill for lunch.

Carsely was whirling away to a small speck in Agatha's mind. She was back in London, part of it again, not visiting, back in business.

Jack Pomfret, a slim Oxbridge type, fighting the age battle in denim and hair-weave, enthused over Agatha's appearance. Agatha curiously asked him why he had really decided to sell up.

'Just like you,' he said with a boyish grin. 'Thought retirement would suit me. Actually we, that's my wife, Marcia, and I, moved to Spain for a bit, but the climate didn't suit us. Down in the south. Too hot. But tell me all about yourself and what you've been doing.'

Agatha settled back and bragged about her part in a murder investigation, highly embroidered.

'But village life must be absolutely stultifying for you, darling,' he said, smiling into her eyes in a way that reminded Agatha of the vet. 'All those dead brains and clodhoppers.'

'I must admit I get bored,' said Agatha, and then felt a pang of guilt as the faces of the village women rose before her eyes. 'Actually, everyone's very nice, very kind. It's not them. It's me. I'm just not used to country life.'

They talked on until the coffee arrived and then got down to business. Jack said that there was an office up at Marble Arch they could rent. All they really needed to kick off were three rooms. Agatha studied the figures. He seemed to have gone into everything very carefully.

'This rent is very high,' said Agatha. 'We would be better to get the end of a lease somewhere. Then, before we even start thinking about it, we should be sure we had enough clients.'

'Would those two biggies I mentioned to you, Jobson's Electronics and Whiter Washing Powder, convince you?'

‘Of course.’

‘The managing directors of both companies happen to be in London for a business conference. Tell you what. Lay on some drinks and fiddly bits and I’ll bring them round to your flat. I’ll phone you later today and give you a time.’

‘I must say, if you have contacts like this, we’ll shoot to the top of the league in a few weeks,’ said Agatha.

He did phone later, the managing directors came round to Agatha’s the following day and it was a jolly meeting, particularly for Agatha, as both men flirted with her.

As Jack got up to leave, having stayed on for an extra drink after the businessmen had left, he kissed Agatha on the cheek and said, ‘I’ll give you a round figure for your share of the concern, you give me a cheque and leave all the nitty-gritty business side to me. You’re the whiz with the clients, Agatha. Always were. Look at the way you had those two eating out of your hand!’

‘How much?’ demanded Agatha.

He named a figure which made her blink. He sat down again and took out sheaves of facts and figures. Agatha thought hard. The sum he had named would take away all her savings. She still had the cottage in Carsely, but she wouldn’t need that any more now she was back in business.

‘Let me sleep on it,’ she said. ‘Leave the papers with me.’

After he had gone, she wished she had not drunk so much. She stared down at the figures. They needed all the basic things like computers and fax machines, desks and chairs. Party to launch it. Paper and paper-clips. ‘I’m not sure,’ she said slowly. ‘What do you think, Hodge? Hodge?’

But there was no sign of the cat. She searched the small flat, under the bed, in the cupboards and closets, but no Hodge.

The cat must have slipped out when her guests were leaving.

She threw on her coat and went down by the stairs, not the lift, calling ‘Hodge! Hodge!’ A woman opened a door and said in glacial tones, ‘Do you mind keeping that noise down?’

‘Get stuffed,’ snarled Agatha, sick with worry. If this were Carsely, said a voice in her head, the whole village would turn out to help you. She opened the street door. Outside lay anonymous, uncaring London. She trekked round and round the squares and gardens of Kensington while the traffic often drowned the sound of her frantically calling voice.

‘If I was you, dear,’ said a woman’s voice at her elbow, ‘I’d wait till after the traffic dies down. Cat, is it? Well, the traffic scares them.’

But Agatha ploughed on, her feet cold and aching.

She asked in all the shops up the Gloucester Road, but she was just another woman looking for a lost pet and no one had seen the cat, nor did they look at all interested or concerned.

She wandered dismally back into Cornwall Gardens. Someone was stumbling through a Chopin sonata in an amateurish way. Someone else was having a party, a press of people standing shoulder to shoulder in a front room.

And then Agatha saw a cat walking slowly towards her, a tabby cat. She advanced slowly, praying under her breath. Hodge was a tabby, a striped grey and black, hardly an original-looking animal.

‘Hodge,’ said Agatha gently.

The cat stopped and looked up at her. ‘Oh, it *is* you,’ said Agatha gratefully and scooped the cat up into her arms.

‘I’m glad someone’s picked up that poor stray,’ said a man who was walking his dog. ‘I was going to phone the RSPCA. Been living in these gardens for about two weeks. In this cold, too. Still, cats are great survivors.’

‘It’s *my* cat,’ said Agatha, and clutching the animal as fiercely as a mother does her hurt child, she stalked off to her flat.

She opened the door and closed it firmly behind her, put the cat on the floor and said, ‘Hot milk is what you need.’

Agatha went into the minuscule kitchen. Hodge rose from a kitchen chair and stretched and yawned.

‘How did you get there?’ demanded Agatha, bewildered. She swung round. The tabby she had picked up in Cornwall Gardens came into the kitchen, mewing softly. In the full glare of the fluorescent light, Agatha saw that it was a skinny thing, not at all like Hodge.

‘Two of them,’ groaned Agatha. She couldn’t keep two. One was worry enough. Where had Hodge been? thought Agatha, who was not yet well enough versed in the ways of cats and did not know they could appear to vanish into thin air. She thought of putting the new cat back out in the gardens. But that would be cruel. She could take it to the RSPCA but they would probably gas it, for who would want a plain tabby cat?

She warmed milk and put down two bowls of it and then two bowls of cat food. Hodge seemed to have placidly accepted the newcomer. Agatha changed the litter in the tray, hoping the new animal was house-trained.

When she went to bed, the cats settled down on either side of her. It was comforting. What would they say in Carsely when she returned with two? But then, she would only be returning to Carsely to pack up.

But the village was still fresh in her mind when she awoke the next morning. She decided to phone Bill Wong and tell him her news.

At police headquarters in Mircester, they said it was his day off and so Agatha phoned his home.

Bill listened carefully while she outlined all her plans and told him of the



visit of the two managing directors.

There was a silence. Then he said in his soft Gloucester accent, 'That's odd.'

'What is?' demanded Agatha.

'I mean, *two* managing directors of big companies turning up just like that. I don't know much about business . . .'

'No, you don't,' put in Agatha.

'But I would have thought a meeting would have been set up for you, liaison with the advertising department, the firms' public relations officers, that sort of thing.'

'Oh, they both happened to be in town for some business meeting.'

'And what do you really know about this Jack Pomfret? You're not just going to hand over any money or anything like that?'

'I'm not stupid,' said Agatha, angry now, for she was beginning to think she was.

'A good way to find out about people,' said Bill, 'is to call at their home. You can usually get an idea of how flush they are from where they live and what the wife is like.'

'So you think I should spy on him? And you're always telling me I don't know how to mind my own business.'

'I think you're a Nosy Parker when you don't have to be and touchingly naïve when you do have to be,' said Bill.

'Look, copper, I ran a successful business for years.'

'Maybe Carsely's made you forget what an evil place the world can be.'

'What? After all that murder and mayhem?'

'Different sort of thing.'

'Well, I've finished with Carsely.'

There was an amused chuckle from the other end of the phone. 'That's what you think.'

Agatha settled down with a coffee and cigarette to go through the papers Jack had given her again. Did he really expect her just to hand over a cheque without seeing his equal contribution? The new cat and Hodge were chasing each other over the furniture, the stray seeming to have recovered amazingly.

Agatha opened her briefcase and found a clipboard and put the papers on it. She phoned Roy Silver, the young man who had once worked for her.

'Aggie, love,' his voice lilted down the line. 'I was thinking of coming down to see you. What are you up to?'

'I need some help. Do you remember Jack Pomfret?'

'Vaguely.'

'You wouldn't happen to have an address for him?'

'As a matter of fact I have, sweetie. I pinched your business address book when I left. Don't squawk! You'd probably have forgotten about it. Let me

see . . . aha, 121, Kynance Mews, Kensington. Do you want the phone number?’

‘I’ve got that, but it doesn’t seem like a Kensington one. Never mind. I’ll walk round. It’s only round the corner.’

‘How long are you in London? I gather you are in London. Want to meet up?’

‘Maybe later,’ said Agatha. ‘Did you get married?’

‘No, why?’

‘What about that girl, what’s-her-name, you brought down to meet me?’

‘Ran off and left me for a lager lout.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m not,’ said Roy waspishly. ‘I can do better than that.’

‘Look, I’ll call you. I’ve got something to deal with first.’ Agatha said goodbye and put the phone down. Why hadn’t Jack said he was living just round the corner?

She walked along to the end of Kynance Mews to 121 and pressed the bell.

A thin, tweedy woman answered the door, the kind Agatha didn’t like, the kind who wore cultured pearls and green wellies in London.

‘Mr Pomfret?’ asked Agatha.

‘Mr Pomfret no longer lives here,’ said the woman acidly. ‘I bought the house from him. But I am not his secretary and I refuse to send any more letters on to him. All he needs to do is to pay a small amount of money to the post office in order to get his mail redirected.’

‘If you give me his address, I can take any letters to him,’ said Agatha.

‘Very well. Wait there and I’ll write it down.’

Agatha stood in the freezing cold on the frost-covered cobbles of the mews. A skein of geese flew overhead on their way from the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens to St James’s Park. Her breath came out in a little cloud of steam in front of her face. Two dog lovers stood at the entrance to the mews and unleashed their animals, which peed their way down from door to door and then both squatted down and defecated, before the satisfied owners called them to heel. There was no more selfish animal lover than a Kensington animal lover, thought Agatha.

‘Here you are,’ said the woman, ‘and here’s the address.’ She handed Agatha a slip of paper and a pile of letters. Agatha thanked her and put the letters in her briefcase and then looked down in surprise at the address as the woman firmly closed the door: 8A Ramillies Crescent, Archway. Well, there were some mansions in Archway and some rich people left in that declining suburb, but 8A suggested a basement flat.

She headed off to the Gloucester Road tube, and not wanting to make a lot of changes took the District Line to Embankment and then the Northern Line to Archway. Once she was settled on the Northern Line, she took out the

letters. They were mostly junk mail but there was one from the income tax.

Agatha's heart sank down to her cold feet. Law-abiding, financially secure people were the ones that kept in touch with the Inland Revenue.

She then took out a pocket atlas of London and looked up Ramillies Crescent, which was in a network of streets behind the hospital.

Everyone at the main road junction in Archway at the exit to the tube looked depressed. You could, thought Agatha bleakly, take the lot and dump them on the streets of Moscow and no one would notice they were foreigners. She ploughed up the steep hill from the tube and turned off towards Ramillies Crescent when she got to the hospital.

It turned out to be a run-down crescent of Victorian houses. No one here was obviously feeling the recession, for no one had ever got to any point from which to recess *to*.

The gardens were untended and most of them had been concreted over to make space for some rusting car. Agatha arrived at Number 8. Sure enough, 8A was the basement flat. Edging her way around a broken pram which looked as if it had been thrown there rather than left to rot, she rang the doorbell. Marcia Pomfret, she vaguely remembered, was a statuesque blonde.

At first she did not recognize Marcia in the woman who opened the door to her, a woman with a faded, lined face and black roots, who looked at her without a spark of recognition.

'What are you selling?' asked Marcia in a weary, nasal voice.

Agatha made up her mind to lie. 'I'm not selling anything,' she said brightly. 'Your name was given to me because I believe you and your husband lived in Spain. I am doing research for the Spanish government. They would like to know why various British families did not settle in Spain but returned.'

Agatha scooped the clipboard and papers out of her briefcase and stood waiting.

'You may as well come in,' said Marcia. 'I usually stand talking to the walls here, and that's a fact.'

She led the way into a dark living-room. Agatha's sharp eyes recognized what she called landlord's furniture and she sat down on a worn sofa in front of a low glass-and-chrome coffee-table.

'Now,' she said brightly, 'what took you to Spain?'

'It was my husband, Jack,' said Marcia. 'He'd always wanted to run a bar. Thought he could do it. So he sold the business and the house and we bought this little bar on the Costa Del Sol. He called it Home from Home. Made it British-like. San Miguel beer and steak-and-kidney pud. We had a little flat above the bar. Slave labour, it was. While he was out chatting up the birds in the bar, I was in the kitchen, wasn't I, turning out those hot English meals when it was cooking-hot outside.'

'And were you successful?' asked Agatha, pretending to take notes.

‘Naw. We was just another English bar among all them other English bars. Couldn’t get help. The Spanish’ll only work for top wages. Nearly died with the heat, I did. “Soon it’ll be all right,” Jack said. “Spend the days on the beach and let someone do the work for us.” But the place never really got off the ground. Once the tourist season was over, that was that. I said to Jack he’d have been better to make it Spanish, get the locals and the better-class tourists who don’t come all this way for English muck, but would he listen? So we sold up and came back to nothing.’

Agatha asked a few more questions about Spain and the Spanish to keep up the pretence. Then she put the clipboard away and rose to go. ‘I hope you will soon be on your feet again.’

Marcia shrugged wearily and Agatha suddenly remembered what she had looked like ten years ago at a party, blonde and beautiful. Jack’s latest bimbo, they had called her, but he had married her.

‘Have you any children?’ Agatha asked.

Marcia shook her head. ‘Just as well,’ she said sadly. ‘Wouldn’t want to bring them up here.’

And just as well, indeed, thought Agatha miserably as she trailed off down the street. For when he finds I haven’t been suckered, he’ll search around for a new wife, and one with money this time. She remembered his letters and stopped beside a pillar-box, readdressed the lot and popped them in.

Jack Pomfret was standing on the up escalator at Archway tube when he saw the stocky figure of Agatha Raisin on the down escalator and opened his copy of *The Independent* and hid behind it. He ran all the way home once he was out in the street.

‘Was that Raisin woman here?’ he demanded.

‘What Raisin woman?’ demanded Marcia. ‘There was only some woman from the Spanish government asking questions about British who had left Spain.’

‘What did she look like?’

‘Straight brown hair, small brown eyes, bit of a tan.’

‘You silly bitch, that was Agatha Raisin smelling out God knows what kind of rats. What did you tell her?’

‘I told her how we couldn’t make that bar work. How was I to know . . .’

Jack paced up and down. The money he’d spent feeding that old cow at the Savoy! The money he’d paid to those two actor friends to impersonate businessmen! Perhaps he could still save something.

Agatha packed up her stuff and left the rented flat for a new one, sacrificing the money she’d paid in advance. She moved to another rented service flat in Knightsbridge, behind Harrods. She would see a few shows and eat a few

good restaurant meals before returning to that grave called Carsely.

She knew Jack would come looking for her and she did not relish the confrontation, for like all people who have been tricked, she felt ashamed of her own gullibility.

So when Jack Pomfret, sweating lightly despite the cold, called at her old flat, he did not find anyone there. The owners did not know she had left, for she had not returned her keys, and assumed she was out, and so Jack called and called desperately in the ensuing days until even he had to admit to himself that there was little hope of getting any money out of Agatha Raisin.

Apart from going to shows and restaurants, Agatha took the new cat to the Emergency Veterinary Clinic in Victoria, learned it was female, got it its shots, named it Boswell despite its gender, with some idea of keeping up the literary references, and decided that two cats were as easy to keep as one.

One evening, walking home from the theatre through Leicester Square, she was just priding herself at how easily she fitted back into city life when a youth tried to seize her handbag. Agatha hung on like grim death, finally managing to land a hefty kick on her assailant's shins. He ran off. Passers-by stared at her curiously but no one asked her if she was all right. When one lived in town, thought Agatha, one became street-wise, developed an instinct for danger. But in sleepy Carsely, where she often did not bother to lock her car at night, such instincts had gone. She walked on purposefully, striding out with a confident step which declared, don't mug me, I'm loaded for bear, the step of the street-wise.

At the end of a week, she headed back to Carsely, carrying two cat baskets this time.

For the first time, she had an odd feeling of coming home. It was a sunny day, with a faint hint of warmth in the air. Snowdrops were fluttering shyly at village doorsteps.

She thought of the vet, Paul Bladen, again. Now she had a new cat, she had every excuse to take it to the vet for a check-up. On the other hand, if Bill Wong was to be believed, Paul Bladen did not like cats. She decided to go along and say she needed some eye ointment.

She had really only half believed Bill, however, and was surprised to find the waiting-room empty. Miss Mabbs looked up listlessly from a torn magazine and said Mr Bladen was up at Lord Pendlebury's racing stable but would be back soon. Agatha waited and waited.

After an hour, Paul Bladen walked into the waiting-room, nodded curtly to Agatha and disappeared into the surgery. Agatha had half a mind to leave.

But after only a few moments, Miss Mabbs told her to go through.

He listened to Agatha's tale of the cat's eye infection and then scribbled out

a prescription, saying they were out of the ointment, but that she could get it at the chemist's in Moreton-in-Marsh. He then obviously waited for Agatha to leave.

'Don't you think you owe me an explanation?' demanded Agatha. 'I tried to go to that restaurant in Evesham but the snow was so bad, I crashed. I tried to phone you but some woman answered the phone, saying she was your wife. I thought you might have had the decency to phone *me*.'

He was suddenly all charm. 'Mrs Raisin, I am very sorry. The weather was so dreadful, I was sure you would not even try to make it. The woman on the phone was my sister, being silly. Do forgive me. Look, what about tonight? There's a new Greek restaurant in Mircester, just near the abbey. We could meet there at eight.' But when he smiled into her eyes, Agatha was reminded bitterly of Jack Pomfret.

She hesitated, looking out of the surgery window. It was then that she saw James Lacey, looking the same as ever. He was a very tall, well-built man with a handsome, tanned face and bright blue eyes. His thick black hair had only a trace of grey at the sides. He was strolling past with that easy, rangy stride of his, James Lacey without a care in the world.

'I'd love to go,' she said. 'See you then.'

When Agatha got home, the phone was ringing and she picked up the receiver. Jack Pomfret's voice sounded down the line. 'Agatha, Agatha, I can explain . . .'

Agatha slammed the receiver back on its stand. The phone immediately began to ring again.

She snatched it up. 'Look, bugger off, you useless con,' she snarled. 'If you think –'

'Mrs Raisin, it's me, Bill.'

'Oh! I told you to call me Agatha.'

'Sorry. Agatha. So business wasn't business?'

'No,' said Agatha curtly.

'Pity. What about dinner tonight?'

'What?'

'You, me, dinner.'

Bill Wong was in his twenties, so any invitation to dinner was prompted by pure friendship. Nonetheless she was flattered and almost tempted to dump the vet. But the vet was nearer her age.

'I've got a date, Bill. What about next week?'

'Right. I'll probably see you before then. Who's your date with? Lacey?'

'No, the vet.'

'Out of the frying pan into the fire.'

‘What the hell does that mean? You mean he’s after my *money*? Well, let me tell you, Bill Wong, that a lot of men find me attractive.’

‘Sure, sure. Talking off the top of my head. See you soon. Only joking. He’s probably loaded.’

## Chapter Three

Agatha tried on one dress after the other, gave up and changed into an old skirt and blouse, was about to leave and hurried back indoors to put on the body stocking, the Armani dress, the pearls, and gummed on a pair of false eyelashes she had bought in London.

James Lacey saw her drive off. He noticed that she no longer went slowly past his house, looking eagerly out of the car window.

Agatha drove along the Fosse to Mircester, an old cobbled town dominated by a great medieval abbey. She found the restaurant without difficulty. It was more like a dingy shop with closed curtains rather than a restaurant, but she was sure all would be warmth and elegance inside.

The Stavros Restaurant came as a bit of a shock to her when she walked inside. There was cracked linoleum on the floor and checked plastic tablecloths covered the tables. A few rather dingy enlarged photographs of views of Greece, the Acropolis, Delphi, and so on stared down from the walls.

Paul Bladen rose to meet Agatha. He was wearing his old tweeds and an open-necked shirt.

‘You look very grand,’ he said by way of greeting.

‘I didn’t know it would be such a . . . quaint . . . restaurant,’ said Agatha, sitting down.

‘The food makes up for the decor.’ He poured her a glass of retsina from a carafe, and Agatha took a swig, mentally damning it as lighter fuel but hoping the alcohol content was enough to give courage.

A skinny waitress with dead-white *Return of the Mutant Women* make-up came up with a notebook.

‘Watyerwant?’ she asked laconically.

Agatha, who would normally have told her to buzz off and give her time to choose something had, that evening, decided to play the feminine and submissive woman, so she batted her false eyelashes at Paul and said, ‘You choose for me.’

The dish was supposed to be stuffed vine leaves. Agatha, poking at it after it had arrived at their table with depressing speed, decided the vine leaves were cabbage and the filling was watery rice.

She found that by dint of breaking the little packets open and spreading



them about her plate she could actually make it look as if she had at least eaten some of it.

Paul Bladen talked all the while about his hopes to supply Carsely with a really good veterinary service and ordered another large carafe of retsina, as Agatha was making up in drink what she was not getting in the way of food.

‘Now,’ he said, smiling into her eyes, ‘tell me all about yourself. How is it that such a sophisticated lady ends up in a Cotswold village?’

A sober Agatha might have remembered that the Cotswolds, being fashionable, abound in quite a lot of interesting people, but the tipsy Agatha was flattered and told him all about her childhood dream of owning a cottage in the country, how she had built up a successful business, sold it and retired early. ‘*Very* early,’ said Agatha.

He reached across the table and took her hand. ‘You haven’t mentioned your husband.’

Agatha shrugged. ‘I left him years and years ago. I suppose he’s dead.’ Agatha had never even bothered to get a divorce. Paul’s hand was warm and dry and firm. She felt fluttery and breathless, almost as if she were on a first date.

‘I’m doing all the talking,’ she said. ‘What about you?’

‘I am working on a dream,’ he said. He released her hand as the waitress came up and put two Levantine sticky cakes, oozing watery honey, in front of them and two cups of black sludge masquerading under the name of Greek coffee.

‘I plan to create a really good veterinary hospital,’ he said, ‘but that takes money.’

‘You should ask the Carsely Ladies’ Society,’ said Agatha. ‘They’re terribly good at fund-raising.’

‘Unlike you, I think they are all too provincial to grasp such a grand concept.’

‘I wouldn’t say that.’ Agatha thought of Mrs Bloxby. ‘They’re really dedicated workers . . . I tell you what. I’ll give you a contribution to start your fund off.’

Twenty pounds, thought Agatha charitably. After all, he is paying for this quite hideous dinner.

He seized her hand again. ‘You don’t seem to like your coffee.’

‘I like filter coffee.’

‘Then let’s go to my place and have some.’ He stroked his thumb over the palm of her hand.

Well, this is it, thought Agatha, as she drove after his car through the dark winding streets of the old town, this is what I got all dressed up for. But the euphoria induced by all she had drunk was leaving her.

Paul, in the car in front, stopped outside a small Victorian villa on the

outskirts of the town.

As Agatha followed him into a gloomy hall, she was suddenly seized with panic as he turned and smiled slowly and intimately at her. Sex! Here it was and here were all the fears. She hadn't shaved her armpits. What if she wasn't . . . er . . . gymnastic enough? The house was cold. One of her false eyelashes was beginning to slip. She could feel it. What if she had to undress in front of him and he saw her trying to get out of that body stocking?

'I've got to go,' she said suddenly. 'I forgot to leave the cats any water.'

'Agatha, Agatha, they'll be all right. Come here.'

'And I'm expecting an important phone call from New York and . . . I mean, thanks for the dinner. My treat next time. Honestly, got to rush.'

Agatha fled down the garden path, stumbling on her high heels.

She unlocked her car and dived into the driving seat and then drove off, not feeling the panic ebb until she was safely back out of the town and on her road home. Along the Fosse, a police car loomed up in her rear-view mirror. She thought of all she had drunk and prayed they would not stop her and breathalyse her. She dropped her speed to thirty and the police car moved out and passed her.

She felt bewildered by her reactions to the handsome vet. She had not had an affair with anyone in quite a long time. What a fool she had been. Not once did she allow the thought to form in her head that the idea of love-making without love had become repugnant to her. That was too old-fashioned an idea to admit to, and Agatha Raisin was determinedly modern.

The next day Paul Bladen went back to Lord Pendlebury's racing stables. He was to perform Hobday's operation on a racehorse to stop its roaring. This involved cutting the vocal cords. He filled a syringe with a drug called Immobilon to anaesthetize the animal. Beside him on a small rickety table which he had carried into the stable for the purpose, he placed a glass bottle of Revivon to inject the horse when the operation was over, and also a glass bottle of Narcon, a powerful antidote in case he got any of the Immobilon into his bloodstream by mistake.

'There now, boy, easy,' he said, patting the horse on the nose as it shuffled and whinnied. He felt irritated that Lord Pendlebury had not even bothered to supply him with a stable-boy to help. The sun was shining in through the open stable door, casting a huge gold rectangle on the cobbles at his feet. He raised the syringe to inject the horse in the jugular vein. The gold at his feet darkened as if a cloud had passed over the face of the sun. Then something struck him savagely on the back of the head and he fell sprawling. Winded but not unconscious, he twisted round on the cobbles. 'What the hell are you . . .?' he began.

A hand twisted the syringe out of his grasp and the next thing he knew, the syringe had been plunged into his chest. He scrambled desperately at the table where the antidote lay. Even Revivon, the drug to revive the horse, would work if he couldn't reach the Narcon, but the table was kicked over and he died a few seconds later.

Agatha heard about his death the following day from Bill Wong, and her first feeling was one of selfish relief that the vet was no longer around to gossip about the way she had fled from his house.

Agatha had replaced the electric cooker in her kitchen with an Aga stove. The door of the stove was open and a wood fire was burning briskly. A jug of early daffodils from the Channel Islands stood on the window-ledge. The square plastic table was gone and now there was a solid wooden one with a scrubbed top.

'It was a tragic accident,' said Bill. 'Some vets won't work with Immobilon. It's deadly. There was a case not long ago where the vet put the syringe full of the stuff in his breast pocket and approached the horse. The horse nudged him on the chest, the syringe pricked the vet and that was enough. He died almost instantly.'

'You'd think they'd have some sort of antidote,' said Agatha.

'Oh, they do, but there's not often time to reach it. In Paul Bladen's case, it was on a little table, but either he kicked it over in his death agonies, or the horse kicked it over.'

'You mean it's like cyanide? You writhe about?'

'Come to think of it, you don't,' said Bill. 'Good way to commit suicide . . . quick and painless. There was one curious thing.'

'Yes?' Agatha's eyes brightened.

'No, not that curious. Not murder. There was a lump on the back of his head, but of course it was assumed he got that striking his head when he fell, although he was found lying on his side. His fingerprints were on the edge of the table, as if he'd made an attempt to get to the antidote.'

'And he was all alone?'

'Yes. The reason for that, reading between the lines of old Lord Pendlebury's statement, is that he high-handedly demanded help. Lord Pendlebury said his stable staff were all too busy and then made sure they were. It was an operation to stop the horse roaring. A lot of racehorses make a roaring sound on the course.'

'Seems brutal.'

'Everything to do with animals is brutal.'

James Lacey hovered outside Agatha's door. She had baked him a pie two months ago and he knew he should have returned the pie dish. He had been putting it off. But the fact that Agatha had apparently ceased to pursue him had given him courage. He rang the bell, thinking that with any luck she might be out around the village, and then he could safely leave the pie dish on the doorstep.

But Agatha answered the door. 'Come in and have coffee,' she said, taking the pie dish. 'We're in the kitchen.'

That 'we' encouraged James Lacey to step inside. He was writing a military history, and like most writers spent his days looking for excuses not to work.

He knew Bill Wong and nodded a greeting. James settled down over a cup of coffee, relieved that Agatha was not staring at him in the intense way she usually did.

'We've just been talking about Paul Bladen's death,' said Agatha. She described what had happened.

The retired colonel despised what he called 'women's gossip' and would have been amazed had anyone pointed out to him that he was just like the rest of the human race, a gossip himself.

'I'm not surprised,' he said cheerfully, 'that a man so generally loathed should be bumped off.'

'But he wasn't bumped off,' protested Agatha.

The people who claim not to be gossips are usually the worst kind, and James Lacey weighed in. 'How can you be sure?' he demanded. 'For a start, did you hear about poor Mrs Josephs? You know she was devoted to that old cat of hers, Tewks. Well, she kept going to Bladen with one excuse or another. One day he asked her to leave the cat with him for a full examination. When she went back to collect her beloved pet, he had put it to death. He said the cat was too old and needed to be put out of its misery. Mrs Josephs was distraught.

'Then there was Miss Simms. She kept going along on one pretext or another. The last time she went, she said, and I believe her, it was because the cat had a genuine complaint. It was scratching and scratching. Bladen told her coldly the cat had fleas, and not to waste his time and be more thorough with her housekeeping. She took her cat back to her former vet, who told her the animal had an allergy. Miss Simms returned to Bladen and ripped him up and down. You could hear it all over the village. But then Bladen had told Jack Page, the farmer, that he was sick of those women and their dreary pets. He only had time for working animals.'

'This must have all happened when I was in London,' said Agatha. 'I mean, they all went to him when he first came.'

'They were all in love with him,' said James. 'Then for some reason he started to get nasty to a few of them. There are still some who think he's the

best vet ever . . . or was.'

'Who are they?' asked Bill.

'Mrs Huntingdon, the pretty newcomer with the Jack Russell; Mrs Mason, the chairwoman of the Carsely Ladies' Society; Mrs Harriet Parr from the lower village; and Miss Josephine Webster, who runs that shop which seems to sell nothing other than dried flowers.'

'How did you learn all this?' exclaimed Agatha, and then turned pink, for she realized in that moment that he was every bit as much pursued by the village women as Paul Bladen had been.

'Oh, people talk to me,' he said vaguely.

'You had a dinner date with Bladen,' said Bill Wong, looking at Agatha. 'The night before his death, in fact, for I asked you out for dinner and you told me you couldn't go because you had a date with him.'

'So what?' demanded Agatha.

James Lacey looked at her curiously. She was quite attractive, he supposed, in a pugnacious sort of way. In fact, now that she was not oiling all over him, he could see that she did have certain good points. She had a trim, if rather stocky figure, excellent legs, rather small, intelligent brown eyes, and shiny healthy brown hair, worn straight but cut by some no doubt expensive hairdressing master.

'So I'm interested,' Bill was saying. 'Where did you go for dinner?'

'That new Greek place in Mircester.'

'Horrible dump,' said James. 'Took someone there for dinner myself. Never again.'

Agatha wondered immediately whom he had taken for dinner, but she said, 'I didn't find out all that much about him. Oh, he said his dream was to open a veterinary hospital.'

'Aha,' said Bill maliciously. 'Tried to get money out of you, did he?'

'No, *he did not!*' yelled Agatha, and added in a quieter voice. 'It may come as a surprise to you, but he fancied me.'

'I'm glad about that. I mean, you'd suffered enough already with that chap in London trying to cheat you,' said Bill.

'More coffee?' said Agatha, glaring at him.

'Yes, please,' said James Lacey.

'Not for me,' said Bill. 'Back to work.' And he left the kitchen too quickly for James to change his mind and escape.

Determined to be as remote and cool as possible, Agatha served James with another cup of coffee and then sat at the far end of the table from him. More for something to say than because she was interested, she said, 'So you think someone might have murdered Paul Bladen?'

'It did cross my mind,' he said. 'I mean, it would be so easy to do. Creep up on him when he had a syringe full, knock him on the head . . . No that won't

do. He hadn't been knocked on the head.'

'But he might have been,' said Agatha. 'I mean, he had a lump on his head. They decided he might have got it falling on the floor, but he was lying on his side.'

'I suppose the police know what they are doing,' said James. 'I mean, if anyone else had been around Lord Pendlebury's racing stables, he or she would have been seen. This is the country. You can't sneak around places quietly like you can in the city.'

'I wonder,' said Agatha. 'I would like to see those racing stables. Do you know Lord Pendlebury?'

'No. But all you have to do is go up there and ask him to contribute to one of those charities you're always raising money for. Then, when you leave the house, all you have to do is go to the stables and take a look around.'

'I wish you would come with me,' said Agatha. He looked at her nervously, but she had not said it in any flirtatious way.

He thought of the work he had to do, he thought of the joys of writing and found himself saying, 'I don't see why not. We could go up this afternoon, say, about two.'

'That is very kind of you,' said Agatha calmly.

She saw him to the door, ushered him out, and then performed a war dance in her little hall. The impossible was about to happen. She was going to spend an afternoon with James Lacey.

By two o'clock, Agatha, weary of trying on clothes, had settled for a cherry-red sweater, a neat tweed skirt, brogues, and a sheepskin coat.

She stood by the window of the dining-room, which faced the front of the house, so that she could watch him arriving. And there he came with his long rangy stride. Although in his fifties, he was a handsome man, over six feet tall, with crisp dark hair with only a trace of grey, humorous eyes and a powerful nose. He was wearing a moth-eaten old shooting sweater with worn suede patches on the shoulders over a checked shirt and olive-green cords. Agatha had a good stare at him to compensate for the fact that she intended to remain cool and detached when she actually met him again.

Lord Pendlebury's home, Eastwold Park, lay at the end of a long drive which led off the road from the village. Agatha felt quite elated. The only time she had been inside the doors of a grand house before was as a tourist. She wondered if she should curtsy – no, that was for royalty – and should she call him 'my lord'? Best to watch how James Lacey went on and copy him.

They drove up and parked outside the front of one of those rambling Cotswold mansions which cover quite a bit of ground without appearing to do so. The door was answered not by a butler, but by one of the village women,

Mrs Arthur, wearing an overall and brushing wisps of grey hair from her eyes. Mrs Arthur was a member of the Carsely Ladies' Society, but Agatha had not known she worked for Lord Pendlebury.

'I wanted to ask Lord Pendlebury if he would contribute to our fund-raising for Save the Children,' said Agatha.

'You can *ask*,' said Mrs Arthur. 'No harm in *asking*, I always say.' She stayed put.

'Why don't you ask Lord Pendlebury then if we may see him?' demanded James Lacey.

'On your own heads be it,' said Mrs Arthur. 'He's in the study, over there.' She jerked a thumb towards a door at the end of the hall.

It was all very disappointing, thought Agatha, as she followed James Lacey across the hall. There should have been a butler to take a visiting card on a silver tray. But James was already holding open the study door for her.

Lord Pendlebury was seated in a battered leather armchair before a dying wood fire. He was fast asleep.

'Well, that's that,' whispered Agatha.

James crossed to the window. 'The stable block is out the back,' he said, not bothering to lower his voice. 'You can see it from here.'

'Shhh,' urged Agatha. The room was so silent, book-lined, dim, with two walls of calf-bound books, a large desk, bowls of spring flowers on odd little tables, and the solemn tick of clocks intensifying the silence.

'Who are you?' Lord Pendlebury was awake now and staring straight at her.

Agatha jumped and said, 'I am Agatha Raisin from Carsely. The gentleman there is Mr Lacey.' She longed to call him Colonel but was sure James would object. 'I am collecting money on behalf of the Carsely Ladies' Society for Save the Children.'

Like an American swearing the oath of allegiance, Lord Pendlebury put an arm across his chest, no doubt to protect his wallet.

'I have already given money to Cancer Research,' he said.

'But this is Save the Children.'

'I don't *like* children,' said Lord Pendlebury petulantly. 'Too many of them. Go away.'

Agatha opened her mouth to blast him, but James Lacey said quickly, 'Fine-looking stables you have, sir. Mind if we walk over and take a look?'

'Doesn't matter if I mind, does it?' said Lord Pendlebury. 'A landowner no longer has any privacy. If it's not busybodies like you, it's those damn environmentalists, walking over my land with their rucksacks, eating health-food nut bars and farting. Do you know what causes the damage to the ozone layer? It's health fanatics, eating ghastly bran and nut bars and farting about the landscape. Sending out poisonous gases and wind. Ought to be put down.'

‘Quite,’ said James indifferently while Agatha glared at Lord Pendlebury.

‘You don’t seem a bad sort of chap,’ said Lord Pendlebury, peering at James in the gloom of the study. ‘But that woman looks like one of those hunt saboteurs, slaving on about the darling foxes.’

‘Listen, you,’ said Agatha, advancing on him.

James took her firmly by the arm and guided her towards the door. ‘Thank you for your kind invitation, Lord Pendlebury,’ he said over his shoulder. ‘We shall enjoy seeing your stables.’

‘Rude old bugger,’ raged Agatha when they were out in the hall.

James shrugged. ‘He’s old. Leave him be. We get to see the racing stables and that’s why we came.’

But Agatha was still smarting. She felt she had been grossly insulted. Worse than that, she thought Lord Pendlebury had been able to see right through her expensive sheepskin and sweater, right down into her working-class soul.

‘I’m going to have a firm talk with Mrs Arthur,’ said Agatha as they walked together towards the stable block. ‘She could probably earn more working in a factory or a supermarket.’

‘She and her husband work for Lord Pendlebury,’ pointed out James Lacey. ‘They get a rent-free cottage on the estate and all the free vegetables they want from the market garden. Anyway, you want to persuade Mrs Arthur to leave to get your revenge on the old man because he thought you were a flatulent fox preserver.’

This was the truth, and so Agatha decided James was really quite an uninteresting and charmless man after all.

The other thing that was irritating was that although James Lacey had spent less time in and around the village compared to herself, he seemed to know a remarkable number of people. He hailed Lord Pendlebury’s trainer, Sam Stodder, and introduced him to Agatha.

‘Lord Pendlebury said we could take a look around the stables, Mr Stodder,’ said James. ‘Sad thing about that vet’s death, wasn’t it?’

‘Sad, for sure. Happened right over there. He were doing that operation to stop Sparky roaring.’

‘And no one else was about at the time?’

‘No. Lord Pendlebury had a new filly out in the paddock and took us all off to have a look. We was all talking and smoking and admiring the filly, ’cos it’s not often the old man lets us slack. Devil for work, he is. Then Bob Arthur, him what does for my lord, he strolls off and says he’s going for to see how the vet is getting on and the next thing he comes out, yelling and crying that Bladen is dead. “Looks like someone’s done fer him,” he says, so his lordship says for to call the police.’

‘And it was in here?’ asked Agatha, approaching the right wing of the



stable block.

Both men followed her in. There was nothing to be seen. The row of loose boxes stretched off into the gloom, the horses' heads poking out. 'Oldest bit of the stables,' said Sam. 'In the rest of it, the loose boxes open right out on to the courtyard, not inside like here.'

Agatha stared at the floor, but there was nothing to be seen, not even a sliver of glass.

'Why did Mr Arthur say that it looked like someone had done for him?' she asked.

'Reckon he warden't none too popular, like. Wizard with horses, mind. Lord Pendlebury thought him a cheeky sort and wanted Mr Rice, Bladen's partner from Mircester, but Mr Rice don't like Lord Pendlebury and that's a fact, and so he do make excuses not to come.'

'I don't suppose anyone likes Lord Pendlebury, horrible old man that he is,' said Agatha.

'You're entitled to your opinion, I'm sure,' said Sam, 'but don't expect none of us here to say a word against the old man. Course you haven't been as long in these parts as Mr Lacey here, or you'd know that criticism of his lordship is not welcome; no, that it's not.'

'I've been here a considerable time longer than Mr Lacey,' said Agatha huffily.

'Well, there's folks that fit in and folks that don't,' said Sam. 'Afternoon.' He touched his cap and strolled off.

'What a feudal peasant,' said Agatha.

'Sam's a good man, and we're the peasants in this case.'

'What?'

'Vulgarly poking our noses in where they don't belong. What on earth are we doing here, Mrs Raisin?'

'Agatha.'

'Agatha. The man died because of an unfortunate accident.'

'I'm not so sure,' said Agatha, more out of a desire to be contrary than because she believed it.

They strolled round to the front of the house where Agatha's car was parked. It looked new and shiny after all the expensive repairs. Lord Pendlebury came towards them.

His tall, thin, heron-like figure loped up to them. 'What do you think you're doing?' he said angrily. 'There's an open day once a year, on June the first; otherwise keep off private property.'

'It's us,' said James Lacey patiently. 'You gave us permission to go and look at your stables.'

His pale watery eyes blinked at them and then focused on Agatha. 'Oh, the hunt saboteur,' he said. 'The people one has to put up with these days.'

He headed off towards the stables, leaving James amused and Agatha fuming.

‘You’re hardly the flavour of the month,’ said James.

‘The man’s senile,’ snapped Agatha. She had often lingered longingly while on the tour of some stately home outside the roped-off private part hoping a member of the family would recognize her as one of their own kind and ask her to tea. That fantasy seemed totally ridiculous now.

She drove James back to the village, feeling hurt and gauche and inadequate. He glanced at her sideways and something prompted him to say, ‘I haven’t been to the Red Lion for ages. Fancy a drink there this evening?’

Agatha’s spirits rocketed like the pheasant which rose up before the wheels of her car and over the hedge beside the road. But she kept her voice light and casual. ‘That would be nice. What time?’

‘Oh, about eight. I have to go to Moreton for something, so I’ll see you there.’

He was already regretting his invitation, and yet there was no sign of any return of that predatory look he had noticed before in Agatha’s eyes.

Agatha, guessing that he would not bother to change, restrained herself from changing her own clothes. She fed the cats and played with them and tried not to watch the clock. Excitement built up in her as eight o’clock approached. Although she had, with the help of Mrs Bloxby, been training herself to cook, she put a frozen lasagne in the microwave for her dinner so as not to waste more time on elaborate preparations. It tasted foul. How could she ever have eaten such stuff?

As she walked to the Red Lion, a full moon was shining down, washing everything with silver, outlining the skeletal arms of trees against the starry sky. White and pink verbena flowers scented the air, reminding Agatha unromantically of expensive bath soap. At exactly three minutes past eight, she pushed open the door of the Red Lion.

James Lacey was there in the low-raftered pub, standing at the bar, talking to the landlord. ‘What’ll you have?’ he asked by way of greeting.

‘Gin and tonic,’ said Agatha, settling herself happily on a bar stool.

‘I was wondering,’ he began as he paid for her drink. But Agatha was never to know what he was wondering, for the pub door opened and the yapping of a Jack Russell and the heavy smell of French perfume heralded the arrival of Mrs Huntingdon, Carsely’s newest incomer.

To Agatha’s dismay, James said, ‘Evening, Freda. What’ll you have? Do you know Agatha Raisin? Agatha, this is Freda Huntingdon.’

So it was Freda, was it? thought Agatha gloomily. The widow was wearing a cherry-red sleeveless jacket over a black cashmere sweater and short black wool skirt. Her legs in fine black stockings were very good.

‘Let’s sit at that table over there,’ said James after he had bought Freda a

whisky and water.

‘Perhaps Freda is meeting someone,’ suggested Agatha hopefully.

‘No,’ she said in a husky voice, ‘all on my lonesome. Thought I might find you here, James. How’s the writing going?’

James! Freda! Rats! Agatha plumped herself down at the table by the log fire and tried not to let her bitter disappointment show on her face.

‘The writing’s not going at all well,’ said James. ‘I look for every excuse not to get started. This morning I defrosted the fridge, and this afternoon Mrs Raisin –’

‘Agatha, please.’

‘Sorry, Agatha and I went to see Lord Pendlebury.’

‘Isn’t he an old duck?’ murmured Freda. ‘Quite one of the old school.’

‘How do you know him?’ asked Agatha.

‘I talked to him outside the church last Sunday,’ said Freda. ‘I found him quite charming.’

‘I don’t think Agatha found him at all charming,’ said James. ‘He mistook her for a hunt saboteur.’

Freda Huntingdon laughed merrily. Her dog peed against the leg of the table and she said ‘Tut-tut’ and picked up the revolting yapping creature and cuddled it on her lap.

‘Have you seen the latest Russell Crowe movie, James?’ asked Freda. She lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke in Agatha’s direction.

‘I haven’t seen any Russell Crowe movie, let alone the latest,’ replied James.

‘But you should! They’re tremendous fun. The new one’s on at Mircester. Tell you what, come with me tomorrow.’

At that moment, Agatha saw Jack Page, the farmer, come in. She felt she could not bear any more of Freda and James. She rose and picked up her unfinished drink.

‘Just going to have a drink with Jack.’

Jack Page hailed her. ‘Nights are drawing out, Agatha,’ he said. ‘Be spring before you know it. Sorry to hear about that crash you had.’

He was a cheerful man with an easy manner. Agatha told him at length about her crash. He bought her another drink. Agatha sat down on a bar stool next to him and tried to forget about the pair in the corner.

‘Bad thing about that vet,’ said Jack.

‘You went to him, didn’t you?’ said Agatha. ‘I saw you there the first time I took my cat along. What did you make of him?’

‘The surgery was handy to nip down to and get antibiotics and things,’ said Jack. ‘Never thought about him much one way or t’other. Then I heard what he done to poor Mrs Josephs’s cat, so I stopped going. That was right cruel.’

‘You don’t think someone bumped him off, do you?’

‘Ah, you’re looking for another murder to solve,’ he teased. ‘Sad accident, it were. Funeral’s next Monday in Mircester, at St Peter’s.’

‘I might go,’ said Agatha.

‘Was you friendly with him then?’

‘Had dinner with him one night,’ replied Agatha, ‘but not really friendly.’

He drained his tankard and set the empty glass down on the bar. ‘I’d best be getting back. I told the wife I’d only stop for the one. Why not come back and say hello?’

Agatha had a sudden longing to turn round. But Mrs Huntingdon let out a trill of laughter and her dog gave a volley of barks.

‘I’d like that,’ said Agatha, picking up her handbag.

She turned at last and gave a casual wave to James before leaving with the farmer.

James Lacey watched her go with some surprise. And he had thought she was pursuing him!

## Chapter Four

Snow was falling as Agatha entered the church of St Peter in Mircester the following Monday. She was already wishing she had not come. A doggedness to find out something about the vet's death had prompted this visit. So long as she was worrying about the vet's death, Agatha did not need to worry about James Lacey.

The church was very old, with fine stained-glass windows and a dreadful seventeenth-century altar of some dark wood. Agatha took a pew at the back, unhitched the hassock from its hook, knelt in pretended prayer and then studied the congregation. But all she saw was backs of heads. There seemed to be quite a number of women present. One turned her head. Mrs Huntingdon! And then Agatha recognized the solid bulk of Mrs Mason, the chairwoman of the Carsely Ladies' Society, two pews in front of her. She changed her seat and went to sit next to her.

Mrs Mason was clutching a damp handkerchief in her hand. 'So sad,' she whispered to Agatha. 'Such a fine young man.'

'Hardly young,' said Agatha and received a look of reproach.

The coffin was carried in and placed in the aisle in front of the altar. 'That's Mr Rice, Mr Bladen's partner,' said Mrs Mason. 'The one on the left at the front.' Among the men who had carried in the coffin, Agatha saw a burly middle-aged man with curly ginger hair.

'Who is here from the village, apart from us and that Mrs Huntingdon?' asked Agatha.

'Over there to the right, Mrs Parr and Miss Webster.'

Agatha leaned forward. Both women were crying. Mrs Parr was small and quite pretty and Miss Webster of an indeterminate age, possibly late thirties. She recognized Miss Webster as the woman who ran the dried flower shop.

'I'm surprised you are all so upset,' whispered Agatha, 'after what he did to Mrs Josephs' cat.'

'What he did was *right*,' muttered Mrs Mason fiercely. 'That cat was too old for this world.'

'I hope no one thinks that about me,' said Agatha.

'Shhh!' said a man in front waspishly.

The service began.

Mr Peter Rice paid a tribute to his dead partner, the vicar quoted St Francis of Assisi, hymns were sung, then the coffin was raised up again and the congregation filed out after it to the graveyard.

It was strange, thought Agatha, but one never thought of people being buried in old church graveyards any more. A short service in a crematorium was more what was expected. She had always wondered about those churchyard graveside scenes in television dramas and had assumed that the television company had paid a nice sum to the church to dig up an appropriate hole for the show. One always assumed that the old churchyards of England had been full to bursting point since the end of the nineteenth century.

Snow fluttered down among the leaning gravestones and a magpie swung on the branch of a cedar and cocked a curious eye at the proceedings.

‘That’s his ex-wife,’ said Mrs Mason. A thin, grey-haired woman with a weak face was looking bleakly straight in front of her. She was wearing a fox coat over a red suit. No mourning weeds for her.

But the graveside service was so moving and so dignified that Agatha thought there was a lot to be said for staking your claim to your six-by-four in a country churchyard. When the service was over, she muttered a goodbye to Mrs Mason and set out in pursuit of the vet’s ex-wife, catching up with her at the lych gate.

‘My name is Agatha Raisin,’ she said. ‘I gather you are poor Mr Bladen’s wife.’

‘I was,’ said Mrs Bladen a trifle impatiently. ‘It is really very cold, Mrs Raisin, and I am anxious to get home.’

‘My car is just outside. Can I drop you somewhere?’

‘No, I have my own car.’

‘I wonder if we could have a talk?’ said Agatha eagerly.

A look of dislike came into Mrs Bladen’s eyes. ‘My life seems to have been plagued by women wanting to talk to me after my husband had dumped them. It is just as well he is dead.’

She stalked off.

I seem to be getting snubbed all round, thought Agatha. But there’s one thing for sure: our vet was a philanderer. If only I could prove it wasn’t an accident, that it was murder, then they’d all sit up and take notice!

Carsely had frequent power cuts, some lasting days, some only a few seconds.

James Lacey pressed Agatha’s doorbell the following day. He did not know there was one of the brief power cuts because one could not usually hear the bell ringing from outside.

He glanced down at the front lawn. There was a lot of moss on it. He wondered if Agatha knew how to treat it. He bent down for a closer look.

Agatha, who thought she had heard someone outside, put her eye to the spyhole, but not seeing anyone, retreated to the kitchen. James Lacey straightened up and pressed the bell again. By this time the power had come back on but Agatha had found crumbs on the carpet and had plugged in the vacuum cleaner in the kitchen at the back.

James retreated, feeling baffled. He remembered all the times he had pretended to be out when Agatha had called.

He went into his own cottage, made himself a cup of coffee and sat down at his desk. He switched on his new computer and then stared bleakly at the screen waiting for it to boot up, before finding the right file and flicking his written words up on to the green screen. There it was. 'Chapter Two'. If only he had written just one sentence. Why had he decided to write military history anyway? Just because he was a retired soldier did not necessarily mean he was confined to military subjects. Besides, why had he chosen the Peninsular Wars? Was there anything to add more than what had been already written? Oh, dear, how long the day seemed. It had been fun going to see Pendlebury. Of course it had been an accident. And yet there was that bump on the back of the head.

It might be more fun to write mystery stories. Say, for example, the vet had been murdered, how would one go about finding out what had really happened? Well, the first step would be to find out *why* he was murdered, for the *why* would surely lead to the *who*.

If Agatha had answered her door to him and not looked as if she were avoiding him, he might have dropped the subject. Had he really wanted to write military history, he still might have dropped it. He gave an exclamation of disgust, switched off the machine and went out again. There would be no harm in trying Agatha's door again. He had obviously been mistaken when he had thought she was pursuing him. And he had invited *her* for a drink, not Freda Huntingdon. It was not his fault that Agatha had suddenly decided to leave with that farmer.

It was a fine spring day, light and airy, smelling of growing things. This time, Agatha's front door was open. He went in, calling, 'Agatha,' and nearly fell over her. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the hall, playing with her cats.

'Am I seeing things, or have you two of them?' he asked.

'The new one's a stray I picked up in London,' said Agatha, scrabbling to her feet. 'Like a coffee?'

'Not coffee. I seem to have been drinking it all morning. Tea would be nice.'

'Tea it is.' Agatha led the way into the kitchen.

'About the other night,' he said, hovering in the kitchen doorway, 'we didn't have much of a chance to talk.'

‘Well, that’s pubs for you,’ said Agatha with seeming indifference. ‘You never end up talking to the person you go in with. Milk or lemon?’

‘Lemon, please. I’ve been thinking, this business about the vet. Did you go to the funeral?’

‘Yes. Lot of women there. Seems to have been popular with quite a lot of women, so he can’t have gone around putting down *their* cats unasked.’

‘Who was there from this village?’

‘Apart from me, his four remaining fans: your friend, Freda Huntingdon; Mrs Mason; Mrs Harriet Parr; and Miss Josephine Webster. Oh, and his ex-wife. Hey, that’s odd.’

‘What is?’

‘When I was supposed to be having dinner in Evesham that night I crashed and I phoned Paul’s house and this woman answered the phone saying she was his wife . . .’ Agatha broke off.

‘Well?’

‘Well, Paul Bladen told me afterwards that the woman who answered the phone was his sister, being silly or something. But no one else has mentioned his sister. I forgot to ask for her at the funeral.’

‘We could drive into Mircester and find out,’ he volunteered.

Agatha turned away quickly and fiddled with the kettle to hide the sudden look of rapture in her eyes. ‘Do you think it’s murder then?’ she asked.

He sighed. ‘No, I don’t. But it might be fun to go through the motions. I mean, ask people, just as if it were.’

‘I’ll get my coat.’ Agatha nipped smartly upstairs, gazing in the glass at her outfit of sweater and skirt. But there was no time to change, for if she did not hurry up, he might decide to call the whole thing off.

‘Just going to get some money,’ he called up the stairs.

Agatha cursed under her breath. What if he were waylaid in the short distance between her house and his? She went down the stairs and out of the door.

Freda Huntingdon was talking to him, laughing and holding that wretched yapping dog under her arm. Agatha clenched her hands into fists as they both disappeared into James’s cottage. She stood there in her own front garden, irresolute. What if he forgot about her? But he emerged with Freda after only a few moments. Freda was tucking a paperback into her pocket.

She waved goodbye to him and he walked towards Agatha. ‘Shall we take my car?’ he asked. ‘No need to take two.’

‘Mine will be fine,’ said Agatha. He climbed into the passenger seat. As Agatha drove past Freda, she turned and stared at them in surprise. Agatha gave a cheerful fanfare on the horn and drove fast round the corner out of the lane.

‘What did the merry widow want?’ she asked.



‘Freda? She had lent me a paperback and had come to collect it.’

Agatha would have chatted on merrily all the way to Mircester and probably would have driven James away again, but just at that moment she sensed there was a pimple growing on the end of her nose. She squinted down and the car veered wildly to the side of the road before she corrected the steering.

‘Are you all right?’ asked James. ‘Do you want me to drive?’

‘I’m fine.’ But Agatha sank into a worried silence. She could feel that pimple growing and growing, an itchy soreness on the end of her nose. Why should such a thing happen to her on this day of all days? This was what came of eating ‘healthy’ food, as recommended by Mrs Bloxby. Years of fast food had not produced one blemish. The only solution, Agatha decided, was when they reached Mircester, she would say she needed to buy something from the chemist’s – no gentleman would ask what – and then say she was dying for a drink.

She parked in the last space in the town’s main square. A woman who had been in the act of carefully reversing into it before Agatha beat her to it by driving straight in nose first, stared in hurt anger. When they got out of the car, Agatha, keeping her face averted, said, ‘Got to go to the chemist’s over there. Meet you in that pub, the George, in a few moments.’ And then, like jesting Pilate, did not stay for an answer, but scuttled across the square.

In the chemist’s, she bought a stick of Blemish Remover, astringent lotion, and, for good measure, a new lipstick, Hot Pink.

James looked up and waved as Agatha came into the pub, but she scuttled past him to the Ladies’, her face still averted.

Agatha cleaned her face, applied the astringent lotion and then wiped it off with a tissue. She peered at her nose. There was a bright little red spot at the end of it. She carefully applied the stick of Blemish Remover, which resulted in a beige blotch on the end of her nose. She covered it with powder. The light in the Ladies’ was not working, so she could only guess at the effect. She stared upwards. There was a light socket up on the ceiling, but she noticed the light bulb was missing and what light there was in the room filtered through the grimy panes of a window high up over the hand basin. Then she remembered she had bought a packet of 100-watt light bulbs the day before and had left them in her car. She scuttled out again. Again James waved and again she ran past him, her face averted, and out the door. He drank his beer thoughtfully. He had once thought Agatha Raisin deranged. Perhaps he had been right. There she came again, running sideways, and back into the Ladies’.

Agatha looked up at the ceiling. In order to reach the light socket, she would need to stand on the hand basin. She hitched up her skirt and climbed into the large Victorian hand basin and gingerly stood up. She reached up to

the light socket.

With a great rending sound, the hand basin came away from the wall. Agatha swayed wildly and then grabbed hold of a dusty windowsill as the hand basin slowly continued to detach itself and fell with an almighty crash on the floor, taking the brass taps with it. A ferocious jet of cold water from a now broken and exposed pipe shot straight up Agatha's skirt.

With a whimper she let go of the windowsill, jumped to the flooding floor and skirting the debris shot back into the pub after firmly closing the door behind her.

'Let's go,' she said to James.

He stared at her in surprise. 'I've just bought you a gin and tonic.'

'Oh, thanks,' said Agatha desperately. 'Cheers!' She threw the drink down her throat in one gulp. 'Come on!' Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a flood of water appearing from under the door of the Ladies'.

James followed her out. He noticed to his dismay that the back of her skirt had a dark stain on it and he wondered whether to tell her. She was not *that* old, but perhaps she had bladder trouble.

'Now, *this* pub looks much nicer,' said Agatha, pushing open the door of the Potters Arms and diving in. Once more, she went to the Ladies'. To her relief it was a modern place with a hot-air hand dryer. She took off her skirt and held it under the dryer until the water stain began to fade. Then she lay down on the floor and held her wet feet up under it. Time passed. When she emerged, a worried James was on his second pint of beer. 'I was just about to send someone to look for you,' he said. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' said Agatha, radiant again, for she had discovered that the new make-up had done the job effectively and she was once more warm and dry.

'I bought you another gin,' he said, indicating the glass on the table.

Agatha smiled at him. 'Here's to detection,' she said, raising her glass. And then she slowly lowered it, a look of ludicrous dismay on her face. For into the pub had just marched Bill Wong and a tall policewoman. 'Dropped my handbag,' said Agatha and dived under the table.

It was to no avail. 'Come out, Agatha,' said Bill.

Agatha miserably crawled out from under the table, her face red with shame.

'Now, Agatha,' said Bill, 'what have you been up to? PC Wood here called me into the George. A woman answering your description went in and vandalized the ladies' room, tearing a hand basin out of the wall and flooding the place. People in the square saw you running in here. What have you to say for yourself?'

'I had a spot on my nose,' mumbled Agatha.

'Speak up. I can't hear you.'

'*I had a spot on my nose,*' roared Agatha. Everyone looked at her and

James Lacey desperately wished himself elsewhere.

‘And how did that make you tear the hand basin out of the wall?’ asked Bill.

‘I bought make-up at the chemist’s.’ Agatha’s voice was now reduced to a flat even tone. ‘I wanted to cover up the spot, but the light in the Ladies’ wasn’t working and I thought it probably needed a new bulb. I remembered I had a packet of light bulbs in the car and went to get one. But the only way I could get to the light was by standing on the basin. It came away from the wall. I was so shocked I decided to say nothing about it.’

‘I am afraid you are going to have to come with me,’ said Bill severely.

The fact that James Lacey did not offer to accompany her, that he muttered something awkwardly about staying put and reading the newspapers, plunged him low in Agatha’s estimation despite her distress. So much for the knight errant of her dreams. He was going to sit safely while she dealt with a no doubt enraged landlord.

James went out a few moments after they had left. He bought two newspapers and then returned to the pub. But he could not concentrate on the stories. Damn Agatha. What a woman. What a stupid thing to do! And then the ridiculous side of it all struck him and he began to laugh and, once started, couldn’t seem to stop, although people edged away from his table nervously. He finally mopped his eyes and, tucking the unread papers under his arm, strode over to the George.

Agatha was holding out a cheque which the landlord of the George was refusing. ‘Ho, no, you don’t get off that easily,’ he said. He was an unpleasant-looking man with a face like a slab of Cheddar cheese, the skin yellow and slightly sweating with rage. ‘You charge this woman, officer,’ he said to Bill, ‘and I’ll see her in court. You charge her with wilful vandalism.’

James twitched the cheque out of Agatha’s fingers and blinked slightly at the large sum. ‘You can’t afford this,’ he said to Agatha. ‘A lady like yourself, existing on a widow’s pension, cannot afford a sum like this. Declare yourself bankrupt and then, even if he takes you to court, he won’t get a penny. I know a good solicitor just around the corner.’

‘Good idea,’ said Bill. ‘You need a solicitor anyway. He’ll want to know why there was no

light bulb in the Ladies’ in the first place, why the basin fell away from the wall so easily. The wiring in this pub had better be checked, too.’

‘I’ll take the cheque,’ growled the landlord desperately.

‘You’ll take another cheque,’ said James firmly. ‘Agatha, get your cheque-book and write out one for half this sum.’

The Cheddar cheese looked ready to explode again, but a steely look from James silenced him.

Agatha wrote out the new cheque while James tore up the old one.

When they were all outside in the square, Bill said, 'If that had been a nice, respectable landlord, I might have charged you, Agatha. Anyway, thanks to Mr Lacey, it's all sorted out. What about dinner tonight?'

Agatha hesitated. She had originally thought her day with James might end in an intimate dinner. On the other hand, better to continue to play it cool. 'Yes, that would be nice. Where do you live? I know your phone number but not your address.'

'It's number 24, The Beeches. You go out of town on the Fosse and take the first left along Camden Way until you come to a set of traffic lights, turn right, then take the first left, and that's The Beeches. It's a cul-de-sac.'

Agatha scribbled the information down on the back of a gas bill. 'What time?'

'Six o'clock. We eat early.'

'We?'

'My parents. You forget, I live at home. You come, too, Mr Lacey.'

Please, please, *please*, God, prayed Agatha.

James looked surprised but then said, 'I'd like that. I'd more or less decided to have the day off. Is it all right if I come dressed like this?'

Bill looked amused. 'We're not formal,' he said. 'See you then.'

He moved off, with the tall and still silent policewoman walking beside him.

'I think we need something to eat now,' said James. 'What about a beer and a sandwich, and then we'll decide who we ask about the sister. We should have asked Bill Wong. Still, we can always do that this evening.'

He did not mention the ruined toilet and Agatha was grateful for that. But she felt obliged to say gruffly, 'I'm hardly penniless.'

'I know,' he said amiably, 'but the minute that landlord thought you were broke, then he was glad to take any money.'

Once they had eaten, he drew out a notebook and pen and said, 'Why don't we pretend it's murder and start by writing down all the names of the people we should speak to.'

'I think the ex-wife would be a good idea,' said Agatha, 'although she wasn't very friendly. I know, we can call at the vet's here, his partner, Peter Rice. He'll know whether Bladen had a sister, and that would be a start.'

Mr Peter Rice was a pugnacious man with a large bulbous nose, small eyes and a small mouth. The ugly nose, which dominated his face, was disconcerting, rather like a face pressed too close to a camera lens. His thatch of thick red curly hair looked as if someone had dropped a small wig casually on the top of his rather pointed head. His neck was thick and strong, as were his shoulders. In fact, his body seemed too strong and broad for his small head, as if he had thrust his head through a Strong Man cardboard cutout on a fairground.

He was not pleased to learn that they had queued up in his surgery, not to consult him about some animal, but to ask him questions about his dead partner.

‘Sister?’ he said in answer to their questions. ‘No, he didn’t have a sister. Got a brother somewhere in London. Fell out a time ago. Brother didn’t bother turning up for the funeral.’ His hands covered in thick red hair like fur moved restlessly over a shelf of small bottles, as if looking for a label that said ‘Vanish’. ‘Now if that’s all . . .’

‘Was he a wealthy man?’ asked James.

‘No.’

‘Oh. How do you know?’

‘I know because he left everything to me.’

‘How much was that?’ asked Agatha eagerly.

‘Not enough,’ he said. ‘Get out of here and leave me to deal with my customers.’

‘So he inherits and not the brother. Now there’s a motive,’ crowed Agatha when they were outside. ‘Who would know how much money was involved?’

‘The lawyer. But I doubt if he would tell us. Let’s try the local newspaper editor,’ said James. ‘They pick up all sorts of gossip.’

The offices of the *Mircester Journal* came as a disappointment to Agatha, even though the newspaper consisted of little more than three pages. She had naïvely expected something like the newspaper offices she had occasionally seen on news programmes, great enormous rooms with lines of computers and busy reporters. Time and printing changes had passed the *Mircester Journal* by. The offices consisted of several dark rooms at the top of a rickety staircase. A pale young woman with straight lank hair was pounding an old-fashioned typewriter and a young man with his hands in his pockets was standing by a window, whistling tunelessly and looking down into the street.

‘May we see the editor?’ asked James.

The pale girl stopped typing. ‘If it’s births, deaths, or marriages, I do that,’ she said.

‘None of those.’

‘Complaints? Wrong name under the photo?’

‘No complaint.’

‘That makes a change.’ She got to her feet. She was wearing a long patchwork skirt and baseball boots and a T-shirt which said ‘Naff Off’.

‘Names?’

‘Mrs Raisin and Mr Lacey.’

‘Right.’

She pushed open a scarred door and vanished inside. There was a murmur

of voices and then she popped out again. 'You're to go in. Mr Heyford will see you now.'

Mr Heyford rose to meet them. After the vision in the T-shirt and baseball boots he came as a conservative surprise, being a small, neat man with a smooth olive face, black eyes and thin strips of oiled black hair combed straight back from his forehead. He was dressed in a dark suit, collar and tie.

'Sit down,' he said. 'What can I do for you? I recognize your name, Mrs Raisin. That was quite a lot of money you raised for charity last year.' Agatha preened.

'We both knew the vet, Paul Bladen,' said James. 'We're having a sort of a bet. Mrs Raisin here said he was worth a lot of money, but I got the impression he didn't have that much. Do you know how much he left?'

'I can't tell you exactly how much because I can't quite remember,' said Mr Heyford. 'About eighty-five thousand, I think. Would have been a fortune once, but that sort of money won't even buy you a decent house now. He left a house, of course, but he had taken a double mortgage out on that, and with house prices being what they are, Mr Rice, who inherited, will barely get enough to cover the mortgages. I never thought the day would come in this country when we would consider eighty-five thousand not very much money, so it looks as if you've won the bet, Mr Lacey.'

'So he couldn't have been killed for his money,' said Agatha mournfully when they had said goodbye to the editor. 'And yet . . .'

'And yet what?'

'If he did have eighty-five thousand pounds, why the two mortgages? I mean, the interest must have been crippling. Why not pay off some of the money owing?'

'The trouble,' said James, 'is that we are making ourselves believe an accident to be murder.'

Agatha thought quickly. If he gave up the idea of investigating anything at all, then she would have little excuse to spend any time in his company. 'We could try the wife,' she suggested. 'I mean, as we're here and we've still got time to kill before we go to Bill's.'

'Oh, very well. Where do we find her?'

'We'll try the phone book and hope she is still using her married name,' said Agatha.

They found a name, G. Bladen, listed. The address was given as Rose Cottage, Little Blomham. 'Where's Little Blomham?' asked Agatha.

'I saw a sign to it once. It's off the Stroud road.'

A pale mist was shrouding the landscape, turning the countryside into a Chinese painting, as they drove down into Little Blomham. It was more of a hamlet than a village, a few ancient houses of golden Cotswold stone hunched beside a stream.

No one moved about, no smoke rose from the chimneys, no dog barked. Agatha switched off the engine and both listened as the eerie silence settled about them.

James suddenly quoted:

‘Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,  
And the sound of iron on stone,  
And how the silence surged softly backward,  
When the plunging hoofs were gone.’

Agatha looked at him crossly. She did not like people who suddenly quoted things at you, leaving you feeling unread and inadequate. In fact, she thought they only did it to show off.

She got out of the car and slammed the door shut with unnecessary force.

James got out of the passenger seat and wandered to a stone wall and looked down at the slowly moving stream. He seemed to have gone into some sort of dream, to have forgotten Agatha’s presence. ‘So very quiet,’ he said, half to himself. ‘So very English, the England they fought for in the First World War. So little of it left.’

‘Would you like to stand here and meditate while I find out which one of these picturesque hovels is Rose Cottage?’ asked Agatha.

He gave her a sudden smile. ‘No, I’ll come with you.’ They walked together down the road by the stream. ‘Let me see, this one has no name and the next one is called End Cottage, although it’s not at the end. Perhaps one of the ones further on.’

They nearly missed Rose Cottage. It was set well back from the road at the end of a thin, narrow, tangled and unkempt garden. It was small and thatched, with the walls covered in thick creeper. ‘Looks more like an animal’s burrow than a house,’ commented James. ‘Well, here we go. We can’t say we think he was murdered. We’ll offer our sympathy and see where that gets us.’

He knocked on the door. And waited. They stood wrapped in the silence of the dream countryside. Then, as if a spell had been broken, a bird suddenly flew up from a bush near the door, a dog barked somewhere, high and shrill in the road outside, and Mrs Bladen opened the door.

Why, I believe she’s older than I, thought Agatha, looking again at that grey hair and at the tell-tale lines on the thin neck.

Mrs Bladen looked past James to Agatha and her face settled in lines of dislike. ‘Oh, it’s you again.’

‘Mr Lacey wished to offer you his sympathy,’ said Agatha quickly.

‘Why?’ she demanded harshly. ‘Why should someone come all this way to offer sympathy for the death of a man I’ve been divorced from?’

‘We’re very neighbourly people in Carsely,’ said James, ‘and wondered if

we could do anything to help.'

'You can help by going away.'

James looked helplessly at Agatha. Agatha decided to take the bull by the horns. 'Are you sure your husband died a natural death?' she asked.

Mrs Bladen looked amused. 'Meaning someone killed him? It's more than likely. He was a thoroughly nasty man and I'm glad he's dead. I hope that satisfies you.'

She slammed the door in their faces.

'That's that,' said James, as they walked down the weedy path.

'We got something,' said Agatha eagerly. 'She didn't laugh in our faces when I suggested murder to her. Now did she?'

'You know what I think?' he said, holding the gate open for her. 'I think we're two retired people with not enough to do with our time.'

'Just because you can't get started writing,' said Agatha shrewdly, 'don't take it out on me.'

'This is a lovely little place,' he said to change the subject. 'So quiet and peaceful. I wonder if there's anything for sale here.'

'Oh, you wouldn't want to live here,' said Agatha, alarmed. 'I mean, Carsely's bad enough, but there's *nothing* here, not even a shop or a pub.'

'What's wrong with that, in this age of the motor car? Oh, look. That sign there. The Manor House. I didn't notice it before. Let's go and have a look.'

Agatha followed him silently up a winding drive. She did not want to look at any manor house because manor houses belonged to James Lacey's world and not to hers. The drive, edged with rhododendron bushes, opened up and there stood the manor house. The mist had thinned and pale sunlight washed the golden walls. It was low and rambling and settled and charming, exuding centuries of peace. Even Agatha sensed that wars and conflicts, plague and pestilence had passed this old building by.

A small square woman in a twin set and tweed skirt came out with a black retriever at her heels. 'Can I help you?' she called.

'Just admiring your beautiful home,' said James, approaching her.

'Yes, it is beautiful,' she said. 'Come inside and have some tea. I don't often get visitors until the summer, when all my relatives decide they would like a free holiday.'

James introduced them. The woman said she was Bunty Vere-Dedsworth. She led the way into a dark hall and then through into a large old kitchen gleaming with copper pans and white-and-blue china on an old dresser which ran the length of one wall.

'Lacey,' she said, as she plugged in an electric kettle. 'I used to know some Laceys down in Sussex.'

'That's where my family comes from,' said James.

'Really!' She had cornflower-blue eyes in a reddish face. 'Old Harry



Lacey?’

‘My father.’

‘Gosh, small world. Do you ever see the . . .’

Agatha, excluded from that intimidating conversation of the upper classes which consisted of names and exclamations of recognition thrown back and forth, moodily sipped her tea and felt James moving out of her sphere. She could picture him living in a place like this with an elegant wife, not with some retired public relations woman such as herself who would only be able to swap names with someone from the rather nasty Birmingham slum in which she had grown up.

‘What brings you here?’ said Bunty at last.

James said, ‘Our vet in Carsely died and we went to offer Mrs Bladen our sympathies, but she doesn’t seem in need of any.’

‘No, she wouldn’t,’ said Bunty. ‘She had a very unhappy marriage.’

‘Other women?’ suggested Agatha.

‘I think it was more a question of money, or the lack of it. Greta Bladen was a wealthy woman when she married Paul, and he seemed to spend a great deal of her money. When she left him, that dingy little cottage was all she could afford. She really hated him. I heard how Bladen died. Now if he had been found dead because someone had biffed him with the frying-pan, that someone being Greta, I wouldn’t have been at all surprised. But you’d really need to know about veterinary things to shove a syringe full of deadly stuff in him. I mean, think of it. How many of the population would know that stuff was deadly? Maybe his partner wanted the business for himself.’ And Bunty laughed.

James looked at his watch. ‘We really must go.’

‘Must you?’ Bunty smiled at Agatha. ‘Then do come back and see me. I’d like that.’

Agatha smiled back, feeling all her social inadequacies fade away, feeling welcome.

‘She had a point,’ said Agatha as she drove out of the village. ‘I mean about Rice. Surely it would need to be someone with a knowledge of veterinary medicine.’

‘Not necessarily,’ he remarked. ‘That story about the vet who died last year when the horse nudged his breast pocket with the syringe in it and caused his death was in all the local papers. I read it. Anyone could have read it and got the idea.’

‘But it would need to be someone who knew where he was going and what he was doing on that day.’

‘Any of his lady friends might know. “What are you doing tomorrow, Paul?” “Oh, I’m cutting the vocal cords of one of Pendlebury’s horses.” That sort of thing.’

‘Yes, but say he had said that to me. I wouldn’t immediately think of Immobilon.’

‘No, but a vet might talk about it, saying how deadly it was and talking about the accident of the previous year. I’ve got a feeling a woman did it.’

Agatha was about to exclaim, ‘So you *do* think it was murder,’ but decided to remain silent in the hope of more days of investigation together.

Bill’s home came as a surprise to Agatha. She had naïvely expected something, well, more oriental and exotic. The Beeches was one of those closes designed by builders, each house different, with trim suburban lawns, oozing respectability and dullness. Agatha knew that Bill’s father was Hong Kong Chinese and his mother from Gloucestershire, but she had not expected him to live somewhere so ordinary. Bill’s house was called Clarendon, the name being poker-worked on a wooden sign hung on a post at the gate. They went up a trim path between regimented flower-beds and rang the bell, which played a chorus of ‘Rule, Britannia’.

Bill himself answered the door. ‘Come in. Come in,’ he cried. ‘I’ll just put you in the lounge and go and get the drinks. Ma’s in the kitchen getting dinner ready.’

Agatha and James sat in the lounge, not looking at each other. There was a three-piece suite, shell-backed, in a nasty sort of grey wool material. There were venetian blinds drawn down over the ‘picture’ windows and ruched curtains. The fitted carpet was in a noisy geometric design of red and black. The wallpaper was white and gold Regency stripe. There were little occasional pie-crust tables on spindly legs. A display cabinet full of Spanish dolls and little bits of china stood against one wall. A gas fire with fake coals and logs burned cheerfully but threw out very little heat.

Agatha longed for a cigarette but could not see an ashtray.

Bill came in with a small tray on which were three tiny glasses of sweet sherry.

‘You’re honoured,’ said Bill. ‘We don’t use this room much. Keep it for best.’

‘Very nice,’ said Agatha, feeling strange and awkward at seeing her Bill, chubby and oriental as usual, in these cold English suburban surroundings.

‘May I use your toilet?’ she asked.

‘Top of the stairs. But don’t go standing on the hand basin.’

Agatha climbed up thickly carpeted stairs and pushed open the door of a bathroom which contained a suite in Nile green. The toilet had a chenille cover. A flowery notice on the back of the bathroom door stated, ‘When you have had a tinkle, please wipe the seat.’

She tugged at the toilet roll to get a piece of tissue to blot her lipstick and

started in alarm as the toilet-roll holder chimed out ‘The Bluebells of Scotland’.

‘Dinner’s ready,’ said Bill when she arrived downstairs again.

He led them across the hall and into another small room, the dining-room, where at the head of the table sat his father, a small morose Chinese gentleman with a droopy moustache, a grey baggy cardigan and large checked carpet slippers.

Bill performed the introductions. Mr Wong grunted by way of reply, picked up his knife and fork and stared at the polished surface of the laminated top of the table. Agatha looked down at a place-mat depicting Tewkesbury Abbey and wished she had not come.

A hatch from the kitchen shot up and a Gloucester accent said shrilly, ‘Bill! Soup!’

Bill collected plates of soup and passed them round. ‘Have you got that bottle of Liebfraumilch, Ma?’ he called.

‘In ’er fridge.’

‘I’ll get it.’

Mrs Wong appeared. She was a massive woman with a discontented, suspicious face and appeared to resent having guests. Bill poured wine.

The soup was canned oxtail. Little triangles of bread were passed around. Even James Lacey seemed stricken into silence.

‘Roast beef next,’ said Bill. ‘Nobody does roast beef quite like Ma.’

‘That’s for sure,’ said Mr Wong suddenly, making Agatha jump.

The roast beef was incredibly tough and the table knives were blunt. It took all their concentration to hack pieces off. The cauliflower was covered in a coat of thick white sauce, the carrots were overcooked and oversalted, the Yorkshire pudding was like salted rubber and the peas were those nasty processed kind out of a can which manage to turn everything on the plate green.

‘Days are drawing out,’ said Mrs Wong.

‘That’s for sure,’ said Mr Wong.

‘Soon be summer,’ pursued Mrs Wong, glaring fiercely at Agatha, as if blaming her for the seasons.

‘I hope we get another nice summer,’ said James.

Mrs Wong rounded on him. ‘You call last summer nice? Did you hear that, Father? He called last summer nice?’

‘Some people,’ muttered Mr Wong, taking more cauliflower.

‘So hot, it nearly brought on one of my turns,’ said Mrs Wong. ‘Didn’t it nearly, Father?’

‘That’s for sure.’

Silence.

‘I’ll get the pudding,’ said Bill.

‘Sit down,’ said his mother. ‘These are your guests. I told you I wanted to watch that quiz on the telly, but you would have them.’

Soon bowls of stewed apples and custard were banged in front of them. I want to go home, thought Agatha . . . Oh, please God, let this evening be over quickly.

‘Take them through to the lounge,’ said Mrs Wong when the dreadful meal was over. ‘I’ll bring the coffee.’

‘You really must show me your garden,’ said James. ‘I’m very interested in gardens.’

‘We’re not going out in the evening air to catch our deaths,’ said Mrs Wong, looking outraged. ‘Are we, Father?’

‘Funny thing to suggest,’ said Mr Wong.

To Agatha’s and James’s relief, they had only Bill for company over coffee. ‘I’m so glad you could come,’ said Bill. ‘I’m really proud of my home. Ma’s made quite a little palace out of it.’

‘Really cosy,’ lied Agatha. ‘Bill, are you sure there is nothing odd about Bladen’s death?’

‘Nothing that anyone could find,’ he said. He looked amused. ‘You two have been sleuthing.’

‘Just asking around,’ said Agatha. ‘Bill, do you mind if I have a cigarette?’

‘I don’t, but Ma would kill you. Come out into the back garden and have one there.’

They followed him out into the garden. James let out a gasp. It was beautifully laid out. A cluster of cherry trees at the bottom raised white-and-pink branches to the evening sky. A wisteria just beginning to show its first leaves coiled over the kitchen door. ‘This is my patch,’ said Bill. ‘Makes a change from policing.’

James marvelled that Bill, who obviously had such an eye for beauty, could see nothing wrong with his parents’ home. Agatha wondered how Bill could have such admiration and affection for such a dreary couple and then decided she admired him for it.

James was becoming happy and animated as he discussed plants and Agatha thought again of her own neglected garden and decided that if this investigation fell through, then gardening might be a subject they would have in common. By the time they returned to the dreadful lounge for more horrible coffee served in doll’s cups which Mrs Wong called her best ‘demytess’, the three were at ease with each other.

‘I like to return hospitality,’ said Bill to James. ‘I’m always dropping in to Agatha’s for a coffee, but she’s never been here. Now you know the road, you’re welcome to come any time.’

‘Have you moved here recently?’ asked James.

‘Last year,’ said Bill proudly. ‘Dad’s got this dry-cleaning business in

Mircester and he's really built it up. Yes, we're moving up in the world.' His good nature seemed to transform his home into the palace he thought it to be and Agatha and James thanked Mrs Wong very warmly for her hospitality before they finally left.

'It will be a cold day in hell before I go back there again,' said Agatha, as they drove off.

'Yes, I'm still hungry. I cut up that beef and pushed it under the vegetables to make it look as if I'd eaten it,' said James. 'We'll stop somewhere for a drink and a sandwich.' He said this almost absent-mindedly, as if to an old friend, taking her acceptance for granted, and Agatha felt so ridiculously happy, she thought she might cry.

Over beer and sandwiches, they decided to continue their investigations the next day. 'What about Miss Mabbs?' asked Agatha suddenly. 'Look, we know Bladen was a womanizer. Miss Mabbs was that pallid female who worked as receptionist. What of her? She must have known all about the operation on that horse. I wonder where she is now?'

'We'll find her tomorrow. You can smoke if you like.'

'I feel like an endangered species,' said Agatha, lighting up. 'People are becoming so militant about smokers.'

'They're puritans,' said James. 'Who was it said that the reason the puritans were against bear-baiting was not because it gave pain to the bear but because it gave pleasure to the crowd?'

'I don't know. But I should give it up.'

'Bill said an odd thing when we were leaving,' said James. 'He said, "Don't go about stirring up muck or you may promote a real murder."'

'Oh, he was joking. He's a great one for jokes.'

## Chapter Five

Agatha would have been most surprised if anyone had called her a romantic. She considered herself hard-headed and practical. So she did not realize the folly of wild dreams and fantasies.

In her mind, since she had said goodbye to him the evening before, she was married to James Lacey, and most of her dreams had been of a passionate honeymoon, and the lovely thing about dreams is that one can write the script, and James said beautiful and loverlike things.

So Agatha, next morning, forgot all her plans of being cool and detached. James had said he would call for her around noon and that they might have a bite to eat in the pub before trying to find out what had become of Miss Mabbs.

Agatha decided to make a romantic lunch. So when James turned up on her doorstep, he shied nervously before an Agatha in a low-cut blouse, tight skirt and very high heels, who was glowing at him. He fidgeted nervously in the hall as she waved a hand in the direction of the dining-room and said she'd thought they may as well have lunch at her place.

Through the open door of the dining-room, James saw the table set with fine china and crystal and candles burning in tall holders – candles in the middle of the day!

Panic set in. He backed out of the door. 'Actually, I came to apologize,' he said. 'Something's come up. Can't make it.' And he turned and fled.

Agatha could practically hear the ruins of her dreams tumbling about her ears, brick by brick. Red with shame, she blew out the candles, put the china away, went upstairs, scrubbed off her thick make-up and put on a comfortable old dress like a sack, thrust her feet into slippers and shuffled back down to stare at the soaps on television and try not to brood on her gaffe.

She had had a nearly sleepless night and so she dozed off in front of the television set with the cats on her lap, waking an hour later at the sound of the doorbell.

She hoped he had come back – if only he would come back! – but it was Mrs Bloxby, the vicar's wife, who stood there.

'I was just passing,' said Mrs Bloxby, 'and wondered whether you remembered that the Carsely Ladies are having a meeting tonight.' For a

moment, something unlovely darted through Agatha's eyes. She was thinking, Screw the Carsely Ladies.

'I do hope you will come,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'Our newcomer, Mrs Huntingdon, is going to be there, and Miss Webster, who has the shop. We expect quite a crowd. And Miss Simms is bringing along some of her home-made cider, so I thought we would have cheese and biscuits with that.'

Agatha realized Mrs Bloxby was still standing on the doorstep and said, 'Do come in.'

'No, I'd better get home. My husband is wrestling with a tricky sermon.'

So this is what life has come down to, thought Agatha gloomily; another evening with the ladies. Even the knowledge that Mrs Huntingdon was going to be there could not give Agatha enough energy to change out of her old dress.

But on her way to the vicarage, she remembered that Josephine Webster, she of the dried-flower shop, she who had admired the vet, was to be there. There was no James Lacey, but there was still the interest of amateur detection.

The vicarage sitting-room was full of chattering women. Mrs Bloxby handed Agatha a tankard of cider. 'Where is Miss Webster?' asked Agatha.

'Over there, by the piano.'

'Of course.' Agatha studied her with interest. She was a neat woman of indeterminate age, neat fair hair crisply permed, neat little features, neat little figure. Talking to her was Freda Huntingdon, who had not bothered to dress up either, Agatha noticed. Agatha did not want to interrupt their conversation. She took another pull at her tankard and blinked. The cider was very strong indeed. She found Miss Simms next to her. 'How did you get such powerful stuff?' she asked.

Miss Simms giggled and whispered in Agatha's ear. 'Let you into a secret. I thought I would spice it up a bit.' She waved her own tankard towards a firkin on a table. 'So I poured a bottle of vodka into it.'

'You'll get us all drunk,' said Agatha.

'Well, some of us need cheering up. Look at Mrs Josephs. She's looking better already. I thought she was going to go into mourning for that cat of hers forever.'

Agatha sat down beside Mrs Josephs. 'Glad to see you looking better,' said Agatha politely.

'Oh, much better,' said the librarian in a tipsy voice. 'Revenge is mine.'

'Really?'

'I am to get what is rightfully mine.'

Agatha looked at her impatiently. 'What do you mean?'

'Silence, ladies,' called Mrs Mason. 'Our meeting is about to begin.'

'Call on me at ten tomorrow,' said Mrs Josephs loudly, 'and I'll tell you all

about Paul Bladen.'

'Shhh!' admonished Mrs Bloxby.

Agatha waited restlessly while the proceedings dragged on. But before they were finished, Mrs Josephs suddenly got up and left. Agatha shrugged and approached Miss Webster. 'I saw you at Paul Bladen's funeral,' she said.

'I didn't know you were a friend of his,' said Miss Webster.

'Not exactly a friend,' said Agatha, 'but I felt I should pay my respects. You must have been very sorry to lose him.'

'On the contrary,' said Miss Webster, 'I went to make sure he was really dead. Now, if you will excuse me, Miss . . .?'

'Mrs Raisin.'

'Mrs Raisin. I find all these chattering women give me a headache.'

She got up abruptly and left the room. Curiouser and curiouser, thought Agatha. Damn James. All this was interesting stuff, hints here, hints there. She would call on him before she went to see Mrs Josephs.

James heard his doorbell at quarter to ten the following morning. Feeling like an old spinster, he twitched the front-room curtain and looked out. There was Agatha Raisin. That old feeling of being hunted came back again. He went through to his kitchen and sat there. The bell went on and on and then there was blessed silence.

Agatha stumped grumpily through the village. A car slid to a stop beside her and Bill Wong's cheerful face looked out. 'What's the matter, Agatha? Where's James?'

'Nothing's the matter, and where James Lacey is I neither know nor care.'

'Which means you've scared him off again,' commented Bill cheerfully.

'I have done nothing of the kind, and for your information I am on my way to see Mrs Josephs, the librarian. She has something important to tell me about Paul Bladen's death.'

Bill gave a little sigh. 'Agatha, when there actually has been a murder, a lot of distasteful scandal usually comes to light which has nothing to do with the case. A lot of people get hurt. Now if you're going to dig around an English village trying to make an accident look like murder it will have the same effect, and without any justification. Drop it. Do good works. Go abroad again. Let Paul Bladen rest in peace.'

He drove off. Well, I may as well go, thought Agatha stubbornly. She'll be expecting me.

Mrs Josephs lived at the end of a terrace of what were once workers' cottages. Hers was neat and trim, with a pocket-sized garden where forsythia spilled over the hedge into the road in a burst of golden glory. A blackbird sang on the roof. From a field above the village came the sound of a hunting



horn, and as Agatha turned and looked up the hill, she saw the hunt streaming across a meadow, looking oddly out of perspective from her angle of vision.

If Lord Pendlebury was part of the hunt, she hoped he broke his neck. And with that pious thought, she pushed open the small wrought-iron gate and walked up to the door and rang the bell. There was no reply. The sound of the hunt disappeared into the distance. A jet screamed above, tearing the pale spring sky apart with sound.

Agatha tried again, feeling almost weepy, wondering dismally if all the inhabitants of Carsely were going to hide behind their sofas when they saw her on the doorstep.

But Mrs Josephs had asked her to call. Mrs Josephs had no right to snub her. Agatha turned the handle of the front door. It opened easily. A small hall with a narrow stair leading straight up from it.

‘Mrs Josephs!’ called Agatha.

The little house had thick walls, and silence pressed in on Agatha. She looked in the downstairs rooms, small parlour, small dining-room, and tiny cubicle of a kitchen at the back.

Agatha stood at the bottom of the stairs and shifted from foot to foot.

How sinister that dim staircase looked. Perhaps Mrs Josephs was ill. Emboldened by that thought, Agatha climbed the stairs. Bedroom on the right at the top, bed made, everything tidy. Box-room full of pathetic pieces of broken china and old furniture and dusty suitcases. No drama here.

May as well use the bathroom while I’m here, thought Agatha. Oh, I know! She probably meant me to go to the library. What a fool I am! But how crazy to go out and leave the house unlocked. This must be the bathroom. She pushed open a door which had a pane of frosted glass.

Mrs Josephs was lying on the bathroom floor, her eyes staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. Agatha let out a whimper. She forced herself to bend down, pick up an arm and feel the pulse. Nothing.

She turned and ran down the stairs, looking for the phone. She found one in the parlour and dialled police and ambulance.

The first to arrive was PC Fred Griggs, the village policeman. He looked like a village policeman in a children’s story, large and red-faced.

‘She’s dead,’ said Agatha. ‘Upstairs. Bathroom.’

She followed the bulk of the policeman up the stairs. Fred looked sadly down at the body. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘Can tell by just looking at her. Mrs Josephs was a diabetic.’

‘So it wasn’t murder,’ said Agatha.

‘Now what put such an idea into your head?’ His small eyes were shrewd.

‘She said last night in front of everyone at the Carsely Ladies’ Society that she had something to tell me about Paul Bladen.’

‘The vet what died! What’s that got to do with the poor woman’s death?’

‘Nothing,’ muttered Agatha. ‘I think I’ll wait outside.’

As she went out into the garden again, she could hear the wail of sirens; and then an ambulance, followed by two police cars, came racing up. She recognized Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes and Bill Wong. There were two other detectives she did not know and a policewoman.

Bill said, ‘Did you find her?’ Agatha nodded dumbly. ‘What time?’

‘Ten o’clock,’ said Agatha. ‘I told you I was going to see her.’

‘Go home,’ said Bill. ‘We’ll be around to take a statement.’

James Lacey stood on his doorstep, peering down the lane. He had heard the sirens. Ever since he had failed to answer the door to Agatha’s ring, he had been staring at that heading ‘Chapter Two’ on his computer screen. Then he saw Agatha trailing along the lane. Her face was very white.

‘What’s happened?’ he called, but she flapped a hand at him and said, ‘Later.’

He felt frustrated. He felt that Agatha held the key to some excuse to take him away from writing for the day. He should not have run away from her lunch like a schoolboy.

He returned to his machine and glared at it. Then he heard the sound of a car turning into the lane and dashed outside again. It was a police car. He watched eagerly as it drove up to Agatha’s cottage and stopped. He recognized Bill Wong with another detective and a policewoman. They went inside.

He had brought it on himself, he thought gloomily. The wretched Raisin woman was on to something and he was excluded.

Inside her home, Agatha answered all questions put to her. How long had she been in Mrs Josephs’s cottage? Just a few minutes? Had anyone seen her just before she arrived? Detective Wong. The Chief Inspector nodded, as though Bill had already confirmed that.

‘What did she die of?’ asked Agatha.

‘We’ll need to wait for the pathologist’s report,’ said Wilkes. ‘Now, I gather this arrangement to see her was made at the vicarage last night. What exactly did she say?’

Agatha replied promptly, ‘She said, “Call on me at ten tomorrow and I’ll tell you all about Paul Bladen.” ’

‘Anything else?’

‘Let me see. I think I remarked she was looking better and she said an odd thing, she said, “Revenge is mine.” ’

‘You’re sure of that?’

‘Absolutely. She added . . .’ Agatha screwed up her eyes in an effort of memory. ‘She added, “I am to get what is rightfully mine.”’

‘Indeed,’ commented Wilkes. ‘Very cryptic. Quite like a novel.’

‘I am not making it up,’ snapped Agatha. ‘I have a very good memory.’

‘Now, Mrs Josephs said, “Call me at ten,” yet you went to her house. Wouldn’t you think she meant you to phone her?’

‘No,’ said Agatha, ‘we don’t use the phone much in this village to talk to each other. We call in person.’

‘Mrs Josephs was due on duty at the library. Why didn’t you go there?’

‘Because I didn’t *think!*’ howled Agatha, exasperated. ‘What the f—, what the devil is all this about? She just died of natural causes, didn’t she?’

‘Odd you should think that, when I gather from Detective Sergeant Wong here that you are very ready to believe the death of Paul Bladen was murder.’

Agatha threw Bill Wong a reproachful look. ‘I was interested in Paul Bladen’s death and I was just asking a few questions,’ she said defensively.

‘Who all was at the vicarage tea-party last night?’

‘It wasn’t a tea-party. Cider and cheese. I can give you most of the names, but if you ask Miss Simms, the secretary, she makes a note of everyone who attends each meeting.’

Wilkes stood up. ‘I think that will do for now, Mrs Raisin. We’ll probably be talking to you again. Not thinking of travelling anywhere, are you?’

‘What?’ Agatha stared at him. ‘Me? Not travel – You think it’s murder.’

‘Now, now, Mrs Raisin, at the moment we are simply investigating the death of a diabetic. Good day to you.’

Bill gave Agatha a wink behind his superior’s back and mouthed silently, ‘This evening.’

After they had left, Agatha decided to try James again. Forget about romance. This was too exciting to keep to herself. But he did not answer his door and she took small comfort in the fact that this time his car was gone.

James had driven into Mircester. To heal the breach with Agatha, he had considered an offer of flowers or chocolates and then had hit upon a better idea. If he found out Miss Mabbs’s address, that would be a better excuse than anything to call on her.

Agatha went along to the Red Lion and eagerly discussed the death of Mrs Josephs with the locals but without really learning anything

that she did not know already. She returned home rather tipsy and fell asleep, and did not wake up until five o’clock to hear her doorbell ringing.

Feeling bleary-eyed and hung-over, she went to answer it. Bill Wong stood there.

‘Come in! Come in!’ cried Agatha. ‘Tell me all about it, but let me get a cup of strong coffee first. I had too much to drink in the pub.’

‘How did you scare Lacey off?’ asked Bill, ambling into the kitchen after

her.

‘I didn’t . . . Oh, well, I did invite him for lunch yesterday, light the candles on the dining-table and flash the old cleavage. You couldn’t see him for dust.’

The doorbell rang. ‘I’ll get it,’ said Bill.

He came back a few moments later followed by James.

‘Don’t raise your voice,’ said Bill. ‘Our Agatha’s got a hangover. She’s been drowning her sorrows in the pub. She got all dolled up like a dog’s dinner expecting an old flame from London for lunch yesterday and he didn’t show and she’d forgotten about you calling but you scuttled off anyway.’

‘Oh,’ said James. ‘It’s a good thing I’m not a vain man or I might have thought it was all for me.’

Bill smiled happily. ‘Our Agatha’s usually got bigger fish to fry, haven’t you, Agatha? Why didn’t your flame turn up, anyway?’

I can lie as easily as you, thought Agatha. ‘Threatened with a merger,’ she said. ‘But he’s going to take me to the Savoy for dinner to make up for his absence.’

James felt silly. I really must stop imagining this woman’s pursuing me, he thought.

‘So,’ said Agatha, putting down cups of coffee in front of them, ‘tell us all, Bill. Why have I not to leave the country?’

‘What *is* all this?’ cried James, exasperated. ‘It’s about that librarian’s death, isn’t it? It’s all the talk at Harvey’s.’

Agatha told him about the arranged call on Mrs Josephs and of finding Mrs Josephs dead. ‘You, now, Bill,’ she said. ‘Is it murder?’

‘We’re waiting for the pathologist’s report,’ said Bill. ‘I’ll tell you this off the record. There’s something funny.’

‘Like what?’ asked Agatha.

‘Forensic found scuff marks on the stairs, all the way up from the parlour to the bathroom. Mrs Josephs was wearing brown leather walking shoes. The stairs aren’t carpeted. There were scuff marks which could have come from her shoes, and she was wearing those thick stockings and there are a couple of stocking threads caught in a crack on the stairs.’

Agatha’s eyes gleamed. ‘You mean someone could have killed her in her parlour and then dragged her upstairs and dumped her in her bathroom?’

‘I don’t understand that,’ said James. ‘If someone’s going to kill her, why bother dragging the body up to the bathroom?’

‘I’m speculating,’ said Bill. ‘I’m going out on a limb and neither of you must breathe a word of this to anyone.’

They both nodded like mandarin dolls.

‘Everyone seems to have known she was a diabetic and injected herself with insulin. What if someone gave her a jab of something lethal and then dragged her up to the bathroom where she kept her syringes and left her there

hoping we would think she had died as she was giving herself one of her usual injections?’

James shook his head, to Agatha’s irritation. ‘I still don’t like it,’ he said. ‘Everyone knows about the wonders of forensic science these days.’

‘Any murderer is usually desperate or deranged,’ said Bill. ‘It would amaze you how little they think.’

‘Did the neighbours see anyone calling at the house?’ asked James.

‘No, but there’s a lane runs along the end of the back gardens. Mrs Dunstable at the other end of the terrace said she thought she heard a car stopping just at the end of the back lane – you can’t get a car along there – about eight in the morning. But she’s deaf! She says she felt the *vibrations* of a car, can you believe it?’

‘It would be odd if it turned out to be murder,’ said James slowly. ‘After what she said to Agatha in front of all those women, it might cast doubts on the death of Paul Bladen.’

‘She might have committed suicide,’ Bill pointed out. ‘Everyone said she was very depressed since the death of her cat. The scuff marks could have been made when she dragged herself upstairs. That’s the news so far. I’ve got to get back to work. Thanks for the coffee, Agatha.’

When Bill had left, Agatha returned and sat down at the coffee-table and closed her eyes. ‘Want me to go?’ asked James.

‘No, I’m thinking. If I had murdered Mrs Josephs and injected her with something, I wouldn’t leave that lethal something among her bottles and pills in the bathroom. I’m not a very clever murderer. Think of the scuff marks. So I’m driving off with this bottle or ampoule I’ve used in my pocket. I’m sweating and panicky.’ She opened her eyes. ‘I’d chuck it out the car window.’

‘It’s a thought,’ said James. ‘And the road from the end of the back lane goes up to Lord Pendlebury’s. No harm in just having a look, I suppose. We’ll take rubbish sacks so that people will think we’re volunteers from the village keeping the countryside tidy. But if you find anything sinister, leave it there and call the police or they might think you planted it.’

They took Agatha’s car. She drove to the back lane and sat there with the engine idling imagining she had just committed murder. She then drove off up the hill and suddenly stopped.

‘Why here?’ asked James.

‘Because here’s where I would chuck it if I were a murderer,’ said Agatha.

They started searching up and down the road on the right-hand side where anything a driver might have thrown out would have landed. Fortunately people in the Cotswolds are very litter-minded and so there was hardly anything after an hour’s careful search to be found but an old broken fountain-pen and one sandal.

‘The light’s fading and I’m hungry,’ complained James.

‘Let’s try further up, nearer the estate,’ pleaded Agatha. ‘Just a bit more.’

‘Damn, I promised Freda Huntingdon a few days ago that I would meet her for a drink at seven in the Red Lion. Besides, it’s getting dark.’

‘I’ve a torch in the car,’ said Agatha, now determined to keep him out as long as possible.

‘Oh, well, just a little longer.’

They drove farther up the road and got out again, Agatha taking the torch and James poking aimlessly now in the hedgerow.

When Agatha after half an hour of patient walking and searching suddenly cried, ‘Eureka!’ James said crossly, ‘Look, is it another shoe or something? Freda will be –’

‘Come here! Look at this!’

He stumped over. Agatha pointed the torch at some tangled shrubbery and nettles in the ditch. Down in the bottom of the ditch was a little brown pharmacist’s bottle.

‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ he said, giving her a hug.

Glad of the darkness, Agatha blushed with pleasure.

‘You wait here and guard it,’ she said excitedly. ‘I’m off to phone Bill Wong.’

James waited and waited. He glanced at his watch, noticing by the luminous dial that it was nearly eight. Then he thought, I don’t really need to stand here. He took a stick which he had cut earlier from the hedgerow to help him in poking around, stabbed it down into the ditch beside the bottle and tied his handkerchief like a flag to the top of it. Now he could go safely off to the pub and the police and Agatha would easily find his marker. He strode off down the road.

Agatha waited on her doorstep, biting her nails. Bill had said, ‘Wait right where you are,’ and so she had done just that. But James must be wondering what had happened.

With a sigh of relief, she saw the police car nosing round into the lane and ran out to meet it. Bill and another detective were in the car. ‘Hop in,’ he said, ‘and take us to this clue of yours. We couldn’t raise Fred Griggs. It’s his night off.’

Agatha could not believe it as they drove up the road and found no sign of James. Worse than that, she could not remember exactly where they had found the bottle and so they searched up and down the roadside for quite a long time before Bill finally found the stick with the handkerchief on top.

‘At least he’s marked the spot,’ said Bill, squatting down. He shone a powerful flashlight down beside the stick.

‘There doesn’t seem to be anything there, Agatha.’

Agatha peered over his shoulder. ‘But it *was* there,’ she cried. ‘Oh, where *is*

James? If he just calmly went off to the pub to meet that tart, I'll kill him.'

Bill and the other detective searched slowly and carefully, but there was no sign of that bottle.

He finally straightened up with a sigh. 'Do you think Lacey's in the pub?'

'Oh, I'm quite sure he is,' said Agatha viciously.

It was a busy evening at the Red Lion. The whole village seemed to be crammed into the pub. James was surprised when he received a tap on the shoulder and a voice murmured, 'Police. Would you step outside, Mr Lacey?'

He followed the man out and started guiltily as he was confronted with an unusually serious Bill Wong and a baleful Agatha.

'I shouldn't have left, I suppose,' he said in a rush, 'but didn't you find the stick with the handkerchief on it?'

'We found that all right, but no bottle,' said Bill. 'When did you get to the pub?'

'Just after eight. I was meeting Freda . . . Mrs Huntingdon.'

'Did you tell Mrs Huntingdon or anyone else in the pub what you had found?'

'Well . . .' James shifted awkwardly from foot to foot.

The policeman who had summoned him from the pub had gone back in and now emerged again in time to hear Bill's last question.

'If I might have a word with you, sir.' He drew Bill aside. James Lacey stared at the ground.

Bill came back and looked up at James. 'So, I gather you said to Mrs Huntingdon that you and Mrs Raisin had found a clue to Mrs Josephs's death, that there was a pharmacist's bottle in the ditch and you had left your handkerchief as a flag to mark the spot. Mrs Huntingdon had said in a loud voice to a circle of locals, "We've got a sleuth in our midst. Isn't James clever?" And she told about the bottle.'

'Look,' said James desperately, 'I'm not a policeman. I've looked on it all as a sort of game. But I may have put the stick in the wrong place. Let's go back and look again.'

'Come along, then,' said Bill. 'I'd already thought of that and sent for reinforcements.'

Agatha said not a word to James but climbed into the back of Bill's car. 'If you please, sir,' said a policeman and ushered James to another police car.

There seemed to be policemen all over the place when they returned, searching and searching the hedgerows.

Then there was a shout of triumph. One policeman crouching down a few yards from where James had marked the spot waved them excitedly over. And there, as he pulled some long grass aside, lay a small pharmacist's bottle.

It was tenderly lifted up with tweezers and placed on a clean cloth and shown to Agatha.

‘I am sure that’s a different shape,’ said Agatha. ‘And it hasn’t got any label. I’m sure the one I saw had a bit of a label on it.’

‘You may as well go home, Mrs Raisin,’ said Bill. ‘We’ll call on you when we need you.’

‘I’m awfully sorry . . .’ began James miserably.

‘You too, Mr Lacey. We’ll be in touch with you.’

James faced Agatha. ‘You must think I’m all sorts of a fool.’

Agatha opened her mouth to say that, yes, she did think him a fool, but a sharp memory of how he had helped to extricate her over her own foolishness with the hand basin came into her mind and she said instead, ‘Let’s walk back to my place for some coffee and think about this.’

He fell into step beside her. ‘I can’t help thinking,’ said Agatha, ‘that the murderer might have been in the pub and heard Freda. So he or she nips out, up the road, and takes that bottle, hides nearby and sees the police arrive, waits till they’ve gone to the pub to question you and then puts another bottle there which will prove to have contained something innocuous.’

‘But a clever murderer would not have thrown the bottle there in the first place,’ protested James.

They walked on in silence, each buried in thought.

Once in Agatha’s kitchen and drinking coffee, Agatha, who had been silent for a very long time for her, suddenly burst out, ‘I’ve been thinking.’

‘What?’

‘Surely clever murderers belong in fiction. To take a life you must be insane, or temporarily insane. What if some woman knew Paul was going to be up at Lord Pendlebury’s on that day? Mad with rage, she biffs him on the head, and then jabs the syringe into him without even knowing the contents of the syringe are lethal. He’s dead. She runs off. Now she has committed murder, she really is deranged and terribly frightened. She overhears Mrs Josephs talking to me at the vicarage and feels she’s got to be silenced and she knows she is a diabetic. She injects her with God knows what, panics again, thinks if the body is found in the bathroom, natural death will be assumed. Again, she’s in the pub, and hears Freda. More panic. Take the bottle away. More panic. Replace it with another.’

They talked for another hour, writing out lists of the women who were at the vicarage and all the women in the pub that James could remember. Then the phone rang. Agatha went to answer it and then came back and sat down wearily at the table.

‘That was Bill. Mrs Josephs was murdered. Someone shot a good dose of Adrenalin into her bloodstream.’

‘But where would anyone get Adrenalin?’

‘At first I thought of Peter Rice because vets have it, but he was nowhere near the village. Bill said farmers usually have a supply, although their drugs



cabinets are checked from time to time to make sure they are safely locked.'

'Miss Mabbs!' said James suddenly.

'What about her?'

'That's why I called on you in the first place. I found her address. She's living in Leamington Spa.'

'But wait a bit. She wasn't at the vicarage, nor was she in the pub this evening, surely.'

'No, but she might have been lurking around somewhere. In any case, surely she would know more about Paul Bladen than most. She worked with him.'

Agatha made up her mind.

'We'll go tomorrow.'

## Chapter Six

Agatha and James were not able to set out for Royal Leamington Spa until late the next day, for another drama had hit Carsely. The veterinary surgery had been broken into and the drugs cabinet smashed open. It had been neatly and efficiently done. A pane of glass on the back door had been broken, allowing the thief to reach in and unlock the door.

‘So that’s probably where the Adrenalin came from,’ said a harassed-looking Bill Wong, ‘except that PC Griggs says he kept checking the premises on his rounds and there was no sign of a break-in before last night.’

‘He probably didn’t even notice the broken pane of glass,’ commented James.

‘Fred Griggs is a conscientious village bobby,’ said Bill.

‘Then do you think someone meant the police to think the Adrenalin came from there?’ asked Agatha.

‘That could be the case. But how unnecessarily complicated! And this throws suspicion on the death of Paul Bladen. No one we can think of wanted Mrs Josephs dead.’

Then statements were painstakingly taken from Agatha and James about the finding of the bottle.

‘They analysed the one we eventually found and it contains traces of a tranquillizer. We have checked with the local doctor and it would amaze you in this enlightened day and age how many women are on tranquillizers,’ said Bill. ‘Now I have something to say to both of you. The police at times seem very slow and plodding, but it’s a safer way of doing things than having amateurs running around stirring things up. Please do not interfere again.’

‘If we had not interfered, as you put it,’ said Agatha hotly, ‘you would have gone on thinking Paul Bladen’s death was an accident.’

‘And Mrs Josephs might still be alive. Leave it to us, Agatha.’

After the police had gone, James said reluctantly, ‘It seems we’re not exactly popular.’

‘Yes, I suppose we’d better drop it.’ Agatha looked reluctant. ‘Perhaps I should think about some gardening.’

‘Your lawn at the front could do with treatment,’ said James. ‘Come and I’ll show you what I mean.’

Agatha was first out of her front door. She glanced down the lane and saw Freda Huntingdon standing on James's doorstep and retreated so quickly she bumped into him.

'I've changed my mind,' she said, slamming the door and leading the way back to the kitchen. 'Have another cup of coffee and I'll tell you about it.'

'Now,' she began when they were seated, 'the way I look at it is this.'

Her doorbell rang, sharp and peremptory.

'Aren't you going to answer that?' he asked.

'I suppose so.' Agatha got reluctantly to her feet. She peered through the spyhole. Freda was standing on the step. Agatha returned to the kitchen and sat down.

'Double-glazing salesman,' she said. 'They're so pushy. Not worth answering the door.'

The bell shrilled again and Agatha winced. 'I'll go,' said James, rising.

'No, sit down, please. I think we should go to Leamington and question Miss Mabbs. How can that be called interfering? Just a few questions. If we knew more about what Paul Bladen was like, then we might know what lies behind his death. After all, what makes someone kill?'

'Passion,' said James. 'One of his jilted ladies.'

'Or money,' said Agatha, thinking of her unfortunate experience in London.

But James, secure in the comfort of a private income and an army pension, shook his head. 'He hadn't much to leave, not by today's standards.'

The doorbell rang again.

'No,' said Agatha sharply. 'Just wait and whoever it is will go away. Whereabouts in Leamington does Miss Mabbs live?'

He took out a notebook and flipped the pages. 'Here we are. Miss Cheryl Mabbs, aged twenty-three, employed for only the short time the surgery lasted in Carsely, lives at 43, Blackbird Street, Royal Leamington Spa.'

Agatha's straining ears could not hear anything from outside, but then the cottage was so insulated, she hardly ever did. 'I'll just go upstairs and put some make-up on,' she said, 'and then we'll go. If that doorbell rings again, ignore it.'

Upstairs, she peered out of her bedroom window and saw with satisfaction the slim retreating figure of Freda.

She put on a little make-up, not too much or he might be frightened off again, sprayed some Rive Gauche over herself, and went back downstairs. She fed the cats, and as the day was not particularly cold, let them out into the back garden.

'Why don't you get a cat door?' asked James.

'I've had a few scares before,' said Agatha, 'and when I think of a cat door, I think of a small burglar, writhing his way through it like a snake.'

'That doesn't happen. Tell you what,' said James, feeling obscurely that he

had to make amends for deserting his post the night before, 'buy one and I'll fix it for you.'

Agatha beamed at him. How domestic they were becoming. A simple wedding in Carsely Church. Too old to wear white. Perhaps a silk suit and a pretty hat. Honeymoon somewhere exotic. 'Famous Detective Agatha Raisin Weds,' that's what the local headlines would say.

James looked at her uneasily. Her small eyes had an odd glazed look. 'Are you feeling all right?' he asked. 'You look just the way I feel when I have indigestion.'

'I'm all right,' said Agatha, returning to earth with a bump. 'Let's go.'

Leamington, or Royal Leamington Spa, to give it the full title which few people hardly ever use, was a relatively short drive and they arrived there in under an hour.

The day had become grey and overcast, but unusually mild. Although in the centre of the country, Agatha thought Leamington had the air of a seaside town like Eastbourne or Brighton and kept expecting to turn a corner and see the sea.

James, to her irritation, said he wanted to view the public gardens before they started any detective work. Agatha stumped along angrily beside him while he enthused over plants and blossom. She was obscurely aware she was jealous of the scenery and wished some of his raptures could be directed at her. She glanced at him sideways. He was strolling easily along with his hands in his pockets, at peace with the world. She wondered what he thought about her. She wondered what he thought about anything. Why wasn't he married? Was he gay? And yet look at the way he had left that splendid clue to go running after a stupid bitch like Freda Huntingdon.

He was staring up in dazed wonder at the cascading blossoms of a cherry tree when Agatha suddenly snapped, 'Are we going to commune with nature all day, or are we going to get on with it?' He gave her a glance, half-rueful, half-amused, and all at once Agatha had a picture of him escorting some woman who would share his enthusiasm for the scenery, who would know all these county names he had talked about at that old manor house, and felt bullying and coarsegrained.

'All right,' said James amiably, 'let's go.'

He took out a small street map and consulted it. 'We can walk,' he said. 'It's not far.'

They set off. 'Where does she work?' asked Agatha. 'Oh, and how did you find out about her?'

'I don't know where she works, but I got her address from Peter Rice in Mircester. She isn't a veterinary nurse, simply a sort of receptionist.'

Agatha began to wonder if they were ever going to get there, James's idea of 'not far' not being her own. But they finally arrived at a long street of

shops with flats above them. The shops had probably always been shops. The buildings were Georgian and run down, with cracked stucco and grimy fronts dating from the days before the Clean Air Act, when soot fell on everything.

It was six o'clock. Most of the little shops were closed and the street was quiet. Agatha could remember the days when a street such as this would resound with the cries of children: children playing hopscotch, children playing ball, children playing cowboys and Indians. Now they were probably all indoors watching television, videos, or playing computer games. Sad.

Number 43 turned out to be a staircase between two shops leading to flats above. At the top of the staircase was a battered wooden door and beside it a row of bells with names on cards beside each bell. There was no Mabbs listed.

'Must have the wrong address,' said James.

'I didn't walk all this way for nothing,' said Agatha impatiently, for her feet were sore. She pressed the nearest bell.

After a few moments the door was opened by a thin, anaemic-looking girl with blonde hair gelled up into spikes. 'Wotyerwant?' she asked.

'Miss Cheryl Mabbs,' said Agatha.

'She's on bell 4,' said the girl, 'but you won't find her in. She and Jerry has gone out.'

'Where?' asked James.

'How should I know, mate? They usually has fish an' chips and goes to the disco.'

'Where is this disco?' James smiled at the girl, who smiled back.

'Not your style,' she said. 'It's down the road. Rave On Disco. Can't miss it. Wait till later and you'll hear the noise.'

'Well, that's that,' said James as they emerged out into the street again.

'No, it's not.' Agatha looked up at him. 'We could have a bite to eat and then go to the disco ourselves.'

He shied slightly and looked off into the middle distance. 'I really think I would rather go home, Agatha. As the young lady there pointed out, discos are not my style.'

Agatha glared at him. 'Hardly mine either,' she said, feeling her feet throb.

He stood there, looking down at her in polite embarrassment and obviously waiting for her to give in.

'Dinner and think about it?' suggested Agatha.

'I suppose I am hungry. It's a bit early for dinner. We'll find a pub.'

Over drinks, followed later by a modest dinner in an Indian restaurant, Agatha reflected that the more time she spent with James, the less she seemed to find out about him. He seemed to have an endless fund of impersonal topics to talk about, from politics to gardening, but what he really felt or thought about anything, he did not say.

But he agreed to try the disco.

Back along Blackbird Street they went. They heard the thud, thud, thud of the disco music as they approached.

The disco was called Rave On and was a club, but they got inside easily after paying a modest entrance fee. 'Enjoy yourself, Grandma,' said the bouncer to Agatha, who glared at him and said, 'Get stuffed,' and then realized that James's face had taken on that shuttered look again.

Inside it was full of bodies writhing under strobe lights. Following closely behind James, Agatha shouldered her way to a black plastic-padded bar in the corner.

James ordered a mineral water for Agatha because she was driving and a whisky and water for himself. 'How much is that?' he shouted at the barman, a white-faced youth with a pinched, spotty face.

'On the house, officer,' said the barman.

'We are not police officers.'

'In that case, pay up, guv. Four pound for every drink. Eight quid, squire.'

'Do you know Cheryl Mabbs?' asked James. 'We're friends of hers.'

He pointed. 'Over there in that booth, her wiff the orange-and-pink 'air.'

Through the stabbing strobe lights and shifting gyrating bodies, they could make out a gleam of orange and pink in a far corner.

'Drink up,' said James and tossed his back.

'I'll leave mine,' shouted Agatha above the din. 'I never did like gnat's piss anyway.'

His eyes had that blank look which Agatha had come to interpret as a sign of disapproval. But he said, 'We'd better dance our way over. Less conspicuous.'

He joined the gyrating figures, cheerfully waving his arms in the air and dancing like a dervish. Agatha tried to follow suit but felt ridiculous. Teenagers were stopping their own dancing to cheer James on.

Inconspicuous, thought Agatha with a groan. The whole damn place is looking at us.

A few more whirls and turns and James came to a stop at Cheryl's booth, wildly applauded by the customers.

It was a different Miss Mabbs from the quiet, pallid girl in the white coat Agatha had first seen at the vet's. Her hair was sprayed pink and orange and arranged in what Agatha could only think of as tufts. She wore a black leather jacket with studs over a yellow T-shirt with some slogan on it that Agatha could not read in the gloom. Beside her was a leather-jacketed young man with a face like a tipsy fox.

'Miss Mabbs!' cried Agatha. 'We've been looking for you.'

'Who the hell are you?' said the girl and picked up her drink, which was of as vile a colour as her hair, nudged aside the little paper umbrella on the top

with her nose and took a sip of it through a straw.

‘I am Agatha Raisin,’ said Agatha, thrusting out her hand.

‘So what?’ mumbled Cheryl.

‘I met you at the vet’s in Carsely. I came along with my pussy.’

‘Took your pussy along, did you?’ demanded Cheryl’s escort with a cackle.

‘Any luck?’

Cheryl sniggered.

‘Look here,’ said James in the authoritative tones of the upper class, ‘can we go somewhere quiet where we can talk?’

‘Sod off,’ said Cheryl, but the young man put a hand on her arm. His foxy eyes glinted up at James. ‘What’s it worth to us?’

‘A tenner and a drink,’ said James.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Come on, Cher.’

They were soon all seated in a quiet dingy pub, perhaps one of the few left in Britain without a slot-machine or juke-box or piped music. A few old men sat around in corners. The bar smelt of must and old beer and old men.

‘What do you want to know?’ asked Cheryl Mabbs.

‘About Paul Bladen,’ said Agatha eagerly. ‘It now seems he was murdered.’

Interest showed in her face for the first time. ‘And I thought nothing exciting would ever happen in that dump of a village. Me, I prefer the more cosmopolitan life, like,’ she stated, as if Leamington Spa were Paris. ‘Who done it?’

‘That’s what we want to find out,’ said James. ‘Any ideas?’

She scowled horribly and took a hearty swig at her glass of vodka and Red Bull. ‘Could be anyone,’ she said finally.

‘There’s Mrs Josephs as well,’ said Agatha and told of that murder.

‘I told him trouble would come when he destroyed her old cat,’ said Cheryl. ‘He didn’t like cats, and that’s a fact. Hated the beasts. But he sweet-talked those old dears in the village a treat. Always taking one or the other of them out for dinner.’

‘Why?’ asked Agatha.

‘Why else?’ countered Cheryl. ‘After their money, I suppose. I mean, what other reason could there be?’

‘And why would he want their money?’ demanded James, flashing a sympathetic look at Agatha, who was now outscowling Cheryl. ‘I mean, he left a fair bit.’

‘It was an impression, that’s all. He was keen on that Freda Huntingdon. I caught them hard at it.’

‘Where?’ demanded Agatha with a triumphant look at James.

‘Right on the examining table. Her skirt was up around her ears and his trousers were down round his ankles. Laugh! I nearly died. But the others? Holding hands and taking them out for dinner was about as far as he got, I

reckon. Course he had to soft-soap Mrs Josephs, didn't he? I mean, she was making things hot for him over that cat. Then there was that funny old creature, Webster. That's it.'

Agatha's scowl came back. She estimated that Josephine Webster, she who ran the dried-flower shop, was probably younger than herself.

'None of these ladies is really old,' she protested.

Cheryl shrugged. 'All look like a hundred and two to me,' she said with all the callousness of youth.

'Did he get up to any of this philandering in Mircester?' asked James.

'Didn't know him then,' replied Cheryl. 'Saw the ad for a vet's receptionist and got the job.'

'So what are you doing now?'

'Kennels. Out Warwick way.' Cheryl's face suddenly softened. 'I like animals. B'etter'n people any day.'

'So all we got out of that unlovely pair,' said James as they drove back to Carsely, 'was much as we supposed. He was charming the ladies of Carsely . . .'

'And screwing one,' said Agatha with a grin.

'I must confess I was very surprised to hear that about Freda,' he said stiffly. 'Do you think our Miss Mabbs could have been making it up?'

'Not for a moment,' said Agatha gleefully.

'Oh, well, I suppose we should now concentrate on Miss Webster. Then there's Mrs Mason to see. Who was the other one you saw at the funeral?'

'Harriet Parr.'

'We'll see them all tomorrow,' said James. 'But better not let Bill Wong know what we're doing.'

'And yet,' said Agatha, 'I can't help feeling that the clue to the whole thing lies with his ex-wife. She must know more about him than anyone. And who was the woman who answered the phone that night I called and said she was his wife? I'll bet that was our Mrs Skirt-up-to-Her-Eyeballs, Freda Huntingdon.'

'Can we please drop the subject of Freda?' he said. Agatha glanced sideways at him as they approached the orange lights of a roundabout. His face looked grim.

Damn Freda, thought Agatha bitterly, pressed her foot harder on the accelerator and sent the car racing homewards through the night.

'Do you think there is a Mr Parr?' asked James as he and Agatha strolled through the village the next day to renew their investigation.



‘I shouldn’t think so. There are an awful lot of widows about. Men don’t live that long.’

‘Probably only the married ones,’ said James.

He put his hands in his pockets and began to whistle something complicated – probably Bach or some old bore like that, thought Agatha.

Mrs Harriet Parr lived in a modern bungalow on the outskirts of the village. When they reached the gate, Agatha said suddenly, ‘This is a waste of time.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t remember meeting a Mrs Parr at the vicarage, and if she wasn’t there to overhear what Mrs Josephs said to me, how can she have anything to do with it?’

‘Perhaps Mrs Josephs was going about saying the same thing earlier.’

‘Oh, well, let’s get on with it.’

Mrs Parr answered the door herself. Agatha began by saying they hadn’t met, but she and Mr Lacey would like to ask her a few questions, and soon they found themselves in a comfortable living-room. Agatha counted six cats. There was something claustrophobic about seeing so many cats in one room. She felt obscurely that at least some of them ought to be outside.

Mrs Parr was a small woman with curly black hair and an oddly old-fashioned sort of hourglass figure. Agatha decided she was probably wearing a corset. She had hard red cheeks and a small pinched mouth which when she spoke revealed pointed teeth.

It was some time before Agatha could get down to questioning her because she and James had to be introduced to each cat in turn. Then Mrs Parr fussed over James, asking him if he were comfortable, plumping cushions at his back, before rushing off to fetch tea and ‘some of my special scones’.

‘No Mr Parr,’ whispered Agatha.

‘Might be out at work,’ said James.

Mrs Parr came back with a loaded tray. After tea had been poured and the lightness of scones admired, Agatha said, ‘Actually, we’re really interested in finding out about Paul Bladen.’

Mrs Parr’s cup rattled against the saucer. ‘Poor Paul,’ she said. She put cup and saucer down and dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue. ‘So young and so brave.’

‘Brave?’

‘He was going to found a veterinary hospital. He had such dreams. He said he could only talk to me. I was the only one with enough imagination to share his vision.’

Then they heard the front door open. ‘My husband,’ whispered Mrs Parr. ‘Don’t . . .’

The door of the living-room opened and a tall thin middle-aged man with a grey face and a prominent Adam’s apple bobbing over a rigid shirt collar

came in.

‘People from the village, dear,’ said Mrs Parr. ‘Mrs Raisin and Mr Lacey. They both live in Lilac Lane. They’ve just been admiring my scones.’

‘What brought you here?’ asked Mr Parr bluntly.

‘We’ve just started asking a few questions about Paul Bladen – you know, the vet that was found dead.’

‘Get out of here,’ hissed Mr Parr. He held the door wide open. ‘Out!’

‘We were only –’ said Agatha, but that was as far as she got.

‘Get out!’ he shouted at the top of his voice this time, his thin tired face working with rage. ‘Never come here again. Leave us alone.’

‘I am very sorry we upset you so much,’ said James politely as he and Agatha edged past the infuriated husband.

‘Fuck off, you upper-class twat,’ yelled Mr Parr and spat full in James’s face.

There was a horrified silence, punctuated only by the sound of Mrs Parr’s weeping. James slowly cleaned his face with a handkerchief. Mr Parr was now trembling and looking appalled at the enormity of his own behaviour.

James put his large hands on Mr Parr’s shoulders and shook him backwards and forwards.

He punctuated each shake by saying, ‘Don’t . . . ever . . . do . . . that . . . to . . . me . . . again.’

Then he abruptly released him and strode out, with Agatha at his heels.

‘We’re really stirring up mud, Agatha,’ he sighed. He looked back at the neat bungalow. ‘You know, sometimes when I was coming home on leave, I would look out at little houses like that from the train and imagine secure and cosy lives. What awful emotional dramas lurk behind the façades of all the houses called comfortable names like Mon Repos and Shangri-La, what breeding grounds for murder.’

‘Oh, it’s quite a lively place, the country,’ said Agatha cheerfully. ‘I feel we’re getting somewhere. Mrs Parr must have been having a fling with Bladen. Let’s try Josephine Webster.’

‘Perhaps before we get to her, we should call on Freda Huntingdon.’

‘What? That floozy? How can you bear to look at that slut without blushing?’ demanded Agatha.

He stopped and looked down at her, leaning back, hands in his pockets and rocking slightly on his heels. A faint gleam of malice shone in his eyes. ‘On the contrary, Agatha, I find the idea of a Freda Huntingdon with her skirt around her ears quite delectable.’

Agatha walked on. Well, they would call on Freda because Agatha was suddenly sure, had a sudden gut feeling that Freda was the murderer. She, Agatha Raisin, would prove it. Freda would be dragged off by the police. She would be sentenced to life imprisonment. She would be locked away from

society and James would never set eyes on her again.

‘Why are you racing along?’ demanded James plaintively from somewhere behind her. ‘I thought you weren’t all that keen on seeing the woman.’

‘I’ve decided that after all I do want to visit dear Freda,’ snapped Agatha.

Droon’s Cottage, which Freda had bought, was at the back of the village on a rise. It was a Georgian cottage with a splendid wisteria hanging over the Regency doorway, its purple blooms just beginning to show.

‘The bell doesn’t work,’ said James and Agatha scowled horribly at this sign of his knowledge of the workings of Freda’s house.

The door was opened by Doris Simpson, who cleaned for Agatha.

‘What are you doing here?’ demanded Agatha, who felt that this excellent cleaning woman was her sole property, although Doris only came one day a week now.

‘I does for Mrs Huntingdon, Agatha,’ said Doris, and Agatha thought that Doris should at least have addressed her as ‘Mrs Raisin’ in front of James.

‘Is she in?’ asked James.

‘No, James, her’s up at Lord Pendlebury’s. Got a horse and he’s keeping it in his stables for her. Oh, and Bert thanks you for the loan of the books.’

‘We’ll go up to Pendlebury’s and have a word with her there,’ said James.

‘I didn’t know you knew Bert and Doris Simpson,’ said Agatha.

‘I sometimes have a drink with them in the Red Lion. Should we walk to Pendlebury’s? It’s a fine day.’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Agatha ungraciously, thinking, trust Freda to ingratiate herself with the aristocracy.

She was cursing her middle-aged feet by the time they reached Eastwold Park. She was wearing a low-heeled pair of black suede shoes which up until that day had appeared a miracle of comfort. But shoes which had only been worn around the house and for a short walk from the car to the shops had developed hard ridges and bumps on the inside, of which she had previously been unaware.

As they approached the door of the mansion, Agatha felt her working-class soul cringing.

This was intensified by a smell of baked beans coming from the kitchen, which vividly brought back memories of the shabby streets of Birmingham: squalling babies, large belligerent women, and a small Agatha who nursed a dream of one day having a home in the Cotswolds. The food of the poor, remembered Agatha, had always seemed to be tinned baked beans or fish and chips.

Mrs Arthur opened the door. ‘He’s got company,’ she said. ‘He’s over at the stables.’

‘We’ll find him there,’ said James.

Agatha limped after him towards the stables.

Freda and Lord Pendlebury were standing outside, talking. Freda was wearing a tweed hacking jacket, jodhpurs and new riding-boots. She looked as if she had stepped out of a glossy advertisement in *Country Life*.

‘James!’ she cried when she saw him and she ran forward and kissed him on the cheek. Agatha wished she had not come. Lord Pendlebury sloped over. ‘What’s this, young man? I was just enjoying the company of this pretty lady before you came along,’ and he gave Freda a dotting look. Then he saw Agatha. ‘Good God!’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s that woman back again.’

Freda giggled and hung on James’s arm, smiling up at him.

‘We’ve been asking questions about Paul Bladen’s death,’ said Agatha, harshly and loudly. ‘We gather you were having it off with him.’

‘Really!’ Freda looked at Agatha with distaste and then her eyes appealed silently to the two gentlemen for help.

‘Go away, you horrible woman. Shoo!’ said Lord Pendlebury.

‘Too blunt, Agatha,’ murmured James. ‘Why don’t you go home and leave this to me? I’ll call in on you later.’

Face red, Agatha wheeled round and stalked off. She could feel them all looking at her. Why had she been so blunt? Damn Freda!

James would probably drop the investigation and all because of that floozy.

Her feet hurt and her heart hurt and she was glad to get home to the undemanding affections of her cats.

She felt she should forget about James and go and ask Josephine Webster a few questions. The phone rang.

To her outrage and amazement, she recognized Jack Pomfret’s voice.

‘Look, Agatha,’ he wheedled. ‘Okay, I went about things the wrong way. Yes, you guessed it. I went bust in Spain. But I’ve got a nice little earner lined up and . . .’

Agatha dropped the phone. She found she was trembling with outrage. How *dare* he! She felt almost frightened that he should persist in trying to get money out of her. Think of something else. Think of Josephine Webster. And then there was Mrs Mason. She had been at the funeral.

But somehow she was too upset to think clearly. She thought about pouring herself a drink and then decided against it. She was not going to end up one of those people who poured themselves a drink the minute anything upset them. So she switched on the television and stared blindly at an American soap, gradually feeling herself relax.

An hour later, when her doorbell went, she jumped nervously, almost frightened that Jack Pomfret had pursued her to the country. But it was James who stood on the doorstep. ‘Sorry about that,’ he said. ‘But you were too blunt. Freda knows you don’t like her and so she is not going to take kindly to being questioned by you.’

‘So did you get anything at all out of her?’ asked Agatha.

‘When I got rid of the dotting Pendlebury, I had a talk with her. She says she had a bit of a fling with Bladen, but that was all. She pointed out, rightly, that she’s free and single and can do what she likes. She was quite open about the whole business.’

‘But why in the surgery?’ demanded Agatha. ‘They’ve both got the privacy of homes and beds. Doesn’t that suggest passion rather than a casual affair to you?’

‘Well,’ he said awkwardly, ‘Freda’s quite a girl.’

‘Middle-aged woman, rather.’

‘Let’s not quarrel about Freda. I don’t think there’s anything there to worry about. Let’s try Josephine Webster.’

Glad of an excuse to be with him again and get away from the phone, Agatha set off with him to Josephine Webster’s shop. It was not a proper shop. It was a terraced house on the main street and she used what would normally have been the living-room to display her wares. The shop was dark and heavy with the ginger and cinnamon smells of herbal soaps and perfumes. Bunches of dried flowers hung from the beamed ceiling. Straw hats ornamented with dried flowers hung on the walls.

Neat Miss Webster was sitting at a desk in the corner of this room, doing accounts.

Determined to be more tactful, Agatha bought a cake of sandalwood soap, talked about the Carsely Ladies’ Society, the weather, and then finally got around to the subject of Paul Bladen.

‘A most unfortunate death,’ said Miss Webster, peering at Agatha over a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. ‘Such a sad accident.’

James stepped in. ‘But now, in view of Mrs Josephs’ murder, the police are beginning to think that someone might have murdered Paul Bladen.’

‘That’s ridiculous. I can’t believe that.’

‘There’s a mobile police unit being set up outside the village,’ said James, ‘and I don’t think it’s all because of Mrs Josephs.’

Her face had a pinched, closed look. ‘I am very busy. If you do not wish to buy anything else, please leave.’

‘But you must have been very close to Paul Bladen,’ pursued Agatha. ‘I saw you at his funeral.’

‘I was there to pay my respects, although I did not like him,’ she said. ‘Us village people went to pay our respects. Outsiders like you no doubt went along out of vulgar curiosity, and if you take my advice, leave investigations to the police.’

‘So that’s us, with a flea in both ears,’ commented James outside. ‘All we seem to be getting are insults. What about Mrs Mason?’

‘At least we’ll get a welcome there,’ said Agatha. ‘She lives on the council estate.’

‘How are your feet?’

‘Fine now. I changed my shoes.’

Mrs Mason indeed gave them a warm welcome. More tea and scones. Gossip about the village. But Agatha began to shift nervously. A big murder investigation was taking place in the village. Surely it was odd that Mrs Mason should not mention that.

‘Lot of police around,’ ventured Agatha.

‘Yes, poor Mrs Josephs. I find it hard to believe. I think she took her own life. She was so upset about her cat.’

‘That was a wicked thing of Bladen to do,’ put in James. ‘Of course, the police now think he was murdered.’

There was a long silence while Mrs Mason stared at him, her matronly figure rigid. ‘That’s ridiculous,’ she said at last. ‘No one would kill Mr Bladen.’

‘Why?’

‘He wasn’t the kind of person who gets murdered. He was a man of purpose and vision. A kind man.’

‘Not very kind to kill Mrs Josephs’ cat.’

‘That was a *mercy* killing. He told me the old cat was in *agony*.’

Agatha leaned forward. ‘Just think for a moment, Mrs Mason, just suppose someone had murdered Paul Bladen. Can’t you think of any reason why?’

‘No, I really can’t. I wouldn’t get involved in all this, Mrs Raisin. I really wouldn’t. It’s not decent. Perhaps it’s the way people go on in the city, but . . .’

’

‘But don’t you even want to know who killed Mrs Josephs?’

‘Yes, but that’s a job for the police.’

They couldn’t get anything else out of her and retreated to Agatha’s cottage.

‘I would like to have a go at that ex-wife, Mrs Bladen, one more time.’ said Agatha. ‘But no doubt she would just slam the door in our faces.’

‘You know,’ said James, ‘we could go back and see Bunty Vere-Dedsworth at the manor house. She might help us in getting Greta Bladen to talk.’

‘Then let’s go,’ said Agatha eagerly, frightened that if they waited in Carsely any longer, Freda would arrive on the doorstep.

## Chapter Seven

They were just about to leave when the phone rang. Agatha started and looked at it as if it were a hissing snake. Was it Freda? Or was it Bill Wong asking them to mind their own business and leave the investigation to the police? He had always had a nasty way of knowing what she was up to.

She picked up the receiver and gave a tentative 'Hello.'

'Look here, Agatha,' said Jack Pomfret's voice sternly. 'This is ridiculous. I —'

'Go away and leave me alone!' she screamed and banged down the receiver.

Then she stood and wiped her moist palms on her skirt. 'He's mad,' she muttered. 'I could kill him.'

'Who? Are you all right, Agatha?'

She shook her head as if to clear it and gave a sigh. 'Someone I used to know. He's trying to con money out of me. He starts a new business. I pay. He knows I found out he was trying to cheat me. But he's insane. He keeps phoning. I feel humiliated. I feel threatened.'

The phone rang again and Agatha jumped.

'Allow me,' he said. He picked up the receiver and listened. Then he said in glacial tones, 'This is Agatha's husband speaking. I handle all her financial affairs. One more call from you and I will suggest to the police that they take a close look at your business transactions.'

James looked at the receiver before putting it down and smiled.

'What did he say?' demanded Agatha.

'He gave a frightened squawk and rang off. You won't be hearing from him again.'

'Why are you so sure of that?'

'Because, my dear Agatha, it's an old-fashioned world, however tough and independent women have become. He now thinks he has an irate husband to deal with. Come along. You look too rattled to drive.'

As she climbed into his car, Agatha felt a warm glow permeating her body. He had said he was her husband! Oh, somehow she must tell Freda Huntingdon that!

The day was blustery, with great cloud shadows racing across the fields,

where new corn rippled in the fleeting sunlight. Agatha's heart sang. And then her voice sang, 'Oh, what a beautiful morning.'

'It's afternoon,' said James. He switched on the radio, a pointed rebuke, and Agatha sank back into silence.

The manor house looked as it had done before, calm and benign, part of the landscape rather than some building thrust upon it.

'So you're back,' said Bunty, looking pleased. 'I was just going to have some coffee.'

'We need your help,' said James when they were all seated in the comfortable kitchen.

He succinctly outlined all that had happened and explained they were sure that Greta Bladen could help them.

Bunty listened carefully, her eyes bright with interest.

'As I told you before, I know Greta,' she said. 'We all know each other in this little village. I'll phone her and ask her to come up.'

She went off and came back shortly to say that Greta was on her way. 'You had better let me do the talking,' said Bunty. 'She can be prickly.'

And prickly was what Greta looked as she entered the kitchen and stopped short at the sight of Agatha and James.

'Now you can't run away from people asking questions about Paul's death,' said Bunty firmly. 'You didn't like the man, but surely you don't want a murderer to be left to roam the Cotswolds in peace. Sit down, Greta, and have coffee. You see, we all feel that if we knew a bit more about Paul Bladen, then we might be able to guess which of the suspects might have done it.'

'Including me,' said Greta bitterly, but she sat down and shrugged off her short coat.

'Well, it's a dreary story,' she said. 'As you probably realize, I was ten years older than Paul when I met him. He was working as a vet in Leamington Spa where I lived. I had a dog then I was devoted to, the way only the unloved can become devoted to animals.'

Agatha, who had been thinking of her cats, stared down into her coffee cup.

'I took my dog to the vet for some shots. Paul was charming. I could not believe my luck when he asked me out. My parents had died and left me a house and a comfortable amount of money. It was what the romances call a whirlwind courtship. Shortly after we were married, I found my dog dead one morning. The animal had been fit and healthy the day before. Paul was all sympathy and did an autopsy. He said the dog had died of heart failure. Only in later years did I suspect he had poisoned it. Strange in a vet, but he had a hatred of dogs and cats. He told me about his dream of a veterinary hospital. He said he would name it after me. I gave him a considerable amount of money to get started.

'During the following year, he regaled me with stories of the plot of land he



had bought and how the builders had started work. I was excited and asked to see it, but he said he wanted it to be a surprise. I said, "At least tell me where it is," and he said Chimley Road on the outskirts of Mircester. He started to come home very late. He said he was always going over to the building site when he finished work. Then he said we were moving to Mircester to be near the new hospital. He did not ask me for money. He said he had a house all ready but I was to promise not to go near Chimley Road until he was ready to surprise me.'

Greta sighed. 'I was so much in love with him. That was until I met his partner, Peter Rice, at a party. I had known Peter before, by the way. We were old friends. So I thought it all right to ask him if they would still run the surgery when the new veterinary hospital was opened.

'He asked me, "What veterinary hospital?" I told him. He gave me a pitying look and said why didn't I go out to Chimley Road and have a look. Alarmed, I set off the next day. It was a long row of terraced houses. No building site.

'I taxed Paul with it. He began to say that things hadn't worked out there, so the building site was in Leamington, and when I didn't believe him, he finally came out with the truth. He was a gambler, a dedicated gambler. Not only had he spent all the money I had given him in gambling but he needed more to pay his debts. I refused. He grew ugly. He told me he had only married an old bat like me for my money. Yes, I could have killed him then. But I wanted free of him and so I made him agree to a separation and subsequent divorce. If he did not agree, I said, I would tell Peter Rice all about him.'

'So,' said James, 'one of his ladies could have murdered him because he conned money out of them.'

'Surely that's hardly a reason for murder,' protested Bunty.

'Oh, yes, it is,' said Agatha, thinking of Jack Pomfret.

'So now you've got what you want from me,' said Greta in a tired voice, 'may I go?'

'Of course, my dear,' said Bunty 'But you must realize how essential it is to find out who did this terrible thing.'

Greta stood up. 'Why? Why is it so important? He died painlessly. He was cruel and useless.'

'But there is the murder of Mrs Josephs,' said Agatha quietly. 'You must have read about that.'

'Yes, but what's that got to do with Paul?'

'She said she was going to tell me all about him,' said Agatha, 'and the next day she was dead.'

Greta shook her head in bewilderment. 'I cannot bring myself to believe that Paul's death was anything other than an accident. I don't know this

Josephs woman – I mean I didn't know her. Possibly her death is unrelated.' Her voice shook. 'I've done what I can for you. Please don't trouble me again.'

There was a long silence after she had left. Then, 'Poor woman,' said Bunty.

'Perhaps.' Agatha laced her fingers tightly round the coffee mug. 'On the other hand, she surely had the most reason to kill Paul. She would know about Immobilon. Perhaps she would have access to Adrenalin, if he had left any of his drugs behind when he left her.'

'You're forgetting about the break-in at the surgery,' James pointed out.

'The police seem to think that might have been done *after* Mrs Josephs's death.'

'So many women. So many suspects,' mourned James. 'But we have taken up enough of your time, Bunty.'

They thanked her and left.

'We've got one thing,' said Agatha, as they drove off. 'Money, not passion, seems to be at the bottom of things. Look, Jack Pomfret didn't get any money out of me, right? But the very fact that he tried to trick me, the fact that he has the gall to phone me up makes me want to murder him, gives me a mad hatred and fear of him. Can you understand that?'

'Yes, I think so. If any of these women, I mean any of our suspects, apart from Greta, paid up, there would be a motive. We could go to Mircester and ask Peter Rice what happened to Paul Bladen's deposit book.'

Agatha agreed, delighted at an opportunity of more time in his company.

The evening surgery at the vet's in Mircester was just closing. Peter Rice greeted them this time amiably enough but scoffed when they asked if he had any of Paul Bladen's bankbooks.

'I cleared all his papers out and made a bonfire of them,' he said. 'I've put the house up for sale. I could hardly sell it with all his junk around. I asked Greta if she wanted anything but she didn't, so I gave his clothes to charity and the contents of the house are being sold with it.'

'Which was his bank?' asked James.

'The Cotswold and Gloucester. But bank managers don't reveal anything about their customers' accounts, even when they're dead, as far as I know.'

'You didn't happen to notice if Paul had received any large sums from women recently?' asked Agatha.

He gave a jolly laugh. 'He was hardly young enough to be a toy boy. The lawyers will only pass over to me what is left after their bill and the funeral costs have been settled. I'm afraid his banking affairs have gone to the grave with him. But why do you ask? Hadn't been ripping you off, had he?'

'Just curious,' said Agatha. 'I mean it is odd, now that it's turned out someone murdered Mrs Josephs. I mean, it definitely makes Paul Bladen's

death look like murder.’

‘Not to me,’ said Peter. ‘Pendlebury asked me to do that operation and I said I would never touch Immobilon again.’

‘Let’s get something to eat,’ suggested James when they had left the surgery.

They chose a nearby pub – but not the one where Agatha had ruined the hand basin – and began to discuss the suspects, or rather, Agatha discussed the suspects while a preoccupied James frowned into his beer.

‘I don’t believe you’ve been listening to a word I’ve been saying,’ said Agatha crossly.

‘I’ve been half-listening. The fact is I’ve been thinking about committing a crime.’

‘You?’

‘Yes. I’ve been thinking about breaking into the Cotswold and Gloucester Bank.’

‘But that’s impossible. There’ll be sophisticated burglar alarms and laser beams and pressure pads and God knows what else.’

‘Perhaps not. Let’s finish our food and drink and go and take a look at it.’

The bank was a converted shop in a side street where old Tudor buildings with overhanging eaves crowded out the night sky above.

‘Burglar alarm of course,’ said James. ‘We’ll take a look round the back if we can get there.’

They found a lane which ran along the back of a row of shops and the bank. There were a series of lock-ups, garages, and tall wooden fences, all having a closed, impregnable air.

James counted along. ‘This is the back of the bank,’ he said, ‘what used to be the garden. Surely they wouldn’t wire up this wooden door in the wall.’

He took a small wallet of credit cards out of his pocket. Agatha bit back the impatient remark she was about to make – that apart from in the movies, she had never seen anyone open a lock with a credit card. He selected one.

Agatha turned away and looked along the lane, which was lit with sodium lamps, making everything look unreal, and, she thought more practically, probably making her lips look purple.

There was a click and she swung round. The door in the wall was standing open. ‘Amazing,’ said Agatha.

‘Let’s get inside before someone sees us,’ whispered James.

Agatha followed him in. He closed the door behind them and took out a pencil torch. ‘You’ve done this before,’ accused Agatha.

He didn’t reply but led the way up a narrow path between two strips of lawn. ‘Look,’ he murmured, ‘there’s a kitchen at the back.’

‘What does a bank want a kitchen for?’

‘Make tea for the staff. Left over from when it used to be a shop. Now, let me see . . .’

The thin beam of the torch flicked up and down the building. ‘I don’t see any sign of an alarm here,’ he said. ‘I’m going to have a go. Be prepared to make a run for it.’

‘But we might not hear any alarm,’ said Agatha in an agony of nerves. ‘It might just ring inside the police station.’

‘Where’s your sense of adventure?’ he mocked.

He took out the card again. Agatha prayed that he would not be able to get the door open. She imagined police cars swooping up the lane, police with loud-hailers; the reproachful eyes of Bill Wong. But all she heard was James’s voice saying softly, ‘It’s open. Come on.’

Now Agatha’s heart was hammering so hard, she felt sure it could be heard for miles. The kitchen door closed behind them, the torch beam flickered rapidly to right and left. James opened a door leading out of the kitchen and led the way through.

They found themselves in a square room full of desks and computers. ‘The office,’ said James, ‘which is all we need. Just as well. Look at that door over there. That’s the one into the bank proper, where the money is.’

Agatha shivered. There was an alarm box over the door and a steady red light glared down on them like an infuriated eye.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘make yourself comfortable. This might take some time. There are no windows in this room except for that one through to the main bank, which is just as well, for the light from the computer screen could have been spotted from outside.’

Agatha sat down in a dark corner and waited, too frightened to watch what he was doing, although she was aware of a computer screen flickering into life and the soft sound of drawers being opened and shut.

It had been a long day and extreme fear had the effect of making Agatha feel sleepy. Her eyes closed.

She awoke with him shaking her shoulder and cried, ‘We’ve been caught! The police!’

‘Shhh! I’ve found his account,’ hissed James.

‘Good. Can we get out of here?’

‘Yes, I’ve taken notes. Quietly now.’

As Agatha finally followed him down the garden path, she felt sure there must be people living above the adjoining shops, people who were staring down at the two figures in the garden and reaching for their telephones, but when she shot one frightened look back, everything was as dark and silent as before.

Only when they were safely outside did she realize that fear was affecting her physically. ‘I must find a Ladies’ . . . quick,’ she gasped.

‘Are you feeling sick?’

‘No, I’ve got to *pee*,’ said Agatha. ‘There’s a tide of pee rising up to my eyeballs.’

‘We’ll go back to the pub,’ he said. ‘It isn’t far.’

Agatha cursed her own crudity. But she almost ran back to the pub.

‘Now what?’ she asked, elated because her fright was over and she had used the services of the pub’s toilet.

‘Don’t you want to know what I found out?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Listen to this. In the short time Paul Bladen was in Carsely, he had deposits in his account: one of twenty thousand pounds, one of fifteen thousand, then nine thousand, one of four thousand, five deposits of five thousand, and one for five hundred. That’s apart from his pay.’

‘Who paid him?’

‘There’s the rub. Didn’t say. I’ve been thinking. I would like to get inside that house of his. We could do it tonight.’

‘Last orders, please, ladies and gennelmen. If you please,’ called the barman.

‘As late as that!’ exclaimed Agatha. ‘Well, we could start out tomorrow early and –’

‘No, tonight.’ He looked at Agatha’s cherry-red coat. ‘We need some dark clothes.’

What monster is this I have unleashed? thought Agatha, looking at his animated face. She could tell him to go on his own. And yet, there would be all the excitement of the adventure, which might lead to . . . They fumbled around in the dark of Paul Bladen’s house. ‘What’s that?’ he cried, clutching hold of Agatha. ‘Nothing,’ he murmured, still holding her. ‘Your perfume smells divine. Oh, Agatha!’ And he bent his lips to hers.

‘Agatha! Stop day-dreaming and let’s get on,’ said James sharply and Agatha blinked the rosy vision away, obscurely irritated that he had snapped her out of it before he had kissed her.

Back at her cottage, Agatha changed into a pair of black slacks and a black sweater. She wondered whether he meant her to blacken her face. Better wait and see.

He rang her bell at one in the morning. He too was wearing a black sweater and black trousers. ‘We’ll be causing no end of a scandal,’ he said cheerfully. ‘I only hope no one sees me calling on you at this hour of the night,’ and Agatha thought of Freda and fervently hoped that someone had.

James, who had been drinking mineral water during their last visit to the pub, elected to drive again. Agatha snuggled down in the passenger seat and

dreamt they were racing off on their honeymoon.

‘Just to be on the safe side,’ said James, ‘we’ll park a street away and walk.’

Paul Bladen’s house stood quiet and shuttered in a road of Victorian villas. Agatha remembered her last visit and was glad now she had run away.

James looked up and down the quiet street, which was lined with cherry trees in full bloom. A breeze blew down the street and blossom cascaded about them. ‘Isn’t it sad,’ mourned James, ‘that such beauty should be so fleeting?’

‘Too true,’ said Agatha edgily. ‘But if you stand here for much longer admiring the blossom, then someone’s going to see us.’

He gave a little sigh and Agatha wondered whether he were wishing he was with someone who could share his love of beauty.

‘I think as there is no one around, we should go straight up to the front door,’ he whispered. ‘There’s a dark porch and once we’re there, we’ll be pretty much shielded.’

‘Why bother about dark clothes if we’re not going to sneak around the back?’ asked Agatha.

‘Because it might take me a bit of time to get the door open, and so long as we are dressed in black, there’s less chance of us being noticed from the street by any passer-by.’

When they were in the shelter of the porch, he flicked the beam of his pencil torch at the door and then switched it off. ‘Yale lock,’ he said with satisfaction. ‘Lovely stained-glass panel on the door. I wonder if Peter Rice knows you can get money these days for Victorian stained glass.’

‘Get on with it,’ said Agatha, looking nervously over her shoulder.

And then they heard the sound of slow footsteps coming along the street and stiffened.

‘Stand very still in the corner and turn your face away from the street and don’t move,’ hissed James.

They froze.

The footsteps came nearer, stopping every once in a while. ‘Come on, Spot,’ said a man’s voice irritably. Someone walking the dog.

Agatha could feel sweat trickling down her face.

And then, to her horror, she heard the light patter of paws behind her and then a dog sniffing at her ankles and the sound of the owner walking up the garden path.

‘Come out of there,’ cried the owner sharply. Please God, prayed Agatha, get me out of this one and I’ll never be bad again.

The dog pattered off. ‘I’m putting you on the leash now,’ said the owner’s voice. This was followed by a metallic click and then those footsteps slowly retreated out of the garden and off down the street.

‘Whew!’ said Agatha. ‘That was close. We should have pretended to be a courting couple,’ she added hopefully. ‘Then, if he’d seen us, he would have sheered off.’

‘On the contrary,’ said James, ‘nothing infuriates the suburbanite more than the sight of a couple snogging on someone else’s property.’ He took out a bunch of thin metal implements.

‘Where did you get those?’ asked Agatha. ‘You’re not a retired burglar, are you?’

‘Chap in the regiment. Now, keep quiet while I get to work.’

Agatha stood and fidgeted. She hoped the much-advertised deodorant she had put on was working. He tried one implement after the other until there was a soft click.

A moment later, Agatha stood in the hall where she had panicked before Paul Bladen. ‘Now,’ said James in a normal voice, ‘there’s a good bit of light coming from the street lamps outside and the curtains aren’t closed. So we search around for some sort of study or a desk.’

Agatha opened a door in the hall. ‘I’ll try this side,’ she said. ‘You try the other.’

She could dimly see that the windows of the room she found herself in looked out over the back garden to a railway track. She moved cautiously around in the darkness, feeling with her fingers for a desk. It seemed to be the sitting-room – sofa, coffee-table, easy chairs. Suddenly, with a roar, a late-night passenger train heading for Oxford rumbled along the track at the end of the garden and then crawled to a stop. Agatha crouched down on the floor. The lights from the carriages shone straight into the room. There were a few people sitting reading books or just staring out into space. Then, with a wheeze, the train crawled on, slowly gathered speed, and roared off into the night.

Agatha got up and made her way with trembling legs to the door, fell over something and crashed down, swearing loudly.

James came in and said impatiently, ‘Try to keep it quiet, Agatha. I’ve found the study. Follow me. Other side of the hall.’

‘It’s all right. I haven’t hurt myself,’ said Agatha sarcastically. ‘I knocked something over.’

The torch stabbed down. A canterbury lay on its side, papers and magazines spilled across the floor. ‘You’d think Rice would have thrown these away,’ complained James, picking them up and putting them back after he had righted the canterbury. ‘Hardly add to the value of the house.’

They crept across the hall and into the study. James approached a desk by the window and gently slid open the drawers. ‘Nothing here,’ he mumbled. ‘Maybe lower down.’ He slid out a bottom drawer and then his searching fingers found something at the back of it. He drew out a file. ‘Come out to the

hall so I can flash the torch on this.’

In the hall, the thin beam of light showed bank-books and a deposit book and bank statements tucked into the cardboard file. ‘May as well get out of here and take this home,’ said James.

‘Won’t it be missed?’ asked Agatha.

‘No. Rice said he had burnt all the papers. This was jammed at the back of the bottom drawer. He must have missed it.’

Agatha, delighted to be outside again and once more in the fresh air, tripped gaily forward down the garden path and fell headlong over something. There was a curse from Agatha, a yelp of canine pain, and then that dratted voice calling, ‘Spot!’

The dog pattered off to its master. James helped Agatha to her feet.

‘What’s going on there?’ came the dog owner’s voice.

They walked to the garden gate. A man stood under the street light, holding a small white dog, his face pinched with suspicion. ‘Did you kick my dog?’ he demanded wrathfully.

‘My wife tripped over your dog in the dark,’ said James coldly.

‘Is that so? And what are you doing in there at this time of night?’ asked the dog owner.

‘I do not see it is any business of yours, but my wife and I were looking at our new home. We have just put in an offer for this house and so I would like to take this opportunity of telling you that you ought to keep that animal of yours on a leash and stop it straying over private property. Come, Agatha.’

Agatha, all too conscious of how odd they must look in their black clothes, edged past the dog owner with a weak smile.

She could feel his suspicious eyes boring into their backs as they walked to the car.

‘Let’s get home,’ said James. ‘I’m dying to have a look at those bank statements. What a horrible man. What sort of man goes wandering around the streets with his dog at this time of night? Probably a sex maniac.’

Agatha giggled. ‘He’s probably just a respectable suburban insomniac, or his dog’s incontinent and he is now wondering what kind of people decided to view a house in the dead of night.’

‘It’s all your fault,’ said James. ‘You should look where you’re going.’

‘How was I to know the damn dog would be there?’ retorted Agatha

‘I don’t know. You never seem to have anything sensible on your feet, always limping about and falling over things.’

‘Are we having our first quarrel?’ asked Agatha sweetly.

There was a long silence. Then he said, ‘I am sorry. I was a bit strung up. Shouldn’t take it out on you. The fact is, I’m not used to burglary.’

‘You’re forgiven.’

‘It was not an apology,’ he said, ‘simply an explanation.’



‘Then why did you say you were sorry?’

They bickered the whole way home but neither of them could bring themselves to stalk off to their respective residences until that file was examined.

They went into James’s house. He lit the fire, which was already set. He sat down in an armchair on one side of the fire and Agatha took the armchair opposite.

‘Ah, here’s the deposit book,’ he said. ‘Good heavens!’

‘What? What have you found?’

‘A cheque from Freda was paid in – twenty thousand pounds.’

‘Women’s Lib,’ chortled Agatha maliciously. ‘Not often the woman pays the man.’

‘The others are, let me see: fifteen thousand pounds from Mrs Josephs, nine thousand from Miss Webster, five thousand from Mrs Parr, four more deposits of five thousand, all from Freda, and five hundred from Miss Simms. Oh, and four thousand from Mrs Mason.’

‘Freda!’ Agatha looked triumphant. ‘Do you realize the payments to Bladen come to forty thousand pounds? Now any woman cheated out of that amount of money would feel like murder.’

He looked uncomfortable. ‘I know Freda pretty well. She seems to be awfully rich . . .’

‘No one’s that rich,’ put in Agatha.

He stretched and yawned. ‘I’m tired. Better leave it for tonight. Should we turn this lot over to the police tomorrow?’

Agatha looked horrified. ‘And have to explain how we came by it?’

‘We could say we were viewing the house.’

‘What! At two in the morning? And the estate agents would point out that we never approached them.’

‘All right,’ said James, ‘we’ll tackle these women tomorrow. You had best leave Freda to me.’

Agatha thought furiously about how she might be able to dissuade him from seeing Freda alone, but decided to sleep on it.

But as it turned out, she was the one to tackle Freda after all.

She struggled from a deep sleep the following morning with the sound of her own doorbell ringing in her ears.

She pulled on a dressing-gown and thrust her feet into slippers and went to answer the door. Freda stood there, her noisy dog cradled in her arm. ‘James here?’ she asked brightly. ‘I can’t get any reply at his house.’

‘No,’ said Agatha, ‘but come in and keep that dog of yours away from my cats.’

‘Yes, I think I want a word with you.’ Freda followed Agatha through to the kitchen. Agatha caught a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror: tousled hair, unmade-up face. Freda was as cool and fragile as a figure in a Fragonard painting. She sat down at the kitchen table, put her dog on the floor, and crossed her long legs. Agatha opened the back door and let her cats out into the garden.

‘You’ve been running all over the place with James,’ said Freda. ‘He’s a bit of a softy. You shouldn’t take advantage of his good nature.’

‘And just what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘He has been plagued by every old bat in the village, has he not? I warned him that these frightening menopausal women often get the wrong idea. Give him a break.’

‘Listen, you murderess,’ hissed Agatha, ‘just because you let Paul Bladen screw you on the surgery table doesn’t make you Cleopatra. Besides, you had to pay for that, did you not? Forty thousand pounds, to be exact.’

The doorbell rang and Freda was up like a shot and running to answer it, her dog yapping at her heels. Agatha followed in time to see Freda throw herself weeping into James’s arms, sobbing, ‘This dreadful woman. She’s accusing me of murder.’

‘Now, then,’ he said, ‘no one’s accusing you of anything.’ He detached himself from her grasp. He looked at Agatha. ‘Did you ask her about the money?’

Freda let out a gasp. ‘You have no right to poke about my private affairs. I shall tell the police.’ She ran out of the door and down the lane, with her dog scurrying at her heels.

‘What did you say, Agatha?’ demanded James.

‘She started by insulting me. She said . . .’ Agatha bit her lip. She did not want to put the idea into James’s head that she was one of those menopausal women with fantasies. ‘Anyway, she was vile. So I taxed her about the money. Then you rang the bell and she went to answer it.’

‘Damn. You’d better get dressed, Agatha, and we’d best go and look at that house of Bladen’s officially and then take the file along to Bill Wong, as if we’ve just found it.’

As they drove to Mircester, Agatha said suddenly, ‘Was Bladen blackmailing them? I mean, all payments are relative. Five hundred pounds from Miss Simms, well, that’s a fortune for her.’

‘Yes, but she’s single and so is Miss Webster, and Freda is a widow. Freda seemed quite unfazed by the fact we found out she had been having an affair with Bladen, so how could he blackmail her?’

At the estate agent’s, instead of giving them the keys, a young girl called Wendy said she would accompany them. She was a cheerful Sloane Ranger type and talked non-stop to Agatha and James as they walked around the

rooms of the house wondering how to get rid of her so that they could pretend to find the file. At last James said, 'We would like to be alone to have a private discussion,' and to Agatha's relief, Wendy said, 'Right ho, drop the keys back at the office when you're finished,' and shot off.

They decided to have a thorough search of the house in the hope of finding letters or documents, but there was nothing. Out in the back garden there was an old oil drum with holes banged in its sides which had obviously been used for burning garden rubbish. James poked moodily at the contents with a stick. 'This is where Rice burnt the papers,' he said, 'but we're out of luck. He did a thorough job. Not even an edge of paper left uncharred and legible. Oh, well, let's go and see Bill Wong.'

At police headquarters, Bill Wong studied the bank papers and deposit book and then looked up at them, his eyes shrewd. 'A man phoned in a report in the middle of the night that two people dressed in black were in Paul Bladen's house and told him they had bought it. That wouldn't have been you pair, now would it?'

'Us?' exclaimed James. 'Had it been us and had we found this file, then we would have brought it straight along.'

'I wonder. You must stop interfering. Yes, I know. I'm grateful for this and these women will all be interviewed – by the police. If I find you have been continuing with your amateur investigations, then I will really have to inquire more closely into the identities of that couple who were seen at Bladen's last night. Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes, very,' said Agatha huffily.

'So that's all the thanks we get,' she complained as James drove them back to Carsely. 'I'm relieved in a way,' said James. 'Oh, well, back to that writing.'

There was a long silence. Then Agatha said, 'I have to pay my subscription to the Carsely Ladies' Society and that means calling on Miss Simms. Like to come along? I mean, Bill can't stop us asking a few questions in a neighbourly way. Dammit, he can't stop us talking to the villagers at all!'

'And how's he to know?' said James. 'I mean, everyone calls on everyone else in Carsely.'

'Miss Simms will be at work until this evening,' said Agatha. 'Let's try Mrs Mason first.'

## Chapter Eight

It was one of those typically English days. Steady rain drummed down and fallen cherry blossom bobbed along in the rivulets running between the old cobbles in Lilac Lane. They had fortified themselves with coffee and sandwiches, and with a lack of enthusiasm that the one would not admit to the other, Agatha and James set out to speak to Mrs Mason again.

Mrs Mason was so welcoming, so obviously thought they had come on a social call, that it was hard to get down to brass tacks. ‘And you must have some more of my famous scones, Mr Lacey,’ said Mrs Mason. ‘And that’s *real* strawberry jam, not shop-bought. Soon be strawberry season again. I do hope this nasty weather clears up, don’t you?’ She looked at James archly. ‘You and Mrs Raisin are quite the talk of the village. I was saying to the vicar the other day that we would soon be hearing the banns read.’

James looked at her in blank horror and nearly forgot why they had come. ‘Mrs Mason,’ began Agatha, ‘we really don’t want to distress you further, but we would like to know why you gave Mr Bladen such a large sum of money.’

Mrs Mason blinked rapidly. ‘That is really none of your business.’ Agatha glanced around the living-room. Four thousand pounds was an awful lot of money for such as Mrs Mason to part with.

‘We came to warn you that the police are about to make it their business,’ said James.

‘Then I shall speak to the police when they arrive. But how did you find out?’

‘Agatha and I were looking around Paul Bladen’s house, which is up for sale, and we happened to come across his old bank statements and deposit book. We did give them to the police.’

Mrs Mason studied James, her eyes suddenly sharp. ‘So you and Mrs Raisin were looking at a house together. Well, well, romance does seem to be in the air. Quite cheering, really. It shows one is never too old.’

And that, as she had planned, had the desired effect of driving James to his feet and towards the door.

Agatha gloomily followed him out. James climbed into the car without holding the door open for her and stared moodily at the rain trickling down the windscreen. Agatha got into the passenger seat.

‘Damn all gossiping women,’ said James, striking the steering wheel. ‘You, me, it’s bloody ridiculous.’

‘Yes, a laugh a minute,’ said Agatha drily, although her heart was sore. ‘She only said that to get rid of you, and get rid of you it did.’

His face lightened. ‘Oh, that was the reason. How naïve of me.’

‘You are really over-sensitive on the subject,’ said Agatha. ‘It’s my belief that you think every woman you come across is pursuing you.’

He gave an awkward laugh. ‘Let’s try the Webster female.’

Josephine Webster was arguing with a couple of rainwashed American tourists who were trying to haggle over the price of a dried-flower arrangement. ‘The price is marked on it,’ said Miss Webster, exasperated. ‘This is not a bazaar.’

‘You can haggle over the price of things in antique shops,’ said James to the Americans in a kindly voice, ‘but most other places you’re expected to pay the price marked.’

‘Is that a fact?’

The American man and woman fell into amiable conversation with James about their visit, Miss Webster returned to her desk, and Agatha stared out of the window at the main street. She had no desire to tackle Miss Webster while these tourists were in the shop.

‘I’ve no time for Americans,’ said Miss Webster waspishly when the couple had left. ‘Always complaining.’

‘It’s not their fault,’ said James. ‘They feel they have to protect themselves. A lot of people think American tourists are made of money. Now that couple saved all their lives for this one trip. They have to budget very carefully, and they’ve probably been told back home that all foreigners are out to cheat them.’

‘But we’re not foreigners,’ said Miss Webster. ‘We’re British.’

James smiled. ‘Talking about money, we wondered why you had paid such a large sum of money to Paul Bladen.’

Miss Webster’s face went white and then red. ‘Get out of here,’ she called shrilly. ‘Get out!’ She picked up a bunch of assorted dried flowers and waved it at them like a housewife shooing cats out with her broom.

‘We’re not getting anywhere,’ said James gloomily after he and Agatha had retreated out of the shop. ‘Do you want to see Mrs Parr again?’

‘So long as that husband of hers is not around,’ said Agatha.

But Mrs Parr did not open the door to them. The curtain twitched and they saw the quick blur of a face behind the glass, but the front door stayed resolutely shut.

‘We’re running out of people,’ said James. ‘Perhaps I should try Freda. If I went on my own –’

‘No,’ said Agatha quickly. ‘Why don’t we try Miss Mabbs again? Say we

know these women were paying him. Ask her some more questions.'

'Oh, all right. But I don't want to have to wait until that disco opens up.'

'We can find her where she works. She said it was a kennels "out Warwick way". I'll look up the Yellow Pages before we go.'

At last, armed with the name of a kennels situated between Leamington Spa and Warwick, they set off.

The rain was slowly easing off, to be replaced with pale-yellow sunlight.

They found the kennels easily enough. Dogs were barking, dogs were howling piteously, and the wet air smelled of damp dog.

They went into the office, which was housed in a timber hut, and asked for Cheryl Mabbs.

The man behind the desk looked up sharply. 'Friends of hers?'

'Yes,' said James.

He stood up. He was a small, thickset man with grey hair and rimless spectacles. 'Then you know exactly where to find her,' he said. 'Get out.'

'If we knew where to find her,' said James, 'we wouldn't be here asking for her. Does she work here, or doesn't she?'

Agatha had a sudden flash of inspiration. She edged in front of James and said mildly, 'I am afraid we have misled you, but we do not like to go around announcing who we are. We are social workers.'

'Oh.' He sat down suddenly. 'Why didn't you say so? Although you still make me feel angry. I had a recommendation from you lot that she was on the straight.'

Agatha affected an air of weariness, although her heart was beating hard. 'What has she done this time?'

'Not told you yet, have they? Pah! That's bureaucracy for you. The whole of England is top-heavy with idiotic pen-pushers. She broke into the drugs cabinet, that's what she did.'

'Did you have Adrenalin in there?' asked James eagerly.

'Yes, of course, but the fact is she would have been better off raiding a doctor's or chemist's unless she wants to prevent hard pad and distemper. I called the police right away and they went to her digs and found the stuff. Or what was left of it. She had been flogging pills around some disco in Leamington, claiming they were a new sort of happy pill. I think the youth of Leamington can consider themselves well and truly wormed by now.'

James and Agatha were both dying to know what Cheryl Mabbs's record had been, but then, as supposed social workers, they were supposed to know.

'She's a silly girl,' said the man. 'I'm Bob Picks, by the way. She was a wizard with animals. Why did she want to go and smash up her career?'

Young people these days, I ask you.'

They left him, still shaking his head over the iniquities of youth.

'So,' said Agatha outside, 'that's where the Adrenalin could have come

from. Damn! We can't ask the police, or word might get to Bill Wong that we're still asking questions.'

'So many suspects,' mourned James. 'Tell you what, let's try her digs. She might be out on bail, or that unlovely boyfriend of hers might be there.'

Agatha nodded, although she felt suddenly depressed. She could not help remembering how horrified and shocked he had been at any suggestion of a romance between herself and him. The sun struck down, lighting up the grey patches in his black hair and showing the strong lines down the side of his nose. In that moment, he did not look nearly so handsome as he usually did and Agatha took small comfort from that.

They drove to Blackbird Street and parked outside the door to the flats where Miss Mabbs lived.

They walked up the stairs and pressed the right bell this time. They waited a long time and then heard the sound of someone approaching the door. It opened an inch. 'Oh, it's you,' said Jerry, Miss Mabbs's boyfriend. 'Wot you want?'

'Where's Miss Mabbs?'

'In the slammer.'

'Can we come in? We'd like to ask you a few questions.'

The door opened wider and his foxy face stared at them. 'Cost you.'

James sighed. 'A tenner, like last time.'

'Done. Not here. Meet you down the pub. The Fevvers.'

'The what?' asked James as they walked down and out into the street.

'He meant the Feathers,' said Agatha.

'The old men's pub. That's where we went last time. I'm fed up with mineral water. I'll try tomato juice this time.'

The pub looked the same, tired and dusty. Dust motes swam in shafts of sunlight striking through the windows. An old man slumbered over his beer in a corner.

James ordered a tomato juice for himself and a gin and tonic for Agatha.

Time passed while they discussed the suspects in the case in a desultory way. Agatha would have liked to debate the possibility that Freda was the murderess. After all, she had paid out the biggest amount of money. But James's face went rigid at the very mention of Freda's name.

James ordered another round of drinks and carried them back to the table. 'I don't think our young friend is coming,' he said. 'Maybe we'd better go back and try again.'

At that moment the pub door opened and six youths came in. Black leather and jeans, shaven heads, mean pinched faces. The leader saw them and jerked his head at the others.

'Trouble,' said James.

'I don't like your face,' said the leader. A bicycle chain hung from one

tattooed hand. 'And I'm going to rearrange it.' Agatha looked round wildly for help. The barman had disappeared, the old man slept on.

James threw back his head and shouted, '*Help! Help! Murder!*' It was a terrible shout, deafening and shocking, a bellow. It was as if he had thrown a hand grenade into the group. They darted for the door and crashed out, colliding with one another, while James's terrible shouts went on and on. The old man woke up and stared at him in amazement.

'It's all right,' said Agatha, white-faced. 'They've gone.'

James smiled at her. 'Nothing like a good scream for help, I always say. Let's go and sort out young Jerry.'

'What's it got to do with him? Oh, you think he knows Cheryl Mabbs did the murders and he's sent along his friends to silence us.'

'Romantic idea. But I think young Jerry phoned his friends and told them that there was some rich jerk in the pub with a fistful of tenners for the taking. I just can't wait to see him again.'

Once more they stood outside the shabby door and once more James pressed the bell. 'Who is it?' came Jerry's cautious voice.

'Got the money outer that twat,' said James in a gruff voice.

The door opened wide. Jerry saw them and tried to slam the door, but James shouldered his way in. He slapped Jerry hard on one side of his head and then on the other. Then, holding him by the scruff of the neck, he said, 'Your flat. Time we had a talk.'

'Don't hurt me,' squeaked Jerry. 'I ain't done nothink.'

'Where is it? Which door is yours?' demanded James.

Jerry pointed to an open door. James pushed him inside. 'Now, before I really get to work on you, why did you send your friends to beat us up?'

'I dinnet.'

There was a one-bar heater burning in front of an empty fireplace. James twisted Jerry's arm behind his back and then thrust his face down towards the bar of the heater. 'Speak up while you've still got a face left.'

'Okay, I'll tell you.'

James pushed Jerry down into a chair and stood over him. 'I phoned up Sid and said to tell the boys there was good pickings off a couple in the Fevvers, that's all. See, I don't know nuffink about Cheryl. No, don't,' he shouted as James loomed over him. 'I'm telling you the truff, s'welp me God. It was her idear to steal the drugs from the kennels. Get a bit of cash. She says them hopheads at the disco would buy anythink. Honest.'

His voice went on and on, pleading and explaining. It turned out he had not known Cheryl when she was working in Carsely.

James finally turned away in disgust.



Outside, Agatha looked nervously up and down the street. ‘We should call the cops,’ she said.

‘I wouldn’t do that.’ James unlocked the car door. ‘It might all come out. In fact, we’d better get out of here in case that chap at the kennels has found out we’re impostors.’

When they got back to Carsely, James said, ‘I’ll make us a snack and then we’ll tackle Miss Simms.’

Agatha brightened. ‘I’ll go to my place, feed the cats and then let them out. They’ve been locked up most of the day.’

The cats gave her a rapturous welcome. Agatha sat down suddenly and watched them while they fed. She felt weak and shaky and on the point of crying. She had had a bad fright in the pub. Bill Wong was right. She should leave this sort of business to the police. But if she dropped the investigations, then James would drop *her* and go back to his writing.

She let the cats out into the garden and stood for a moment watching them frolicking about and then went along to James’s cottage.

‘I’ve set our meal in the kitchen,’ he said when he answered the door. ‘Come through.’

Agatha looked eagerly around the kitchen. It was cheerful and warm. A large bowl of daffodils stood on the windowsill. There was a square scrubbed table in the middle and some elegant ladder-backed chairs. Supper consisted of cold ham and an excellent salad with a cold bottle of white Mâcon.

Agatha studied him covertly as he ate with the absorbed attention he gave to everything and everyone except herself. ‘It’s time,’ he said finally, pushing away his plate, ‘for us to separately write down everything we know about everyone. Whoever killed Paul Bladen and Mrs Josephs did both killings in panic or rage and on the spur of the moment. But first, let’s see what we can get out of Miss Simms.’

Miss Simms lived on the council estate near Mrs Parr. She answered the door to them and said cheerfully, ‘Just finished bathing the kids. I’ll be with you in a minute.’

‘I didn’t know she had children,’ whispered Agatha when they were alone.

‘Must be a single parent,’ said James. ‘Quite common these days.’

The living-room was a mess of discarded toys and picture books. An old television set flickered in one corner. The furniture was of the kind bought on the pay-up plan, which grew old and shabby before the final payment was made.

Miss Simms came tittuping back in on the ridiculously high heels she always wore.

‘Drink?’ she offered.

James and Agatha both shook their heads. Agatha looked at James and James looked at Agatha and it was Agatha who said, ‘We happen to know you

paid Paul Bladen five hundred pounds. Why?’

‘I don’t think that’s very nice. I don’t really,’ complained Miss Simms. ‘What’s it got to do with you, anyway?’

Agatha sighed. ‘We just want to know who killed Paul Bladen and Mrs Josephs. We feel if we knew why you gave him the money, it might help. The others gave him thousands and thousands, but they won’t talk.’

Her gaze sharpened. ‘There were others?’

Agatha nodded.

Miss Simms sighed and sat back on the low sofa and crossed her legs, her skirt rucked up to show an edge of scarlet lace knicker. How little I really know about the people in this village, thought Agatha. I didn’t even know Miss Simms had children. It’s the car, that’s what. People in villages have become mobile and so they’re less curious about their fellows. And television. And yet it’s funny how people go on and on about the good old days when they had to make their own entertainment. If it was so great, why did they all rush out to buy television sets as soon as they could?

Miss Simms’s voice broke into her thoughts. ‘I may as well tell you, only it makes me so mad; like when I think of the way that bastard tricked me. He took me out to a posh restaurant in Broadway. He told me all about this veterinary hospital he hoped to start. He said if I gave him some money, he would call it after me. He said he would get Prince Charles to open it. I drank too much and well, things got a bit passionate that night and before I knew what was what, I’d written him out a cheque for everything I’d got in the Post Office savings. After a bit when he didn’t come round again, I got worried. Not nice to be dropped like that. I asked him about the hospital and he said he was too busy to talk about it. I asked for my money back and he got nasty and said I had given it to him of my own free will. I felt such a fool. I work over at a computer place in Evesham. I pay a chunk out of my wages to pay for child care for the kids. I told Mrs Bloxby. She said I should pray to God for guidance and so I did and do you know what?’

‘No, what?’ asked James.

‘The very next day God sent me a new gentleman friend with a nice job in soft furnishings and he pays me an allowance, like.’

‘You’ll be getting married soon,’ said James.

She laughed. ‘He’s married, which suits me. Don’t like having a man underfoot all the time.’

‘Does Mrs Bloxby know the outcome of your prayers?’ asked Agatha curiously.

‘Ooh, yes. She said as how God moves in mysterious ways.’

The vicar’s wife, reflected Agatha, was always the soul of tact.

‘I was so mad with that Paul Bladen, I could’ve killed him,’ said Miss Simms. ‘But I didn’t, and so good luck to whoever did.’

‘But there’s Mrs Josephs.’

Miss Simms looked sad. ‘Forgot about her. Old duck she was. What about a drink now?’

Both cheerfully accepted now that there was no danger of their being thrown out and Miss Simms produced an excellent bottle of malt whisky supplied by her gentleman friend. Agatha paid her membership fee for the Carsely Ladies’ Society and Miss Simms entered it carefully in a ledger.

‘So are you pair going to get spliced?’ she said cheerfully.

James put down his glass. ‘No danger of that,’ he said evenly. ‘I am a confirmed bachelor.’

Miss Simms laughed. ‘Wouldn’t be too sure about that. When our Mrs Raisin sets her mind to something, there’s no stopping her. Mrs Harvey in the shop was only saying the other day that we would be hearing wedding bells soon.’

‘She must have been talking about someone else,’ said Agatha, pink with embarrassment.

When they had said goodbye to Miss Simms and walked outside, there was a constraint between them. Agatha felt quite tired and weepy.

‘I think I’d better go home to bed,’ she said in a small voice quite unlike her usual robust tones.

‘Don’t look so upset,’ he said in a kind voice. ‘They’ll go on talking about us, and when nothing happens, the gossip will die away.’

But I want something to happen, wailed Agatha’s heart, and to her horror a large tear slipped out of one eye and ran down her nose.

‘You’ve had a rotten day,’ said James. ‘Tell you what, we’ll walk to the Red Lion and I’ll get you a stiff nightcap.’

Agatha gave him a watery smile.

The pub was blessedly quiet, only a few of the regulars standing at the bar. They carried their drinks over to a table by the fire.

And then Freda walked into the pub with a man. She was wearing a pale-green tailored suit and a white silk blouse and looked as cool and fresh as a salad. Her companion was a florid-faced middle-aged man with silver hair, dressed in a blazer and flannels. They ordered drinks. Freda half-turned her head and saw James and Agatha. She whispered something to her escort, who let out a great braying haw-haw-haw of a laugh and stared at them insolently.

Agatha noticed James’s face was wearing a blank look and that his body was tense. Please God, let him not be jealous, she prayed, at the same time wondering why she kept praying to a God in whom she did not quite believe.

‘I think I am tired,’ said James abruptly.

They left together and walked silently home Agatha gave him a sad goodnight and went to her own cottage. At least the cats would be glad to see her.

She unlocked the door and stepped inside, switching on the hall light as she did so.

There was a square white envelope lying on the doormat. She opened it up. It contained one sheet of paper with a simple typed message.

‘Stop poking your nose into things that don’t concern you or you will never see your cats again.’

Agatha let out a whimper of fear. She ran through to the kitchen and opened the back door. ‘Hodge, Boswell,’ she called, but all was darkness and silence. She switched on the back outside lights. The square of garden lay before her. No cats.

She went inside and picked up the telephone and phoned the police.

The windows of James’s bedroom overlooked the front of his cottage. He undressed and climbed into bed and switched out the light. Just as he was about to close his eyes, a blue light flickered up and over his ceiling and he could hear the sound of a car sweeping past in the lane outside.

He switched on the light again and scrambled back into his clothes. As he stepped out of his own front door, another police car arrived.

He ran to Agatha’s cottage, hoping she was all right, worried that by encouraging her to go on this murder hunt, he might have endangered her.

PC Griggs was standing on duty on the doorstep. ‘You can step inside, Mr Lacey,’ he said. ‘She’ll need some help.’

‘What happened?’

‘Someone stole her cats.’

James was so relieved that Agatha was not hurt that he nearly said, ‘Is that all?’ but bit the remark back in time.

Agatha’s sitting-room seemed full of policemen, plainclothes and uniformed.

Bill Wong looked up as James came in. He had an arm around Agatha’s shoulders, an Agatha who was sobbing quietly. Agatha had never thought of herself as a cat lover. In fact, she sometimes regretted the responsibility of looking after the pair. But now all she could think of was that they had either been slaughtered or were locked up somewhere, being mistreated and frightened.

‘You’d best sit down and tell us everything you did today,’ said Bill. ‘Agatha’s in no state to give us a coherent account. Begin at the beginning and go on to the end and don’t leave anything out.’

The only thing that James left out was that they had both pretended to be social workers. In a flat voice, he described the interviews they had conducted, the trip to Leamington, the finding out about Cheryl Mabbs’s theft of the drugs including Adrenalin, and the attacks in the pub.

He then fell silent, waiting for a lecture, but Bill said, 'We'll have this all typed up and get you to sign it tomorrow. We'll need to interview everyone in Lilac Lane and see if they saw anyone or heard a car while you were both in the pub.'

He turned to Agatha and gently questioned her again, taking notes of his own while she confirmed James's story.

James ambled off to the kitchen and made some coffee. Men were dusting Agatha's front door for fingerprints, examining the road outside for tyre tracks, picking over the front garden. He sat down at the kitchen table, listening to the murmur of voices in the other room and reflecting that he had initially retired to the country for peace and quiet.

At last he rose and went back to his own house and dug out a sleeping-bag, put his pyjamas, toothbrush, and shaving-kit in a bag and returned to Agatha's cottage.

Bill and the others were just leaving. 'I'll sleep downstairs here tonight,' said James, and Bill nodded.

Mrs Bloxby, the vicar's wife, was sitting with Agatha when he went into the sitting-room. 'That nice Mr Wong phoned me,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'What a terrible business. Agatha should not be left alone.'

'She won't be,' said James. 'I'm sleeping down here. Don't cry, Agatha. Cats are great survivors.'

'If they're still alive,' sobbed Agatha.

'I'm glad you are staying, Mr Lacey,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'But phone me if you need any help.'

James saw her out and then returned to Agatha. 'Off to bed with you,' he said gently, 'and I'll bring you something to make you sleep.'

Agatha scrubbed her eyes and trailed up the stairs. Part of her mind told her that such a short time ago she would have believed any sacrifice was worth getting James to stay under her roof and look after her, but the rest of her mind cried out for her lost pets.

After she was in bed, the door opened and James came in carrying a tray. 'Whisky and hot water and a couple of aspirin,' he said. 'I'll be downstairs. Drink up.' He sat on the edge of the bed and held the glass to her lips and waited until she had swallowed the aspirin.

After he had left, Agatha lay awake, tears trickling out of the corners of her eyes. Everyone seemed sinister to her now, even James. What did she know of him? A man arrived in a village and claimed to be a retired colonel and everyone took him at face value. And yet, Bunty knew his family, and she, Agatha, had met his sister a year ago. But how formidable, how terrifying he had been when he had been slapping the miserable Jerry around. Ruthless, that was the word for it.

Slowly she drifted off to sleep, plagued with nightmares. Freda was

torturing the cats and laughing while James looked on; Bill Wong invited her to dinner and served up the cats, roasted on a tray; and Miss Webster was sitting efficiently at her desk, with Agatha's two cats, stuffed and mounted, in front of her.

Agatha awoke in the morning. Sunlight was streaming into the room, there was a smell of coffee and the hum of voices from downstairs. She looked at the clock beside the bed. Ten in the morning!

She washed and dressed and went downstairs. Her kitchen was full of women: most of them members of the Carsely Ladies' Society, Mrs Harvey from the general store, and Mrs Dunbridge, the butcher's wife, all being served coffee by James.

They surrounded her as she came in, murmuring sympathy. Her kitchen counter was loaded with gifts of cake and jam and flowers. Even Miss Simms was there. 'Took the day off from work,' she said.

'That's very kind of you,' said Agatha, 'but I don't know what you can do.'

'Mr Lacey has had a very good idea,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'We're organizing a search. Your cats may have been dumped off somewhere in the village, so we are all going out on a house-to-house hunt. You sit quietly here with Mr Lacey and we'll report if we find anything.'

Agatha abruptly left the room and went up to the bathroom and cried her eyes out. All her life she had forged on, pushy and determined to get to the top of the public relations profession, all her life she had been alone. All this friendship and help made her feel weak.

When she went back downstairs, red-eyed but composed, only James and Mrs Parr were left.

'Mrs Parr has just been telling me much the same story as Miss Simms,' said James. 'Bladen told her about the veterinary hospital and said he would name it after her. Her husband found out about the missing money and hit the roof.'

'I suppose I might have done the same thing,' said Agatha slowly, remembering that dinner at the Greek restaurant. 'He told me about his plans and I said I would contribute something, but I was thinking of a cheque for twenty pounds. And he was all ready to go to bed with me but I panicked and ran away. Did you have an affair with him, Mrs Parr?'

She shook her head. 'I wouldn't have done. That wasn't how he tricked me. I was so flattered by him because he said I was the only woman who understood him. I am not very happy in my marriage and he made me feel attractive. I should have told you before, but I felt such a fool. I was still a bit in love with him when he died, but after the funeral my mind cleared up and I could see what he had done.'

'Mrs Mason was telling me the same thing while you were upstairs, Agatha,' said James, 'He was a compulsive gambler, Mrs Parr, and that's why

he needed the money.'

'That's odd,' said Agatha. 'He didn't spend any of it. I mean, what he got out of the ladies of Carsely was still in his account.'

'I'll go off and join the search,' said Mrs Parr. 'The least I can do.'

'Thanks for all this, James,' said Agatha, when they were alone. Her eyes filled with tears again.

'Now, now, the time for crying is over. Let's sit down and discuss what we know. Instead of thinking that, say, Freda must have done it because she paid out the most money, what we should be looking for is someone with the *character* to do such a thing.'

'Who can say what anyone will do when they're goaded?'

'You wouldn't kill anyone, Agatha, now would you?'

Except Freda, thought Agatha.

'What we should do,' he went on, 'is make a list of suspects and then divide it up and follow each one and see what she does during the day and who she sees and if there is anything suspicious about her behaviour. Now, the women who gave money to Bladen were Mrs Parr, Mrs Mason, Freda, Miss Webster, Mrs Josephs and Miss Simms. Then we have to take into account Paul's ex-wife, Greta. Also, there is one side of the case we have not been looking at. Bladen was killed up at Lord Pendlebury's stables. Bob Arthur found the body and came running out, saying, "Looks like someone's done for him." Why should he say that? Why not think it a heart attack or something? There's another interesting thing I noticed about Bladen's bank statements. There were no major withdrawals, so he must have had cash to pay for all his food and entertaining. How did he pay the bill at the Greek restaurant?'

'Cash.'

'Right. So what about Mrs Arthur? There's a thought.'

'It gets worse and worse,' said Agatha. 'Where do we begin?'

'I'll begin with Freda. No, don't scowl. My motives are pure detection. You start by watching Mrs Parr.'

'Oh, come on! That woman couldn't hurt a fly.'

'She's terrified of that husband of hers. Bladen might have known that. She may yet not be telling us all. He could have been blackmailing her. Give you something to do. You want your cats back, don't you?'

Agatha winced.

'Anyway, I'll get moving on my side and we'll meet up here, say, at six o'clock this evening. Nothing like action to beat the blues, Agatha.'

Agatha went numbly about the kitchen after he had left, stacking away the various gifts in cupboards. Apart from cakes and pots of jam there was a large bunch of dried flowers, but they could hardly be from Miss Webster. Agatha shoved them in a vase and went upstairs to put on the make-up she had wept

off.

She was on her way out when she stopped in the hall. The back of the front door was still covered in fingerprint dust. A gleam of sunlight lit up a tiny coloured object sticking among the coarse coconut matting of the doormat. She bent down and looked at it and then picked it out. Puzzled, she turned it this way and that. Then her face cleared. It was a tiny dried petal. It must have fallen off that bouquet of flowers that someone had brought. She flicked it from her fingers and then opened the door.

Then she froze.

Suddenly it was the night before and she was lifting the envelope from the doormat and opening it, taking out the letter, smoothing it out. Surely a flicker of something small and bright had drifted down.



## Chapter Nine

Agatha felt weird and strange as she walked numbly out into the bright sunlight. Two policemen were asking questions at the other cottages in Lilac Lane. People waved and called to her as she went past but she did not hear them.

Agatha Raisin was no longer thinking about who had murdered the vet or Mrs Josephs, all she wanted was her cats back.

As she approached Josephine Webster's shop, she saw a white hand twisting the card on the door round from 'Open' to 'Closed'. Of course, half-day in the village. With such a search going on, if Miss Webster had the cats, then she wouldn't have them in the shop or in her flat above it.

Agatha returned home and got into her car. She parked a little way away from the shop and waited, not noticing people passing up and down the main street, intent only on Josephine Webster.

And then Miss Webster came out, neat and trim as ever, and got into her car, which was parked outside the shop. She drove off. Grimly, Agatha followed. Miss Webster drove down into Moreton-in-Marsh and turned along the Fosse. Agatha let a car get between her and her quarry and followed. Miss Webster headed for Mircester, her little red car sailing up and over the Cotswold hills on the old Roman road which ran straight as an arrow.

Agatha followed her into a multi-storey carpark, parked a little bit away and waited until Miss Webster got out and locked her car, then got out of her own.

Josephine Webster went first to Boots, the chemist's, tried various perfume samples, and then bought a bottle. From there, she went to a dress boutique. The day was unseasonably chilly and Agatha shivered as she waited outside. At last, she risked a peek through the shop window. Miss Webster was turning this way and that before a mirror, wearing a low-cut red dress. She said something to the assistant and disappeared back into a changing room. After ten minutes, she came out of the shop, carrying a carrier-bag. From there, she went to a lingerie shop and Agatha again froze and fidgeted outside until Miss Webster appeared carrying a carrier-bag with the lingerie shop's name on it.

When she walked on, followed by Agatha, and turned in at the tall Georgian portico of the public library, Agatha was beginning to despair. It

was all so innocent. Fear for her cats had tricked her memory. That little petal had probably fallen off the bouquet that morning. But the doggedness, the single-mindedness, and the tenacity that had made her successful in business took over. She waited outside for half an hour and then cautiously walked inside. No sign of Miss Webster.

Had she seen her and escaped out of a back door? In her frantic search to find a way out of the back of the library, Agatha nearly ran into Josephine Webster, who was sitting in a leather chair in one of the bays, calmly reading, her shopping bags beside her.

Agatha picked the next bay, took a book at random from the shelves and pretended to read. Her stomach rumbled. She should eat something, but she dare not risk leaving the library.

After two hours, a rustle of bags in the next bay warned her that her quarry was about to depart.

She waited a few moments and then cautiously got up and poked her head round the bay. Josephine Webster was disappearing in the direction of the exit. Agatha followed, heart beating hard again now that the pursuit was back on.

Miss Webster tripped gaily along, as if she hadn't a care in the world. She turned in at the door of Mircester's Palace Hotel.

Agatha, hovering at the entrance, saw her head up a passage at the side of the reception under a sign which said 'Rest Rooms'.

She bought a newspaper from a kiosk in the foyer, sat down in an armchair and barricaded herself behind it, lowering it from time to time to make sure Miss Webster had not escaped.

After a full hour, Agatha saw Miss Webster emerge. She was wearing the new dress and was heavily made up. She had obviously left her bags and coat in the cloakroom. Agatha jerked up the newspaper as Miss Webster crossed the foyer in a cloud of scent and lowered it again in time to see her going into the bar.

Feeling stiff and hungry, Agatha threw aside the newspaper and looked cautiously round the door of the bar and then jerked her head back.

Miss Webster was sitting talking to Peter Rice, ugly red-haired Peter Rice, Bladen's partner. He must have entered the hotel and gone into the bar when Agatha's whole attention was focused on watching for Josephine Webster.

She sat down again in the foyer, her mind working furiously. It could be an innocent meeting. Yes, wait a bit. Miss Webster had a cat. She could have taken the cat for treatment to Mircester and struck up a friendship with Peter Rice. No harm in that. But . . . Greta Bladen had said something about Peter Rice being an old friend.

She looked about her. There was a sign pointing to the hotel restaurant. She walked along to it. The staff were just setting up the tables for the evening

meal, but the maître d'hôtel was there. Agatha asked him if a Mr Rice had made a booking for dinner. He checked. Yes, Mr Rice had booked a table for two. For eight o'clock. Agatha glanced at her watch. Only six thirty. They wouldn't leave the hotel. Somehow, she had to see Greta Bladen before returning to the hotel to keep a watch on them.

She stopped at a phone-box on the road to the car-park and phoned James, but there was no reply. She drove off, praying that Greta would be at home.

Greta answered the door and frowned when she saw her visitor was Agatha.

'I must speak to you,' pleaded Agatha. 'You see, I've been threatened. Someone stole my cats to stop me investigating and I think I might know who that someone might be.'

Greta sighed but held open the door. 'Come in. I don't quite grasp what you are saying. Do you mean someone is trying to stop you investigating Paul's death?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I haven't got your cats.'

'Could you tell me what you know about Peter Rice?'

'Peter? Oh, he can't have anything to do with it. I've known Peter for ages.'

'Tell me about him anyway.'

'I don't know very much. He lived a couple of doors away from me in Leamington in the old days. We were friends, played tennis together, but never anything romantic. I mean, I never thought any man would look at me that way, and so I was glad of Peter's company. Then Paul came along.'

'I thought Peter would be delighted that I had found happiness at last, but he threw a very ugly scene. He said he had been going to ask me to marry *him*. I was so much in love with Paul that somehow that made me callous. It was only old Peter behaving in a most odd way. The next time I saw him he apologized for his behaviour and said he was moving to Mircester.'

'And you never saw him again?' prompted Agatha.

'Well, I did, of course. I met him when Paul went into partnership with him and, as I told you, it was Peter who suggested I check out the site of this supposed veterinary hospital. I told him long afterwards how I had been cheated. After my divorce, we went out for dinner a couple of times, but there was nothing there and I really don't think there ever was anything there.'

'Then how do you explain the scene when you told him you were going to marry Paul?'

'Oh, that. I think Peter is the kind who would have been jealous if any close friend, male or female, got married. He was a very solitary man. Come to think of it, I suppose I was the only friend he had in Leamington.'

'Why did he decide to open the surgery in Carsely?' asked Agatha. 'I mean,

there are lots of villages closer to Mircester, and larger ones, too.'

'Let me think. He said something about that when I met him one day in the square. He said, "I'm finding that ex of yours something useful to do. I think it's better we work apart. I've told him to start up a surgery in Carsely. Keep him out of my hair." I said, "Why Carsely?" and he said that some friend of his who had a shop there said it was a good place for business.'

'Josephine Webster,' said Agatha. 'So that's the connection. And I think I know where my cats are.'

She got up to leave. She looked wild-eyed and her face was working.

'If you suspect anyone of anything,' said Greta, 'go to the police.'

Agatha merely snorted and went out to her car.

She thought furiously on the road to Mircester. Josephine Webster could have tipped off Peter Rice about Mrs Josephs. She could have been in the pub to hear Freda telling everyone about the discovery of that bottle and warned Rice, or she could have removed the bottle herself.

Agatha flicked a glance at the dashboard of her car. Eight o'clock. Peter Rice would just be sitting down to dinner.

She drove straight to the veterinary surgery and parked outside. She got out and took a tyreiron out of the car. The surgery was a low building set at the back of a small car-park. A light was burning over the door. Agatha moved to the side of the building, which was in darkness but with enough light for her to make out a glass-paned side door. She had no time or expertise to emulate James Lacey's burglary techniques. She smashed a pane of glass in the door with the tyre-iron. A volley of hysterical barks greeted her ears. Grimly ignoring them, she tugged out the remaining glass with her gloved hands, reached in and unlocked the door.

Eyes glittered at her in the darkness and somewhere among the barks and yelps she heard several plaintive miaows.

'In for a penny, in for a pound,' muttered Agatha and switched on the light.

'Shhh!' she whispered desperately to the cages of animals. Her eyes ranged along them. And there, together in a cage, were Hodge and Boswell.

With a glad cry, she undid the latch and opened the cage.

The barking and yowling suddenly died abruptly. Agatha, reaching in to get her cats, was aware of a heavy air of menace. She heard a soft footfall and turned around.

Josephine Webster smiled up at the waiter as he pulled out her chair for her in the restaurant. Peter Rice sat down opposite. The maître d' bowed over them and presented menus and made suggestions.

When their order had been taken by one of his minions, he gathered up the huge leather-bound menus and then suddenly said, 'Will the other lady be

joining you?’

‘What other lady?’ demanded Peter Rice, and Miss Webster giggled and said, ‘One of your harem, Peter?’

‘A lady came in earlier and asked if you had booked a table for this evening.’

‘What did she look like?’ asked the vet.

‘Middle-aged, straight brown hair, expensively cut, quite smart clothes.’

‘No, she won’t be joining us,’ said Peter. ‘Hold my order. I’ve got to do something in the surgery. Give Miss Webster a drink and look after her until I get back.’

James Lacey was worried. He had called at Agatha’s cottage several times without getting a reply. He had not been able to get much more out of Freda. Her friend with the silver hair stayed with her all the time, and James could not manage to get a word with her in private.

He decided to pass the time until Agatha’s return trying to write his book, but instead he found himself writing about the case. He wrote on and then gave an exclamation, took out one character and tried to fit the evidence he had to it.

He was roused from his efforts by the doorbell. Bill Wong stood there with Inspector Wilkes. ‘Where’s Agatha?’ asked Bill.

‘Isn’t she back? We were supposed to meet at six. Isn’t her car there?’

‘No, I’m getting worried. We’ll need to ask around and see if anyone saw her leaving the village.’

‘I’ll go out and try to find her myself,’ said James. ‘Here, take a look at my notes, Bill, and see if you come to the same conclusion.’

James went straight to Josephine Webster’s shop. It was in darkness, as was the flat above, and he got no reply to his banging and knocking. A head popped out of a window next to the flat above the shop and a man’s voice said, ‘Ain’t no use you ringing and banging, fit to wake the dead. Her goes to Mircester on half-day.’

James went back and got his car and told Bill he thought Agatha might be in Mircester. He suddenly knew where Agatha had gone and prayed he would not be too late.

Agatha slowly straightened up.

Peter Rice stood in the doorway, looking at her. She was aware again of the strength of that body which supported the disproportionately small head. She had left the tyre-iron lying beside the shattered door. Her eyes flew this way and that, seeking a weapon.

‘Don’t even think of it,’ he said. He produced a small automatic pistol from his pocket. ‘Through to the examining room, Mrs Raisin,’ he said. ‘We won’t be disturbed there.’

Even though she felt weak with fear, even though she felt her bladder was about to give, Agatha gave the door of the cage with her cats in it a kick as she passed and tried to send them telepathic messages to escape. Rice switched off the lights in the room with Agatha’s cats and the other animals and switched on the lights in the small examining room.

Keeping the pistol trained on Agatha, he asked, ‘How did you know it was me?’

‘I didn’t really,’ said Agatha. ‘But I guessed Josephine Webster had been the one to take the cats and leave that note. I followed her and saw her with you. You can’t shoot me. The police will find my body and they’ll know it was you.’

‘Mrs Raisin, you broke into my surgery. I saw the light and a figure inside who rose, I thought, as if to attack me. I shot you. I was defending my life and property.’

‘I left a note, saying where I would be,’ said Agatha.

He studied her for a few moments and then smiled. ‘No, you didn’t, or that Lacey fellow would be here. Anyway . . .’ He raised the pistol an inch.

‘It was because of Greta, wasn’t it?’ said Agatha.

‘In a way. But I didn’t think of killing him then. I didn’t even think of it when she told me how he had been cheating her. No, it was when he started cheating me, ah, then I began to get really angry. That famous veterinary hospital of his. So good for conning gullible women. We had a receptionist here, a nice girl. Paul got his claws into her. She was to persuade the customers to pay cash as much as possible and pass the money to him. Did she get a cut of it? Of course not. All was to go to that hospital which, of course, was to be named after the receptionist. I had taken a long fishing holiday. This is a wealthy practice. I had hired a young vet to stand in for me when I was away and to work with Paul because Paul mostly handled all the cases of horses and farm animals. When I came back, I remarked that trade had dropped by a considerable amount. I suspected the temporary vet, but then one day I was talking to one of the customers in the square and we were complaining about taxes and business taxes in general. “I suppose,” says she, “that’s why you want so much money in cash. To avoid tax. The girl always asks for it.” Of course I got hold of the girl and she broke down and said she had only been stealing for the greater good, namely the founding of that fictitious hospital. I sacked the girl but not Paul. Oh, no. He was going to have to pay me back. But I wanted him out of my hair. Josephine said Carsely was a good place, and so I told him to set up a business there and trick the ladies with his stories if he liked, but every penny was to come to me, and just in

case anything happened to him, I got him to make out his will in my favour. I said unless he paid me back in full, I would go to the police.’

Agatha stayed rigid, seeing out of the corner of her eye that her cats had slid into the room beside her.

‘I still wouldn’t have killed him. But one of the women he tricked was Miss Josephine Webster, whom I had come to love. She came to me, crying and sobbing, and told me the whole story. I knew he was up at Pendlebury’s. I was going to curse him, sack him, punch him on the nose, that was all. The stables were empty apart from Paul. I saw him with the syringe, I knew what was in it, what the operation was and something took over and the next thing I knew he was dead. I slipped off without anyone seeing me. I thought I was safe. I was furious when I realized he had taken a double mortgage out on that house, so instead of gaining by his death, I lost. Josephine and I were going to announce our engagement after the fuss had died down. She knew what I had done. Then that Josephs woman came here. She said Paul had tricked her and she was going to tell the police the truth. She said Paul had told her that I had encouraged him to dupe the women out of money. I promised to pay her back. Then I panicked when Josephine phoned me and told me that you, you Nosy-Parking bitch, were about to hear all from Mrs Josephs. Josephine told me she suffered from diabetes. But still I didn’t mean to do it if she saw sense. I tried to give her the money back, but the silly old bat wouldn’t take it. She said she was going to the police after talking to you. I jabbed the Adrenalin into her. The minute she was dead, I went into a blind panic. I dragged her upstairs in the hope that when she was found dead in the bathroom, they would think it suicide or accident. I chucked the empty bottle out of the car window, as if by getting rid of it, I had got rid of the stain of murder. But you had to interfere again, you and that Lacey. “Take her cats,” said Josephine. “That’ll shut her up.” What a mess. What a bloody mess. But I’m going to marry Josephine, and nothing’s going to stop me.’

Hodge jumped up on the examining table and sat looking from one to the other.

Agatha could suddenly smell her own fear, rank and bitter, and so could the cat. Its tail puffed up like a squirrel’s.

‘So, Mrs Raisin, I need to get this over with. I advise you to stand still and take what’s coming to you.’

His finger began to squeeze the trigger. Agatha dived under the table as a shot rang harmlessly above her head.

One beefy hand dragged her out from under the table. Panting, he threw her against the wall. Hodge flew straight into his face, clawing and spitting. In his panic, the vet tried to shoot the cat off his face but the shot went wild, smashing into a cabinet of bottles.

Agatha tried to drive the examining table into his stomach as he tore the cat

from his face and flung it across the room. She had seen people in films doing that, but it was bolted to the floor. She dived to the side as he fired again, wrenched her ankle and fell on the floor.

She shut her eyes. This was it. Death at last. And suddenly Bill Wong's voice like a voice from heaven said, 'Give me the gun, Mr Rice.'

There was another shot and a cry from Bill. Agatha screamed, 'Oh, no!' and then felt strong hands tugging at her and James Lacey's voice in her ear, saying, 'It's all right, Agatha. Don't look. Rice has shot himself. Don't look. Come with me. Keep your head turned away.'

Agatha rose, clinging to him, and buried her face in the rough tweed of his jacket.

Three hours later Agatha, bathed and wrapped in her dressing-gown, sat in her sitting-room with the cats on her lap, being fussed over by James.

'Bill Wong will be calling on us,' he said. 'Is he grateful to us for having solved two murders for him? Not a bit of it.'

'Us?' demanded Agatha. 'I was the one who found out about Rice.'

'I had more or less come to the same conclusion,' said James, 'although it took me some time to guess Josephine Webster was involved. What put you on to her?'

Agatha told him about finding that shred of dried petal on the doormat.

'But you should have come to me,' exclaimed James, 'or told Bill Wong.'

'I only thought of the cats,' said Agatha. 'Funny, isn't it? I thought my heart would break when they were taken, but here they are, purring away, two animals to be cared for and fed, and now they just seem like an everyday nuisance.'

'Though from what you say, Hodge saved your life,' James pointed out. 'I wonder if they got Josephine Webster. I wonder if she was still sitting there in the hotel restaurant waiting. Bill and his boss went right there while we had to go to the police station and make endless statements.'

'So you had worked it all out yourself?' said Agatha.

He threw another log on the fire and sat down. 'Once I had written down what everyone had done and said, Peter Rice seemed the obvious suspect. He was strong enough to have dragged Mrs Josephs up the stairs, he knew where Bladen would be on the day he was murdered, he knew about the operation on that horse. One always thinks of murderers as planning everything scientifically, but in Rice's case it was all panic and then luck. All he had to do was sit tight and let Mrs Josephs make her accusations to the police. The police wouldn't have thought the philandering and conning tactics of Paul Bladen had anything to do with Peter Rice. I think it was our nosing around that rattled him so badly.'



‘Don’t say that,’ pleaded Agatha. ‘That means we are both directly responsible for Mrs Josephs’s death.’

‘Well, he would probably have panicked anyway.’

The doorbell rang. ‘That’ll be Bill,’ said James, ‘come to read us the riot act.’

Bill was on his own. ‘An off-duty call,’ he said, sinking down wearily on the sofa beside Agatha. ‘Yes, we got Webster. It must have seemed a lifetime to you, Agatha, when he was trying to kill you, but there she was, drinking martinis, just where he had left her.’

‘She denied the whole thing, but when we took her to the station and then told her that Rice had confessed everything to you, she broke down. Cruel thing to say, but we hadn’t yet told her he was dead.’

‘She had been having an affair with Rice for a few months, up until Paul Bladen arrived in Carsely. Before her affair with Rice, she had been a virgin. Think of that, in this day and age. I think her affair with Rice made her feel like a femme fatale, and so, when it seemed that Bladen was courting her as well, it went right to her silly head. That snowy evening you were supposed to meet him in Evesham, that was the evening she went to his house and gave him the cheque. So the grateful Bladen took her to bed. Even if it hadn’t been snowing, he probably wouldn’t have turned up to meet you, Agatha. She was the one who answered the phone to you.’

‘But Bladen was up to his old tricks. He asked her for more money and she grew alarmed and said she could not afford any more. So he lost interest in her, and the repentant Miss Webster went back to the arms of Peter Rice and told him all about Bladen. So, to Rice, history was repeating itself. He had, I gather from what you said in your statement, Agatha, been deeply in love with Greta. Paul had taken her away. Now Paul was doing the same thing with Josephine. But what put you on to them?’

‘I found a dried-up flower petal on the doormat,’ said Agatha proudly, ‘and realized it had probably fallen out of the note about the cats, and so I knew dried flowers meant Josephine Webster.’

Bill looked puzzled. ‘We wouldn’t have missed anything like that.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ said James. ‘Someone brought you a bouquet of dried flowers, Agatha, the morning after, so it probably fell from that.’

‘Why should you be looking closely at the doormat?’ exclaimed Agatha, exasperated. ‘Your men were searching *outside*, where whoever delivered the letter had stood, as well as all over the back garden, because whoever took the cats must have got into the garden by the lane which runs between mine and James’s garden. They wouldn’t bother about the doormat.’

‘I think you’ll find it came from the bouquet after all, Agatha. You made a lucky guess, and a near-fatal one for you. I’m not going to lecture you tonight on the folly of amateurs interfering. Goodness,’ he laughed, ‘I suppose it’s a

case of rank amateurs setting out to catch a rank amateur.’

Agatha glared.

‘Anyway, I’m glad it’s all over. I’m off on a special training course, so I won’t see you for a few weeks.’ Bill stood up. ‘Has the doctor seen you, Agatha?’

She shook her head.

‘You’d best see him tomorrow. You’re going to be a wreck when reaction sets in.’

‘I’ll be all right,’ said Agatha, giving James an adoring look.

He returned it with a startled one and then stood up and said, ‘Do you want me to get Mrs Bloxby to stay with you, Agatha?’

‘No,’ she said, disappointed that he was not volunteering to fetch his sleeping-bag. ‘I’ll be all right after a good night’s sleep.’

After they had left, Agatha rose and went up to bed, the two cats trotting after her. She smiled before she drifted off to sleep. It was all over. She had survived. She felt great. No need to see any doctor. It would take more than one murderer to get Agatha Raisin down!

## Chapter Ten

The next few days were glorious for Agatha, despite the fact that James had sent her a note saying he was shutting himself up to write for a few weeks.

So many people came to call to hear about how Agatha had solved the murders of Paul Bladen and Mrs Josephs, and Agatha stitched away at her story, embroidering the details, so that by the time she gave a talk to the Carsely Ladies' Society, it had become a real blood-and-thunder adventure.

'How exciting you make it all seem,' said Mrs Bloxby after Agatha's talk. 'But do be careful. It can take a little time for reality to set in, and then you might suffer badly.'

'I was not lying,' said Agatha hotly.

'No, of course you weren't,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'I particularly liked that bit when you said to Peter Rice, "Shoot me if you dare, you evil fiend."' '

'Oh, well,' muttered Agatha, shuffling her feet and avoiding the steady gaze of the vicar's wife, 'a bit of poetic licence is allowed, I think.'

Mrs Bloxby smiled and held out a plate. 'Have a slice of seed cake.'

From that moment, Agatha began to feel extremely uncomfortable. Her version of events, which had become a highly coloured adventure story, had indeed come to seem like reality. As she walked back from the vicarage, she noticed how *dark* the village seemed and how the light near the bus shelter had gone out again.

The lilac trees were all out in Lilac Lane, whispering in the night wind, nodding their plumed heads as if gossiping about Agatha as she scurried homewards underneath, thinking that the smell of their flowers reminded her of funerals.

She went inside. The cats did not come to meet her and she let out a whimper of fear and ran to the kitchen. They were curled up together in their basket in front of the stove, happy in each other's company, fast asleep and not caring about one frightened mistress who wanted them to wake up and keep her company.

She reached out a hand to switch on the electric kettle and all the lights went out.

In blind terror, she stumbled round the kitchen, searching for a torch, until some sane voice in her mind told her it was only another of the village's

frequent power cuts. Forcing herself to be calm, she remembered she had candles in the kitchen drawer, found one and lit it with her cigarette lighter. She held it up and found a candlestick. May as well go to bed, she thought.

This was how they had gone to bed in the old days when the cottage was built, people walking up this very staircase with the shadows leaping before them in the wavering candle-flame. So many generations. So many dead. Just think how many had gasped out their last breath in this very bedroom. Her dressing-gown at the back of the door looked like a hanged man. Faces stared at her out of the pretty flowered wallpaper. She was in a cold sweat.

She forced herself to make her way downstairs to the phone in the hall. She put the candle on the floor, sat down on the floor herself, cradled the phone in her lap and dialled James Lacey's number.

His voice when he answered sounded brisk and efficient. 'James,' said Agatha, 'can you come along?'

'I'm writing hard. Is it important?'

'James, I'm frightened.'

'What's happened?'

'Nothing. It's just that that reaction everyone's been warning me about has set in.'

'Don't worry,' he said. 'Help is on its way.'

Agatha stayed where she was. Her fear had gone now that he was coming, but she decided she had better remain looking as frightened as she had been. Perhaps she might throw herself into his arms. Perhaps he would hold her close, and say, 'Agatha, let's give all those gossips a treat and get married.' Perhaps he would kiss her. What would that be like?

This rosy fantasy went on until she realized that a considerable amount of time had passed. Of course, he was probably packing his pyjamas and shaving-kit, but still . . .

The doorbell rang, making her jump. Yes, she would throw herself into his arms.

Mrs Bloxby said gently, 'Now, now, Mrs Raisin. I knew this would happen.'

Agatha opened her eyes and backed off in confusion.

She had seen a dark figure on the step and had taken it to be James.

The vicar's wife was carrying an overnight bag. 'Mr Lacey phoned me and I came as quick as I could. The doctor's on his way.'

Feeling almost ill with disappointment, Agatha allowed Mrs Bloxby to lead her to the kitchen. The lights came on again. Everything was normal.

By the time a sedated Agatha was in bed, the doctor had left, and Mrs Bloxby was sleeping in the spare room, she could only reflect woozily that James was a beast and a bastard.

Agatha spent a long and miserable time of panics and nightmares, glad of callers during the day, glad of the members of the Carsely Ladies' Society, who took it in turns to sleep in her spare room during the night. Not one woman mentioned James Lacey and Agatha's heart was sore with rejection.

And then her fears ebbed away and her mood was improved with long sunny days.

In such a small village it was inevitable that she should meet James again. He smiled at her in a kindly way and asked after her health, he said writing was coming easily and he was working hard. He said they must have lunch sometime, that very English remark which usually means absolutely nothing. Agatha looked at him with bitter hurt in her bearlike eyes but replied politely and coolly, thinking they were almost like a couple who had once had an affair, regretted now on one side.

And then one morning, as lunchtime was approaching, Agatha's doorbell rang. She no longer rushed to it expecting to see James. Bill Wong stood on the step.

'Oh, it's you,' said Agatha. 'You must have been back from that course ages ago.'

'I was,' said Bill, 'but another case came up which involved liaising with the Yorkshire police, so I've been travelling a bit. Aren't you going to ask me in?'

'Of course. We can have coffee in the garden.'

'Lacey around?' he asked as he followed her through the house.

'No,' said Agatha bleakly. 'In fact, apart from little talks like "How are you" and "Isn't the weather great" over the grocery counter, I haven't really seen him.'

'Odd, that. I thought the pair of you were as thick as thieves.'

'Well, we're not,' snapped Agatha. She had bought a new garden table and chairs. 'Sit down, Bill. I was just going to get a bite to eat. Cold chicken and salad suit you?'

'Anything. Your garden could do with some flowers. Give you an interest.'

'I suppose. I'll get the food.'

Over lunch, Bill told her about the case he was working on and then they finally got around to discussing the case of Peter Rice.

'It's odd,' said Bill, 'when you think of the pair of them, Rice and Webster. Hardly Romeo and Juliet to look at, but there was passion there, real passion. Take one man who feels he's too ugly to get a woman and one virgin and that's an explosive mixture. When Rice found out she'd been sleeping with Bladen, it must have nearly broken his heart. History repeating itself. First Greta, then Josephine. But Josephine is back in his arms again. She's not shocked he's killed Bladen. Now they are bound even more closely by the crime and still more after the death of poor Mrs Josephs.'

He looked about him. 'You wouldn't think when you drive through one of these pretty Cotswold villages how much terror and passion and anger can lurk beneath the beams of these old cottages. You know, Agatha, Lacey's an odd bird. Some of these army chaps are. He's only in his fifties, not dead old for these days.'

'Thank you,' said Agatha drily.

'If he'd been married, he might be an easier mark, but these army bachelors, well, it's as if they've come out of the monastery. Play it cool and he'll come around.'

'I have no interest in him,' said Agatha evenly.

'I think you have too much interest in him and that's what frightened him off,' said Bill.

'Oh, really, so young and so wise. What's *your* love life like?'

'Pretty good. You know the Safeways supermarket in Mircester?'

'Yes.'

'There's a pretty girl called Sandra works at the check-out. We've been dating.'

'That's nice,' said Agatha, who felt obscurely jealous.

'So I'd better go. Keep away from murders, Agatha!'

After he had left, Agatha drove down to the Batsford Garden Centre at the bottom of Bourton-on-the-Hill and looked at flowers and plants. They also had full-grown trees. Instant garden, that was the answer. But just a little to start. Something for the borders round the grass at the back and a hanging basket of flowers for the front of the cottage. She bought some Busy Lizzies and pansies and decided she would get started by planting them.

The work was relaxing and the cats played about her in the sunlight and she was so absorbed in her work that it took her some time to realize her doorbell was ringing.

If only it would be . . .

But Agatha recoiled a step when she opened the door. Freda Huntingdon stood there.

'What do you want?' asked Agatha crossly.

'To bury the hatchet,' said Freda. 'Come along to the pub. I feel like getting plastered. I'm sick of men.'

Curiosity warred with distaste in Agatha's mind and curiosity won.

'What's happened?'

'Come to the pub and I'll tell you.'

Only the idea that it might have something to do with James drove Agatha into accompanying Freda.

Freda bought them both large gins and they sat down.

'I'm thinking of selling up,' said Freda. 'Nothing's gone right since I came here.'

‘You mean Bladen?’

‘That and other things. You see, George, my husband, was much older than me, but oodles of money. We used to travel a lot, go to exotic places. But George kept a strict eye on me and I used to think of all the freedom I’d have if he dropped dead and left me the money.

‘Well, he did. I had a couple of unfortunate affairs, and so I thought to hell with it; I’ll move to the Cotswolds, get myself a dinky cottage and look around for another husband. I got my eye on Lacey. Sorry I was such a bitch, but I really fancied him, but not a hope there. That business with Bladen threw me. I really believed he was head over heels in love with me. I really believed all that rubbish about that hospital. When George was alive, I thought I was the clever, worldly, shrewd one, but it was George who had the brains. Then Tony came along. That chap you saw me with in the pub. No Adonis, but good business, Gloucester way. His wife called on me yesterday. His wife! And he swore he was a widower.’ Freda snivelled dismally. ‘I’m just a stupid old tart.’

‘You need another big gin,’ said Agatha, ever practical.

James Lacey read over again what he had written and groaned. Thanks to his experiences in the Bladen case, he had thought he would write a mystery story. How easily the words had come. How rapidly the thousands of little green words had built up on the screen of his computer. But it was as if a mist had cleared. He was looking down at pages of total rubbish.

The windows of his cottage were all open because it was a hot day. From next door, he could hear the sound of voices and the clink of glasses and china. He went out into his garden and peered over the hedge. Bill Wong and Agatha were sitting having lunch and absorbed in conversation. He wished he could go and join them, but he had been cool to Agatha, had snubbed her, and now he had cut himself off.

He returned to the house and potted miserably. Later he heard Bill leave and shortly after that, he saw Agatha driving off.

He went back out into his garden in the afternoon and began to weed the flower-beds. He heard movement from Agatha’s garden and once more looked over. She was planting a row of pansies. He was sure she didn’t know anything about gardening. If he hadn’t been so stupid, he could have strolled over for a chat. But really! All those women expecting him to propose! And Agatha herself, the way she had looked at him.

But on the other hand, she had nearly been killed. He had misread her looks before. It was all the fault of that bloody captain’s wife in Cyprus. He should never have had an affair with her. What a scandal that had been. She had pursued him, flirted with *him*, but when the scandal had broken, he was the

guilty party, the beast that had seduced her and tried to take her away from her noble and gallant husband.

He settled down to read a detective story by Reginald Hill and found it depressingly good.

In the evening, he heard the sound of noisy singing coming along the lane.

Puzzled, he went out and stood in the evening air on his doorstep.

Lurching along the lane, arms about each other, singing, 'I Did It My Way', came Agatha and Freda Huntingdon.

When they came abreast of him, they stopped singing. Freda hiccuped and said, 'Men!' and Agatha Raisin grinned and gave James Lacey the victory sign, but the wrong way round.

James retreated inside and banged the door as, laughing and shouting, the unlikely pair went on their way.



Agatha Raisin  
and the  
Potted Gardener

M. C. Beaton

ROBINSON  
London

To Jane, with love

The author wishes to thank Nic Dicker  
of Batsford Garden Centre for his help  
in choosing plants for Agatha's  
'instant garden'.

# Chapter One

A mild, damp winter was edging towards spring when Agatha Raisin motored slowly homeward to the village of Carsely after a long holiday. She persuaded herself that she had had a wonderful time far away from this grave of a village. She had gone to New York, then to Bermuda, then to Montreal, and then straight to Paris, and so on to Italy, Greece and Turkey. Although she was a wealthy woman, she was not used to spending all that amount of money on herself and felt obscurely guilty. Before, she had nearly always gone on the more expensive arranged package holidays where she was with a group. This time she had been on her own. Carsely had given her the confidence, or so she had thought, to make friends, but she seemed to have spent a blur of weeks either in hotel rooms or in dogged solitary forays around the tourist sights.

But she would not admit she had had a lonely time any more than she would admit her prolonged absence had anything to do with her neighbour, James Lacey.

At the end of what she fondly thought of as 'my last case', she had drunk too much in the local pub with one of the women from the village and on returning home had made a rude gesture to James, who had been standing outside his cottage.

Sober and remorseful the next day, she had humbly apologized to this attractive bachelor neighbour and the apology had been quietly accepted. But the friendship had sunk to a tepid acquaintanceship. He talked to her briefly if he met her in the pub or in the village shop, but he no longer came round for coffee, and if he was working in his front garden and saw her coming along the lane, he dived indoors. So Agatha had taken her sore heart abroad. Somehow, away from the gentle influence of Carsely, her old character had reasserted itself, that is, prickly, aggressive and judgemental. Her cats were in a basket on the back seat. She had stopped at the cattery to pick them up on the road home. Despite the fact that she was still married, although she had not seen her husband for years, did not want to, and had practically forgotten his existence, she felt exactly like the spinster of the village, cats and all.

The village of Carsely lay quietly in the watery sunlight. Smoke rose from chimneys. She turned the car along the straggling main street, which was practically all there was of Carsely, except for a few lanes winding off it and a

council estate on the outskirts, and turned sharply into Lilac Lane, where her thatched cottage stood. James Lacey lived next door. Smoke was rising from his chimney. Her heart lifted. How she longed to stop the car at his door and cry out, 'I'm home,' but she knew he would come out on the step and survey her gravely and say something polite like 'Good to have you back,' and then he would retreat indoors.

Carrying her cats, Boswell and Hodge, in their basket, she let herself into her cottage. It smelt strongly of cleaning fluid and disinfectant, her dedicated cleaning woman, Doris Simpson, having had free run of the place while Agatha had been away. She fed the cats and let them out, carried her suitcases out of the car and put her clothes in the laundry basket, and then took out a series of small parcels, presents for the ladies of Carsely.

She had bought the vicar's wife, Mrs Bloxby, a very pretty silk scarf from Istanbul. Longing for some human company, Agatha decided to walk along to the vicarage and give it to her.

The sun had gone down and the vicarage looked dark and quiet. Agatha suddenly felt a pang of apprehension. Despite her hard thoughts about Carsely, she could not imagine the village without the gentle vicar's wife. What if the vicar had been transferred to another parish while she, Agatha, had been away?

Agatha was a stocky middle-aged woman with a round, rather pugnacious face, and small, bearlike eyes. Her hair, brown and healthy, was cut in a short square style, established in the heyday of Mary Quant and not much changed since. Her legs were good and her clothes expensive, and no one, seeing her standing hopefully on the vicarage doorstep, could realize the timid longing for a friendly face that lay underneath the laminated layers of protection from the world which Agatha had built up over the years.

She knocked at the door and with a glad feeling heard the sound of approaching footsteps from within. The door opened and Mrs Bloxby stood smiling at Agatha. The vicar's wife was a gentle-faced woman. Her brown hair, worn in an old-fashioned knot at the nape of her neck, was streaked with grey.

'Come in, Mrs Raisin,' she said with that special smile of hers that illumined her whole face. 'I was just about to have tea.'

Having temporarily forgotten what it was to be liked, Agatha thrust the wrapped parcel at her and said gruffly, 'This is for you.'

'Why, how kind! But come in.' The vicar's wife led the way into the sitting-room and switched on a couple of lamps. With a feeling of coming home, Agatha sank down in the feather cushions of the sofa while Mrs Bloxby threw a log on the smouldering fire and stirred it into a blaze with the poker.

Mrs Bloxby unwrapped the parcel and exclaimed in delight at the silk scarf,

shimmering with gold and red and blue. 'How exotic! I shall wear it at church on Sunday and be the envy of the parish. Tea and scones, I think.' She went out. Agatha could hear her voice calling to the vicar, 'Darling, Mrs Raisin's back.' Agatha heard a mumbled reply.

After about ten minutes, Mrs Bloxby returned with a tray of tea and scones. 'Alf can't join us. He's working on a sermon.'

Agatha reflected sourly that the vicar always managed to be busy on something when she called.

'So,' said Mrs Bloxby, 'tell me about your travels.'

Agatha bragged about the places she had been, conjuring up, she hoped, the picture of a sophisticated world traveller. And then, waving a buttered scone, she said grandly, 'I don't suppose much has been going on here.'

'Oh, we have our little excitements,' said the vicar's wife. 'We have a newcomer, a real asset to the village, Mrs Mary Fortune. She bought poor Mrs Josephs's house and has made vast improvements to it. She is a great gardener.'

'Mrs Josephs didn't have much of a garden,' said Agatha.

'There's quite a bit of space at the front, and Mrs Fortune has already landscaped it and she has had a conservatory built at the back of the house on to the kitchen. She grows tropical plants there. She is also a superb baker. I fear her scones put mine to shame.'

'And what does Mr Fortune do?'

'There isn't a Mr Fortune. She is divorced.'

'How old?'

'It is hard to say. She is a remarkably good-looking lady and a great help at our horticultural society meetings. She and Mr Lacey are both such keen gardeners.'

Agatha's heart sank. She had nursed a hope that James might have missed her. But now it seemed he was being well entertained by some attractive divorcée with a passion for gardening.

Mrs Bloxby's gentle voice went on with other news of the parish, but Agatha's mind was too busy now to take in much of what she was saying. Agatha's interest in James Lacey was as much competitive as it was romantic. Since she had a great deal of common sense, she might even have accepted the fact that James Lacey was not interested in her at all, but the very mention of this newcomer roused all her battling instincts.

The vicar's voice sounded from the back of the house. 'Are we going to get any dinner tonight?'

'Soon,' shouted Mrs Bloxby. 'Would you care to join us, Mrs Raisin?'

'I didn't realize it was so late.' Agatha got to her feet. 'No, but thank you all the same.'

Agatha walked back to her cottage and let the cats in from the back garden.

She could not see much of the garden because night had fallen. She had put in a few bushes and flowers last year, Agatha being an ‘instant’ gardener – that is, someone who buys plants ready grown from the nursery. In order to get in on the act, she would need to become a real gardener. Real gardeners had greenhouses and grew their plants from seed. Also, she had better join this horticultural society.

With a view to finding out about the opposition, Agatha drove down to Moreton-in-Marsh the following day and bought a cake at the bakery and then drove back to Carsely and made her way to the newcomer’s home, which was in an undistinguished terrace of Victorian cottages at the top of the village. As she opened the garden gate, she remembered with a pang of unease the last time she had pushed open this gate and had entered the house to find that Mrs Josephs, the librarian, had been murdered. An extension had been built to the front of the house, a sort of porch made mostly of glass and filled with plants and flowers and wicker furniture.

Holding the cake, Agatha rang the bell. The woman who answered the door made Agatha’s heart sink. She was undoubtedly attractive, with a smooth, unlined face and blonde hair and bright blue eyes.

‘I am Agatha Raisin. I live in Lilac Lane, next to Mr Lacey. I have just returned from holiday and learned of your arrival in the village, and so I brought you this cake.’

‘How very nice of you,’ beamed Mary Fortune. ‘Come in. Of course I have heard of you. You are our Miss Marple.’ There was something in the way she said it and the appraising look she gave that made Agatha think she was being compared to the famous fictional character not because of that character’s detective abilities but more because of her age.

Mary led the way into a charming sitting-room. Bookshelves lined the walls. Pot plants glowed green with health and a brisk log fire was burning. There was a homely smell of baking. Agatha could almost imagine James relaxing here, his long legs stretched out in front of him. ‘I’ll just take a note of your phone number,’ said Agatha, opening her capacious handbag and taking out a notebook, pen and her glasses. She was not interested in getting Mary’s phone number, only an excuse to put on her glasses and see if the newcomer’s face was as unwrinkled as it appeared to be.

Mary gave her number and Agatha looked up and peered at her through her glasses. Well, well, well, thought Agatha. Thunderbirds, go! That was a face-lift if ever there was one. There was something in the plastic stretchiness of the skin. The hair was dyed, but by the hand of an expert, so that it was streaked blonde rather than being a uniform bleach job.

‘I have heard you are a member of the horticultural society,’ said Agatha,

taking off her glasses and tucking them away in their case.

‘Yes, and I pride myself on doing my bit for the village. Mr Lacey is a great help. You know Mr Lacey, of course. He’s your neighbour.’

‘Oh, we’re *great* friends,’ said Agatha.

‘Really? But we must sample some of the cake you brought.’ Mary stood up. She was wearing a green sweater and green slacks and her figure was perfect.

The doorbell rang. ‘Talking of James, that’ll be him now,’ said Mary. ‘He often calls round.’

Agatha smoothed her skirt. She realized she had not bothered to put on any make-up. Agatha knew there were lucky women who did not need to wear any make-up and that she was not one of that happy breed.

James Lacey came in and for a second a little flash of disappointment showed in his eyes when he saw Agatha. James Lacey was a very tall man in his mid-fifties. His thick black hair showed only a trace of grey. His eyes, like Mary’s, were bright blue. He kissed Mary on the cheek, smiled at Agatha and said, ‘Welcome back. Did you have a good holiday?’

‘Mrs Raisin has brought a cake,’ interrupted Mary. ‘I’ll make some tea while you two chat.’

James smiled at Mary without quite looking at her, as if he longed to look at her, but was as shy as a schoolboy. He’s in love, thought Agatha, and wanted to get up and walk away.

She forced herself to talk brightly about her holidays, wishing she had some amusing stories to tell, but she had hardly talked to anyone and hardly anyone had talked to her.

Mary came back in bearing a tray. ‘Chocolate cake,’ she announced. ‘Now we shall all get fat.’

‘Not you,’ said James flirtatiously. ‘You don’t have to worry.’

Mary smiled at him and James sent her back a shy little smile and bent his head over a slice of chocolate cake.

‘I was thinking of joining the horticultural society,’ said Agatha. ‘When do they meet?’

‘James and I are going to a meeting tonight, if you would like to come along,’ said Mary. ‘It’s at seven thirty in the school hall.’

‘I didn’t know you were interested in gardening, Mrs Raisin,’ commented James.

‘Why so formal?’ Agatha’s bearlike eyes surveyed James. ‘You always call me Agatha.’

‘Well, Agatha, you’ve always just bought fully grown stuff from the nurseries before.’

‘I’ve got time on my hands,’ said Agatha. ‘Going to do it properly.’

‘We’ll help you,’ said Mary with an easy friendliness. ‘Won’t we, James?’



‘Oh, absolutely.’

‘Why did you decide to settle in Carsely, Mary?’ Agatha felt the waistband of her skirt constricting her and put down her plate of half-eaten chocolate cake and shoved it away.

‘I was motoring about the Cotswolds and took a liking to this village,’ said Mary. ‘So peaceful, so quiet. Such darling people.’

‘Do you know someone was murdered in this house?’ asked Agatha, determined to bring the conversation around to the murder case she had solved.

But Mary said quickly and dismissively, ‘I heard all about that. It doesn’t matter. These old houses must have seen a lot of deaths.’ She turned to James and started talking about gardening. ‘I’ve been pricking out my seedlings,’ she said.

‘What you do in the privacy of your home is your own affair,’ said Agatha and gave a coarse laugh.

There was a frosty little silence and then Mary and James went on talking, the Latin names of plants Agatha had never heard of flying between them.

Agatha felt diminished and excluded. One part of her longed to get away and the other part was determined to hang on until James left.

At last, almost as if he knew Agatha would not budge until he left, James rose to his feet. ‘I’ll see you this evening, Mary.’

Mary and Agatha rose as well. ‘I’ll walk home with you, James,’ said Agatha. ‘See you this evening, Mary.’

Agatha and James went outside. When they had reached the garden gate, James suddenly turned and went back to where Mary was standing on the step. He bent his handsome head and whispered something to her. Mary gave a little laugh and whispered something back. James turned and came back to where Agatha was standing. They walked off together.

‘Mary’s an interesting woman,’ said James. ‘She is very well travelled. As a matter of fact, before coming here, she spent some time in California.’

‘That would be where she got her face-lift,’ said Agatha.

He glanced down at her and then said abruptly; ‘I’ve just remembered, I must get something in for supper. Don’t try to keep up with me. Must hurry.’ And like a car suddenly accelerating, he sped off, leaving Agatha looking bleakly after him.

As she walked back home, Agatha was half inclined to forget about the whole thing. Let Mary have James. If that was the sort of woman who sparked him, then he wasn’t for such as Agatha Raisin.

But competitiveness dies hard, and somehow she found that by the late afternoon she had ordered a small greenhouse complete with heating system and had agreed to pay through the nose to have the whole thing done the following week. She also bought a pile of books on gardening.

Before going to the horticultural society meeting, Agatha went along to the pub, the Red Lion. She wanted to come across just one person who did not like Mary Fortune. John Fletcher, the landlord, gave her a warm welcome and handed her a gin and tonic. 'On the house,' he said. 'Nice to have you back.'

Agatha fought down tears that threatened to well up in her eyes. It had been hell travelling alone. Single women did not get respect or attention. The little bit of kindness from the landlord took her aback. 'Thanks, John,' she said a trifle hoarsely. 'You've got a newcomer in the village. What do you think of her?'

'Mrs Fortune? Comes in here a lot. Nice lady. Very open-handed. Always buying drinks for everyone. She's the talk of the village. Bakes the best scones and cakes, best gardener, can do plumbing repairs, and knows all about car engines.'

Jimmy Page, one of the local farmers, came in and hailed Agatha. 'Right good to see you back, Agatha,' he said, hitching his large backside on to the bar stool next to her.

'What'll you have?' asked Agatha, determined not to be outdone in generosity by Mary.

'Half a pint,' said Jimmy.

'I've brought you and your wife a present,' said Agatha. 'I'll bring it along tomorrow.'

'Very good of you. No murders while you've been away. Quiet as the grave. That Mary Fortune, she said a funny thing. She says, "Maybe Mrs Raisin is like a sort of vulture, and as long as she's out of the village, nothing bad'll happen."'

'That wasn't a very nice thing to say,' Agatha glared.

'Don't you go taking it hard-like. Her's got this jokey way of saying things. Don't mean no harm. Tell me about your holiday.'

And as more locals came in to join them, Agatha elaborated on her adventures, inventing funny scenes and relishing being the centre of attention until a look at the clock behind the bar told her that she had better get along to the school hall.

In the dimness of the school hall and among what seemed to Agatha's jaundiced eyes to be the fustiest of the villagers, Mary with her blonde hair and green wool dress clinging to her excellent figure shone like the sun. She was sitting next to James, and as Agatha entered she heard Mary say, 'Perhaps we should have gone for dinner before this. I'm starving.'

So he had lied about getting something in for his supper, thought Agatha bleakly.

A Mr Bernard Spott, an elderly gentleman, led the meeting. There were

familiar faces in the gloom of the school hall, where two fluorescent lights had failed to function and the remaining one whined and stuttered above their heads. Children's drawings were pinned up on the walls. There was something depressing about children's paintings on the walls of a room at an adult gathering, thought Agatha, as if underlining the fact that childhood was long gone and never to return. The Boggles were there, that sour elderly couple who complained about everything. Mrs Mason, who was chairwoman of the Carsely Ladies' Society, was in the front row beside Mrs Bloxby. Doris Simpson, Agatha's cleaner, came in and sat beside Agatha, muttering a 'Welcome back.' Behind her came Miss Simms, the unmarried mother who was secretary of the Ladies' Society, tottering on her high heels.

Mr Spott droned on about the annual horticultural show, which was to be held in July. After that, in August, there was the Great Day when the members of the society opened their gardens to the public. Fred Griggs, the local policeman, then read the minutes of the last meeting as if giving evidence in court.

Agatha stifled a yawn. What was the point of all this? James was definitely not interested in her and never would be. She regretted the expense of the greenhouse. She let her mind wander. It was surely wicked to wish for another murder, but that was what she found she was doing. She hated attending things like this where she knew she did not belong. Gardening, mused Agatha, was something one had to grow up doing. Any plant which had shown its head in the Birmingham slum in which she had been brought up had been promptly savaged by the local children.

There was a shuffling of feet as the meeting ended. And there was Mary, very much the hostess with the mostest, presiding over the tea-urn at the end of the hall.

Agatha turned to Doris. 'Thanks for keeping my place so clean,' she said. 'You into this gardening lark?'

'Just started last year,' said Doris. 'It's good fun.'

'This doesn't seem much like fun,' commented Agatha, looking sourly down the hall to where James was standing next to Mary, who was pouring tea and handing out plates of cakes.

'It gets better when things start growing.'

'Our newcomer appears highly popular,' said Agatha.

'Not with me.'

Oh, sensible Doris. Oh, treasure beyond compare! 'Why?'

'I dunno.' Doris's pale grey eyes were shrewd behind her glasses. 'She does everything right and she's right nice to everybody, but there's no warmth there. It's as if she's acting.'

'James Lacey seems taken with her.'

'That won't last.'

Agatha felt a sudden surge of hope. 'Why?'

'Because he's a clever man and she just appears clever. He's a nice man and she's only pretending to be nice. That's the way I see it.'

'I brought you a present,' said Agatha. 'You can collect it when you come round tomorrow.'

'Thanks a lot, but you shouldn't have bothered, really. How're your cats?'

'Ignoring me. Didn't like the cattery.'

'Instead of paying that cattery, next time you go off, leave them be and I'll come round every day and feed them and let them out for a bit. Better in their own home.'

Mrs Bloxby came up to them, followed by Miss Simms. She was wearing the new scarf. 'So pretty,' she said. 'I couldn't wait until Sunday to wear it.'

Agatha turned to Miss Simms. 'I have a present for you as well.'

'That's ever so nice of you,' said Miss Simms. 'But you haven't had any tea, Agatha, and Mary makes such good cakes.'

'Maybe next time,' replied Agatha, who had no intention of making herself suffer further by going and joining James and Mary.

Mary Fortune looked down the room at the ever growing group around Agatha Raisin. She began to pack up the tea things, putting the few cakes left in a plastic box.

'I'll carry that home for you,' said James. He could not help noticing as he left with Mary that the group about Agatha were laughing at something she was saying and no one turned to watch them go, but it would have amazed him to know that Agatha, although she never turned round, was aware, with every fibre of her being, of every step he took towards the door.

The night was crisp and cold and frosty. Great stars burnt overhead. James felt content with the world.

'That Agatha Raisin is a peculiarly vulgar type of woman,' he realized Mary was saying.

'Agatha can be a bit abrupt at times,' he said defensively, 'but she is actually very good-hearted.'

'Watch out, James,' teased Mary. 'Our repressed village spinster has her eye on you.'

'As far as I know, Agatha is a divorcée like yourself,' said James stiffly. Loyalty made him forget all the times he had avoided Agatha when she was pursuing him. 'I don't want to discuss her.'

She gave a little laugh. 'Poor James. Of course you don't.'

She began to talk about gardening and James walked beside her and tried to bring back the feelings of warmth and elation he usually felt in her company. But he had not liked her snide remark about Agatha. He admired bravery, and there was no doubt there was a certain gallantry about Agatha Raisin which appealed to him.

He saw Mary to her door and handed over the cake box, and to her obvious surprise refused her invitation for the usual cup of coffee.

Agatha, too preoccupied with the James-Mary business, had failed to notice her own popularity at the horticultural society. But Agatha had never been popular in her life before. She had been the successful owner of a public relations company, having only recently sold up and retired to move to Carsely. Hitherto, her work had been her life and her identity. The people in her life had been her staff, and the journalists whom she had bullied into giving space to whomever or whatever she happened to be promoting.

When she opened the door and the phone began to ring, she looked at it almost in surprise.

‘Hello?’ she asked tentatively.

‘Aggie? How’s life in Peasantville?’ came the mincing tones of her ex-assistant, Roy Silver.

‘Oh, Roy. How are you?’ said Agatha.

‘Working as usual, and feeling bored. Any hope of an invitation?’

Agatha hesitated. She wondered if she really liked Roy any more, or, for that matter, had ever liked him. She had invited him before when she was desperate for company. Still, it would be nice to talk PR for a change and find out what was going on in London.

‘You can come this weekend,’ she said. ‘I’ll pick you up in Moreton-in-Marsh. Got a girl?’

‘No, just little me, sweetie. Still microwaving everything?’

‘I’m a proper cook now,’ said Agatha severely.

‘I’ll get the train that gets in about eleven thirty,’ said Roy. ‘See you then. Any murders?’

Agatha thought bitterly of Mary Fortune.

‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘Not yet.’

## Chapter Two

Agatha was surprised to receive a handwritten invitation to drinks at Mary's for Friday evening. It had been pushed through the letter-box the day after the horticultural society meeting.

She stared down at it as if it were some species of poisonous insect. She then walked up to her bedroom and surveyed herself in the mirror. Her figure had thickened with all the food she had eaten on her travels, comfort food to combat the loneliness. She looked decidedly matronly. She put the invitation down on the dressing-table and took one of her best dresses out of the wardrobe and, quickly slipping off the old sweater and trousers she was wearing, tried it on. To her relief it seemed to *look* the same, although it felt tight, but when she twisted round and surveyed her back, it was to see with dismay two rolls of fat above the line of her knickers. How could she go to Mary's and compete with her in any way? That was the trouble about being in one's fifties. Unless one's figure was firmly kept in check at all times, it suddenly began to sag alarmingly and develop nasty rolls of fat.

She changed back and decided to put off accepting the invitation until she had thought clearly what to do. In the meanwhile, she would drive into one of the cheap supermarkets in Evesham and get food for the weekend, picking up some fresh fruit and vegetables from the open-air stands on the A44.

At the supermarket, she decided to have a cup of coffee in the café before shopping. She found that although she had brought cigarettes, she had left her lighter behind, so she went up to the cigarette counter and asked for a cheap lighter. 'These,' said the middle-aged assistant, 'are electronically controlled.'

'What does that mean?' asked Agatha.

'See, it clicks down without much pressure.' She beamed at Agatha. 'Very good for the elderly who have trouble with their thumbs.'

Agatha glared at her. 'I hate you.'

'Madam, I just said –'

'Never mind,' snarled Agatha, 'I'll take it. How much?'

'Eight-five pee. But –'

Agatha slammed down the right money, picked up the lighter and stormed off. Was this what happened at fifty-something when you didn't wear make-up? Getting mistaken for a geriatric?

Come on, sounded the voice of logic in her head, she didn't mean you. Oh, yes, she did, shrieked her bruised emotions. She got herself a cup of coffee at the self-service counter, winced away from the cream cakes and sat moodily down at the window and glared out at the carpark.

There is something very lowering about drinking coffee in a British supermarket while surveying the car-park. Trees surrounded it, wispy, newly planted trees which must have looked very neat and pretty when made out of green sponge on the architect's model. Agatha could almost imagine herself placed in the café window on the model, a small plastic Agatha. It was a dusty, windy day. Discarded wrappings spiralled up and a thin film of greasy rain began to blur the windows. Agatha sighed heavily. It would be very comfortable to forget about the James Laceys of this world and give up, become fat and contented, leave the skin creams alone and let the wrinkles happen. She would not go to Mary's. She would be sensible.

But there would be no harm in getting the bicycle out and taking some exercise.

Mary Fortune stood surveying her guests on Friday. She had a plentiful supply of drinks of all kinds and had cooked hot little savouries to go with them. But people weren't staying, and an awful lot of them had looked around and asked, 'Where's Mrs Raisin?' And Mary had replied sweetly that as Mrs Raisin was expecting a guest at the weekend, she was staying at home to make preparations. Jimmy Page, the farmer, said he thought he had seen Agatha heading for the Red Lion, and an irritating woman, Mrs Toms, said, 'Might just drop down there and thank her for that present,' and Mary began to feel that some of the departing guests were following suit. As a further irritation, James no longer looked at her with that glowing, shy sort of look but fidgeted about. Normally he would have kept at her side and then stayed behind to help her clear up. Mary was puzzled. From what she had seen of her, Agatha Raisin was a stocky, plain, middle-aged woman who had had a charm bypass, so James could not possibly have transferred his attentions to her. But it was almost as if this Agatha Raisin belonged to the villagers and the village, and she, Mary did not. And, sure enough, James did not stay.

Agatha waited the next morning at Moreton-in-Marsh station for the arrival of Roy Silver. She wished in a way he were not coming, perhaps because Roy with his waspish camp manner did not fit into the comfortable ways of Carsely. But James Lacey could find nothing, well, romantic in the fact that Agatha had a man staying for the weekend. Roy was far too young, still in his twenties.

When Roy came sailing off the train dressed in black denim and talking into a mobile phone, Agatha's heart sank. Roy, satisfied at last that the few people on the station platform had noticed the young executive at work, rang off and approached Agatha.

'What have you been doing to yourself?' he asked by way of greeting. "'O, that this too, too solid flesh would melt . . .'" Shakespeare, Aggie. Got a word for everything.'

'Taught you well in the reform school?' rejoined Agatha, who hated literary quotations.

'Honestly, darling,' went on Roy cheerfully, 'not like you to go to seed.'

'I put on a bit on my holidays,' said Agatha, 'but I'll soon take it off.'

'Go on a diet. I'll join you,' said Roy eagerly. 'The fruit diet's the thing. Eat nothing but fruit for three days, and I am here for three days.'

'Don't you have to be at work on Monday?'

'Got an extra day owing to me *and* I've got a proposition to put to you.'

'Oh, Roy, I didn't know you cared. Put that case of yours with the Costa del Sol labels in the back,' snapped Agatha, 'and let's get a move on.'

'Righty-ho. Tell you about it when we get to your place.'

Roy chattered along about the fruit diet, which he seemed determined they should both go on. Agatha drove steadily up through Bourton-on-the-Hill, noticing gloomily that there were still houses for sale, a sign that the recession was not disappearing as fast as the politicians wanted the public to think. She then turned down the long winding road which led to Carsely. There had been a heavy frost that morning, which had not yet melted. White trees leaned over the road and the whole countryside seemed still and frozen into immobility.

'Are you sure you want to go ahead with this diet?' she asked when she had ushered him into the cottage. 'I've got lots of goodies for the weekend, and I'm a fair cook.'

'Let's do it, Aggie. Just think how slim you'll look.'

And Agatha thought of Mary Fortune and heaved a little sigh. 'All right, Roy. Fruit it is.'

She said a longing mental goodbye to the lunch of grilled steak and baked potatoes she had planned. That wasn't fattening, she thought, forgetting about all the sour cream and fresh butter she was going to put on the potatoes.

'Like to go along to the pub for a drink?' she asked hopefully. On Saturdays the bar of the Red Lion was covered in little dishes of cheese nibbles and pickled onions.

'Can't have alcohol or coffee,' said Roy cheerfully. 'We'd better go out and get some fruit.'

'I have fruit,' said Agatha, pointing to a full bowl of apples and oranges.'

'Not enough, sweetie. Must get more.'

As they approached her car parked outside in the lane, Agatha was tempted



to tell Roy to forget about such a ridiculous diet. But Mary's car drew up outside James Lacey's and Mary got out wearing her favourite green. Mary cast a swift appraising look at Roy, and Agatha was suddenly conscious of Roy's youth and weediness. He had a thin white face and small clever eyes and a thin weedy body which looked as if it needed fattening up rather than dieting.

'Who's the glamour-puss?' asked Roy.

'Some incomer,' said Agatha sourly. 'Get in the car.'

Her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she had breakfasted on a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

But there was the carrot held out in front of her of an almost immediate loss of weight.

They drove to Evesham and bought apples, melons, bananas, grapes, pineapples, oranges and a selection of 'yuppie' fruit from an exotic and highly priced variety.

Back home again, they both ate as much as they could and assured each other that they felt terribly well already. Then they went out cycling, Roy borrowing a cycle from the vicarage. It was to be the best part of the weekend as they flew along the frosty lanes in the clear air, returning home under a burning red sun which set the frost-covered grass and trees aflame and made the frozen puddles in the roads burn like monsters' eyes.

But instead of sitting down that evening to a warming meal, there was nothing but more fruit and mineral water.

'What's this proposition you were talking about?' asked Agatha.

'You remember Mr Wilson of Pedmans, my boss?'

Agatha's eyes narrowed. She had sold her PR business to Pedmans. Wilson had gone back on all his assurances that her offices and staff would remain intact, had fired the staff with the exception of Roy, and had sold the offices. 'Of course.'

'He was talking about you the other day. Said you were the best ever. I said I was going to see you,' said Roy, carefully and conveniently forgetting that his decision to visit Agatha had been prompted after he had heard his boss's praise of her. 'He said he would like to employ you as an executive. Pure Cosmetics are playing up. You used to handle them.'

'Bunch of toe-rags,' said Agatha moodily. Pure Cosmetics was run by a temperamental and demanding woman, a modern slave-driver.

'But that woman, Jessica Turnbull, the director of Pure Cosmetics, you could always handle her. That's what Wilson said.'

'I'm retired,' said Agatha. 'Hey, you're spotty.'

Roy squawked and ran upstairs to the bathroom. He returned and said, 'I look like a fourteen-year-old with acne. You're spotty as well.'

'Let's chuck this stupid diet.'

‘No,’ said Roy firmly. ‘It’s toxic waste. The impurities are being purged out of our bodies.’

‘I agreed to this stupid thing to look better, not to get spotty.’

‘But you look slimmer already, Aggie,’ said Roy craftily. ‘Don’t think about Wilson’s offer now. We’ll watch that video I got and then we’ll have an early night.’

Agatha awoke early the next day, hungry and bad-tempered. She went downstairs and gloomily ate six apples, drank a glass of mineral water, and smoked five cigarettes. The doorbell rang. She went to the door and peered through the spyhole. She recognized James Lacey’s chest, which was all she could see of him.

She put her hands up to her face. She could almost feel the spots.

Agatha backed away from the door. She longed to open it, but not like this, not spotty-faced and in her dressing gown.

Outside, James turned slowly away. He had just decided it was silly to nourish a childish resentment of Agatha because she had made a rude gesture at him, and all that time ago, too. As he approached his cottage, he saw Mary’s blonde head turning into the lane. Without thinking why, he quickened his step and plunged into his cottage like some large animal into its burrow, and when his own doorbell rang imperatively a few moments later, he did not answer it, persuading himself that he needed to get down to work.

He was still working on a history of the Peninsular Wars. He switched on his computer and looked gloomily at the last paragraph he’d written. Then he flicked it off and stared moodily at the screen. There was a heading saying simply, ‘Case’. That was when Agatha and he had been trying to solve a murder and he had typed out all the facts and had studied them. That had been fun. It had been exciting. Perhaps Agatha was on to something new. He shook his head. No one had been murdered for miles around. Carsely was still locked in its winter’s sleep. He wondered uneasily why Agatha had not answered the door. She must have been home because her car was parked outside and smoke had been rising from the chimney. That fellow Roy was staying with her. He had seen them the day before on their bicycles. There couldn’t be any romantic interest there. The fellow was too young. Still, in these modern days of toy boys, one could never tell. They were probably having a high old time, laughing and joking while he sat sunk in boredom.

‘I don’t like Wilson and I don’t like Pedmans,’ Agatha was saying sourly. ‘I loathe fruit and I could kill for a big greasy hamburger.’

‘Take a look in the mirror,’ retorted Roy crossly, made bitter by diet and the

fact that his mission was to get Agatha back to work. ‘You’ve let yourself go. Okay, so you’ve had a bit of excitement in this place before, but nothing is ever going to happen here again and you may as well make up your mind to it. Think of London, Aggie!’

And Agatha thought of London and thought of how odd and alien she felt now on her infrequent visits – London, which had once been the centre of her universe.

‘I’m happy here,’ she said defiantly. ‘All right, I’ve let myself go a tiny bit, but I’ll be back on form soon enough.’

‘But Wilson’s prepared to offer you eighty-five thousand a year, for starters.’

Agatha’s eyes narrowed. ‘Wait a bit. You and Wilson seem to have discussed this thoroughly, and knowing what a weak little creep you are, Roy, you probably said, “Leave it to me. I’ll nip down there for the weekend and get the old girl to come around.” You probably bragged as well. “Oh, Aggie and I are like *that*. She’d do anything for me.”’

This was so nearly exactly what Roy had said that he blushed under his spots and then became furious. ‘No, it’s not at all what happened,’ he screeched. ‘The trouble with you, Aggie, is that you wouldn’t know a real friend if you met one in your soup. I’m sick of this, sick of this. I’m going up to shave and get packed.’

‘Do that,’ Agatha shouted after him, ‘but watch your spots. In fact, to help you on your way, I’ll run you into Oxford!’

An hour later, they set off together on the Oxford road, Agatha driving in a bitter silence. Her stomach wasn’t rumbling, it was letting out moans. She hated Roy, she hated Carsely, she hated James Lacey, she hated the whole of the Carsely Ladies’ Society, she hated Mrs Bloxby . . .

She was driving along the A40 as that last name in the catalogue came into her mind. She swerved off the road and parked outside a restaurant.

‘So what are we doing here?’ demanded Roy, speaking for the first time since they had left the village.

‘I don’t know about you, but I am going to eat one great big hamburger smothered in ketchup,’ said Agatha. ‘You can watch me or join me, I don’t care.’

Roy followed her into the restaurant and then watched moodily as she ordered coffee and a ‘giant’ hamburger and ‘giant’ French fries. Then, in a tight, squeaky voice, he said to the waitress, ‘The same for me.’

When the food arrived, they ate their way stolidly through it. Then Agatha imperiously summoned the waitress. ‘Same again,’ she said.

‘Same again,’ said Roy, through a sudden fit of the giggles.

‘Sorry I was so bitchy,’ said Agatha. ‘Can’t stand diets.’

‘That’s all right, Aggie,’ said Roy. ‘Can be a bit of a bitch myself.’

‘And thank Wilson for his offer and tell him I’ll think about it. And –’ Agatha leaned back and dabbed at her greasy mouth and gave a small burp – ‘tell him I would do it for you if I did it for anyone.’

‘Thanks, Aggie.’

‘Furthermore, I’ll run you all the way to London if you’ll join me in ordering a large amount of chocolate cake with chocolate sauce and ice cream.’

‘You’re on.’

When they left the diner they were laughing and giggling as if they had been drinking instead of eating. They sang all the way to London and told jokes until Agatha dropped Roy outside his Chelsea flat.

‘Why not stay the night?’ said Roy.

‘No, I’ve got my cats to feed. Must get home.’

‘Well, your spots have gone.’

‘So they have.’ Agatha peered in the driving mirror. ‘Nothing’s better for the skin than a greasy hamburger.’

She felt quite happy when she reached Carsely again. She would attend the Carsely Ladies’ Society meeting that evening at the vicarage. When she walked into the kitchen and saw bowls piled high with fruit, she gave a shudder. There would be sandwiches and fruit cake and perhaps one of Miss Simms’s chocolate cakes and she intended to eat as much as she could. Her figure could wait.

It was only when she was seated in the vicarage and reaching out for the first ham sandwich that she realized she had felt no desire to stay in London. Her cleaner had the key to the cottage and would gladly have fed the cats if Agatha had decided to stay in town for the night. Changed days, thought Agatha, where tea and sandwiches at the vicarage took precedence over anything London had to offer.

And then Mary Fortune walked into the room, borne forward on a cloud of French perfume. She was slim but curvaceous in tailored trousers, silk blouse and jacket. All green. She never seemed to wear any other colour.

Agatha, her mouth full of sandwich, was dismally aware of the tightness of the skirt she was wearing. As she looked at Mary, she felt herself becoming fatter and fatter. Mary was carrying a cake she had baked and the women were exclaiming in delight. Caraway cake! How clever! Thought no one still remembered how to bake one. Mary beamed all round as she accepted their plaudits. She saw an empty seat next to Agatha and came and sat down next to her.

‘I’m glad you are joining the horticultural society,’ said Mary with a charming smile.

‘I’ve ordered a greenhouse,’ said Agatha. ‘Going to plant my own stuff this year.’

‘I’ll be glad to give you any cuttings you want,’ said Mary.

Reflecting that she wouldn’t have the faintest idea what to do with a cutting, Agatha mumbled thanks. Mary was obviously making a determined effort to please, and something in the new Agatha Raisin that was capable of reaching out to any offered warmth like a frost-bitten plant towards the sun, responded gradually with equal warmth. Agatha found herself inviting Mary round for coffee the following morning.

The meeting started with a discussion on catering. Soon after the annual horticultural show, the gardens of Carsely were open to the public to raise money for charity. The Ladies’ Society had been approached by the horticultural society, who wanted them to serve teas in the school hall. Agatha, who usually liked to be at the centre of things, kept her mouth shut. She decided at that moment that all her energies must be conserved for *her* garden. People would flock to see it and it would glow with colour and outshine James Lacey’s next door. In fact, it would outshine every other garden in the village. She could almost see James’s face glowing with admiration.

The next morning, Agatha remembered her invitation to Mary. She decided not to bother dressing up. She put on a comfortable but baggy skirt with a loose blouse over it.

But the minute Mary arrived, Agatha wished she had put in some work on her appearance. Mary was wearing a green wool dress which clung to her figure, a figure which had bumps only in the right places. Over it she wore a loose coat of greenish tweed, and despite the coldness of the day outside, Mary was wearing very high-heeled green leather sandals and sheer stockings.

Mary slung off her coat, which she had been wearing loose around her shoulders, and dropped it on a chair. ‘What a charming place you have, Mrs Raisin,’ she said, looking around. ‘I am glad of this opportunity to get to know each other better. Carsely is very pleasant, but people here do not travel much. In fact, for most of them a trip to the market in Moreton is a great adventure.’

‘I believe you spent some time in America,’ said Agatha, for the first time not wanting to be classed as different from the other village women.

‘Yes, New York.’

Agatha had a vague idea that California was the home of the face-lift but decided that they probably had plenty of cosmetic surgeons in New York. There was a plastic look about Mary’s face. Still, it could be her, Agatha’s, jealousy prompting her to believe it was the result of a face-lift.

‘I’ll just get the coffee,’ said Agatha and then her doorbell rang.

She went and opened it and found James Lacey standing on the step. Her first thought was that he had seen Mary going into her house and that was the

reason for the call. 'Come in,' she said bleakly, 'Mary's here,' and turned away immediately and so missed the slightly hunted look in his eyes. In the kitchen, Agatha piled coffee-cups and warmed-up Danish pastries, plates and napkins on to a tray and decided to give up on James Lacey entirely. But she still had a nagging longing to escape upstairs and put on something more glamorous.

James looked up as Agatha came into the room and courteously rose to his feet and took the tray from her and set it on the table. For some reason there was an awkward silence. Agatha wondered what they had been talking about in the brief time she had been out of the room. The fire crackled, the china clinked as she arranged spoons on saucers, and from outside a starling gave out the long descending, sorrowful note of winter.

'I can't stay very long,' said James. 'Just dropped by to see how you were.'

'My morning for callers,' said Agatha as the doorbell went again.

When she opened it, she saw with surprise and delight that her visitor was Detective Sergeant Bill Wong. 'Heard through the grapevine you were back,' he said cheerfully. 'May I come in?'

'Of course,' said Agatha, longing to give the young man a hug but feeling uncharacteristically shy. 'I've got James here and a newcomer, Mary Fortune.'

Mary looked up as Bill Wong came in. She saw a small, chubby man with an oriental cast of features and very shrewd eyes.

Agatha went to get another cup and Bill followed her into the kitchen. 'Competition, Agatha?' he asked gently.

They had come to know each other very well during what Agatha thought of as her 'cases', but she felt that last remark had been going too far.

'I don't know what you mean,' she said huffily.

'Oh, yes, you do,' said Bill, taking a cup from her. 'You'll be getting a face-lift yourself soon.'

Agatha grinned at him. 'And I'd nearly forgotten how much I like you.'

Somehow Bill's very presence made her face Mary and James with equanimity. She introduced Bill properly to Mary and then asked him eagerly about what he was working on.

'The usual round of things,' said Bill. 'You haven't been around for a while, Agatha, so no one has been getting themselves murdered. But there have been terrible amounts of burglaries in the villages. They come down the motorways from Birmingham and London, finding the villages an easy target because people here don't go in so much for security and burglar alarms, and a lot of them still leave their cars unlocked and their doors open. You're well protected here, Agatha. Very sensible of you to get that alarm system in.'

'Perhaps we should all follow Agatha's example,' said James.

Mary gave a little laugh. 'Some of us are not made of money. I think I will

continue to trust human nature.'

'I don't think Agatha here is made of money either,' said Bill sharply, 'and considering the reason that she got the system in was because her life was under threat, I think that remark of yours was uncalled for.'

It was obvious to James that Mary was not used to being pulled up for one of her 'little remarks'. Then he realized with surprise that Mary quite often said things which could easily be classed as bitchy. He began to feel he had made a bit of a fool of himself over Mary.

Mary turned slightly pink and said quickly, 'I didn't mean *Agatha*. How could you think such a thing! You didn't think I meant you, did you, Agatha?'

'Yes, I did,' said Agatha.

Mary spread her well-manicured hands in a deprecatory gesture. 'What more can I say? I'm sorry, sorry, *sorry*.'

'You're forgiven,' said Agatha gruffly.

'When is your greenhouse arriving?' asked Mary.

'Today. Any minute now.'

Bill's narrow eyes filled with humour as he looked at Agatha. 'Never tell me you're going in for serious gardening?'

'Might try my hand. I've joined the horticultural society.'

Bill raised his hands in mock horror. 'Don't tell me someone is going to be murdered. Don't tell me you will be going in for any competitions.'

'Why not?' asked Mary in surprise. 'That's part of the fun. We have the annual show and it's a very friendly affair, I gather.'

'You haven't had Agatha in the society before,' said Bill.

'How's your book coming along?' Agatha had turned to James, feeling that if Bill went on he might reveal how she had once cheated in the village baking competition.

'Slowly,' said James. 'I try to knuckle down to it and all the while I'm praying for the phone to ring or someone to call to distract me. Are you going to use the greenhouse right away, Agatha?'

'Yes, I'm going to get some seed boxes and plant some things.'

'Tell you what,' said James, 'I'll go to the nursery with you and help you to choose something.'

Agatha brightened but Mary said, 'We'll *all* go.'

'Let me know, anyway.' James got to his feet.

'I'd best be going as well.' Mary picked up her coat. 'Lovely coffee. Probably see you later at the Red Lion. Come along, James.'

James immediately felt like sitting down again, but he went off with Mary. Agatha slammed the door behind them with unnecessary force and went back to join Bill.

'Handsome couple,' commented Bill maliciously.

'Drink your coffee,' said Agatha sourly.

‘I’m teasing you. He actually doesn’t like her.’

‘But I gather they’ve been an item!’

‘They might have been. But not any more. Take things easy, Agatha. Relax. If you behave in a quiet, friendly way to him, he’ll come around.’

‘I’ve decided I’m not interested any more. I mean, if he fancied someone like Mary Fortune, I don’t think I want to know.’

Bill shook his head. ‘You don’t know much about him. There’s your doorbell again.’

Agatha ran to the door. Perhaps he had come back. But it was the men with the greenhouse.

Bill took his leave with promises to return and left Agatha with the workmen.

By the end of that day a small new greenhouse glittered at the end of Agatha’s garden. She restrained an impulse to rush next door to ask James to come with her to a nursery the following day. He might just remind her that Mary wanted to come along as well.

So instead she went to the Red Lion. It was one of these odd evenings when the pub was thin of company. She talked to a few of the locals, her eyes always straying to the door, waiting for the tall figure of James Lacey to appear.

She made her way home finally, slightly tipsy, and went disconsolately to bed.

The following day she felt bloated, old and downright plain. She sadly took herself off to a local nursery to ask their advice and returned home with packets of seeds, seed trays and instructions which she had written down. She worked busily, planting trays of chrysanthemum, Coltness Mixture and Rigoletto. Then she planted trays of *Arctotis hybrida*, or African daisy. By evening she had finished her work with trays of hibiscus, a variety called Disco Belle. The hibiscus and the chrysanthemums were supposed to be sown in February and planted out in May, but she had been told to sow the African daisies in March. But, thought Agatha, the work was so soothing and it was nearly the end of February anyway. All of them would then be planted out in May.

Next door, James could see Agatha bent over her work in the greenhouse. He felt disappointed that she had not asked for his help.



## Chapter Three

As a reluctant spring crept over the Cotswolds, Agatha's mind often turned to Wilson's offer of a job. At last he phoned her himself and she told him that she might be ready to start work in the autumn, because by the autumn the gardening days would be over. Mary had become a friend, despite Agatha's initial reluctance. She was always charming, always ready to help, and her close relationship with James Lacey appeared to be at an end.

Daffodils shone in the gardens of the village, and then came the cascades of wisteria and heavy lilac blossoms. It was such a miserable spring that it seemed incredible that anything could blossom at all in the slashing rain and gusts of chilly wind. Agatha intended to plant out her seedlings on the first of May. She had bought more trays of seedlings from the nursery and they lay alongside the 'home-grown' products in her greenhouse waiting for the big day.

She had promised Mrs Bloxby to help at the tombola stand on May Monday, which was when all the village celebrations were to take place. Sunday was to be May the first.

It was on Friday, the twenty-ninth of April, that James decided he had been too hard on Agatha. She had in the past made him countless cups of coffee and brought him cakes. They had shared many adventures together. It nagged at his mind that he had taken Mary Fortune out for several dinners while Agatha had been away, and yet he had never asked Agatha out. He had at one time, he admitted, thought that Agatha was keen on him and he had shied away from the thought. But the woman had been all that was normal. In fact, she had never called on him.

So on Friday morning he went and rang her doorbell and asked a flustered Agatha – flustered because she was still in her dressing-gown – out to dinner at a new restaurant in Moreton, the Game Bird.

Gardening forgotten for once, Agatha passed the day in a daze of preparation, finding to her delight that gardening, along with a moderate diet, definitely had its compensations, for all her dresses now fitted her beautifully. She winced at the sight of a green dress. Definitely not green. Mary never wore anything else. She wondered vaguely about the mentality of a woman who always wore one colour. She took herself off to Oxford and got her hair

cut and shaped. She bought new cosmetics. She bought new high heels and then, when she returned from Oxford, realized she had only left herself an hour to get ready, and she had originally planned to take two hours beautifying herself.

The doorbell rang just as she had finished. Thinking James was ten minutes early, she went to answer it. Mary stood there wearing the inevitable green; green blouse, green jacket, green slacks, green leather high-heeled sandals. She blinked a little at the sight of the new Agatha Raisin in little black dress, gold jewellery, and with her short brown hair gleaming in the light over the door.

‘Coming to the pub?’ asked Mary.

‘Can’t,’ said Agatha cheerfully. ‘James is taking me out for dinner.’

Mary’s blue eyes went quite blank and then she said with a little laugh. ‘Tomorrow then?’

‘I’ll meet you there at seven,’ said Agatha. Mary waited, but no, Agatha was not going to spoil this golden meeting by inviting Mary in and risking having Mary include herself in the invitation when James arrived. ‘See you,’ said Agatha brightly and slammed the door.

She then waited in the hall in a frenzy of impatience. What if Mary should now call on James? What if they both came back together? What if James said, ‘Mary’s going to join us’? What if . . . ?

The doorbell rang, making her jump. Crossing the fingers of one hand, she opened the door with the other and let out a sigh of relief to see James there on his own, wearing a well-cut dark suit and looking heart-wrenchingly handsome.

‘Whose car are we taking?’ asked Agatha. ‘Which one of us is going to do without drink?’

‘Neither,’ he said with a smile. He looked down the lane. ‘Our taxi is just arriving.’

Agatha, made shy by happiness, sat very upright in the back seat of the taxi with James. Mrs Mason stopped on the corner and looked curiously at them as she passed and then made her way to the Red Lion. By midnight, there would be very few people in Carsely who did not know that James Lacey had driven off with Agatha Raisin in a taxi.

Agatha, although she was slowly coming to appreciate good food and yet still was quite happy with junk, nonetheless had a sharp eye for a rip-off and her heart sank a little as they entered the elegant country-house atmosphere of the Game Bird. And yet all was calm and soothing. They had a drink in the small bar, seated in chintz-covered armchairs before a roaring log fire. Perhaps, thought Agatha, it was because the tablecloths in the dining-room were pink, as were the napkins. There was always something suspicious about restaurants which went in for pink tablecloths.

When they sat down at the table, huge menus were handed to them, the kind that are handwritten as if by a doctor, the writing is so nearly indecipherable.

It was very expensive and she blinked at the prices. But she was very hungry after her weeks of dieting and gardening – no fruit diet, just eating less – and decided to splash out. She ordered bouillabaisse, followed by the ‘venison special’, despite James’s murmur that April might not be a good time to order venison.

‘You forget,’ said Agatha, ‘that there is a lot of farm venison around these days.’

They talked about people in the village and James said he, too, would be planting out his seedlings. The bouillabaisse arrived. But it was nothing more than a rather thin fish bisque – no bits of seafood – and served only with one sliver of toast melba, and the soup was served in a very small bowl.

James had a tiny portion of pâté, which was beautifully arranged on a small plate.

Determined to be good and not to make a fuss, Agatha drank her soup. She was still hungry when she had finished but then there was the venison to look forward to. The wine, although French vintage, and claiming to be Montrechat, tasted even to Agatha’s untutored palate thin and vinegary.

But then her venison arrived. It was a small piece surrounded by carefully sculptured vegetables and covered in a cranberry sauce. No vulgar fattening potatoes. ‘That looks good,’ said James heartily, a shade too heartily. He had ordered duck in orange sauce.

Agatha attacked her venison. One cut, one mouthful proved her worst fears. Never had she seen a piece of meat with so much gristle. Her stomach let out a baffled rumble of disappointment.

She cracked.

Agatha imperiously summoned the head waiter. ‘Yes, madam?’ He stooped over the table.

‘Can you tell me,’ said Agatha in a thin voice, ‘which part of the animal this comes from? Its hooves? Its knees? The bit between its eyes?’

‘Perhaps madam is not accustomed to venison?’

Deep down inside her, Agatha’s working-class soul flinched. Her temper snapped. ‘Don’t you dare patronize me,’ she said. ‘This is a lump of gristle. And while we’re on the subject, that bouillabaisse was a rip-off, too.’

‘Dear me,’ said an acidulous-looking woman with a strangled would-be upper-class voice from the table behind Agatha, ‘the tourist season is here again.’

Agatha whipped round. ‘Screw you,’ she said contemptuously. Then she turned her bearlike eyes back to the head waiter. ‘I’m telling you this stuff is crap.’

Her voice had been overloud. Everyone had stopped talking and was staring at her. She flushed red.

‘I don’t know about the venison,’ said James mildly, ‘but this duck is as tough as old boots and appears to have been microwaved.’

‘I will get the owner,’ intoned the head waiter.

‘I’m sorry, James,’ said Agatha miserably.

He leaned across the table and poked at Agatha’s venison experimentally with his fork. ‘You know, you’re right,’ he said. ‘It is a lump of gristle. And here, unless I am mistaken, comes the owner.’

A huge man bore down on their table. He had a large body and a surprisingly small head. ‘I know your sort,’ he said in a thick Italian accent. ‘Get outta here. You don’t wanna pay. So don’t pay.’

‘We do not mind paying,’ said James stiffly, ‘just so long as you take this away and bring us some decent food.’

The owner let out a growl of rage like a Klingon at a death ritual and seized the four corners of the tablecloth. He gathered up the lot and strode off to the kitchen with it over his shoulder, wine and gravy dripping down his massive back.

‘Time to leave,’ said James. He stood up and helped Agatha out of her chair.

Covered in shame, Agatha went outside. It was a clear, starry night. Far above the Fosse they twinkled, cold and remote from the social anguish of one middle-aged lady who felt she had not only blown the evening but destroyed all her hopes of romance. And then she realized James was laughing. He was leaning against the wall of the restaurant, laughing and laughing. At last he looked down at her, his eyes glinting in the streetlights. ‘Oh, Agatha Raisin,’ he said, ‘I do love you when you’re angry.’

And suddenly the stars above whirled and the Fosse became a Parisian boulevard and the world was young again and Agatha Raisin was young and pretty and attractive.

She grinned and said, ‘Let’s go to the pub next door and get some beer and sandwiches.’

Most of the pubs in the Cotswolds are comfortable places, redolent of age and centuries of good living. The sandwiches were delicious and the beer was good. They talked comfortably like old friends, Agatha cautiously determined to be on her best behaviour.

‘We must do this again,’ he said after he had called for a taxi to take them home. ‘A very cheap evening after all.’

And Agatha, a few minutes later sitting beside him in the taxi, reflected that if one is in the grip of an obsession, nothing is ever enough. She had told herself at the beginning of the evening that all she wanted was for them to be friends again, but now she longed for him to put an arm around her shoulders

in the darkness of the taxi and kiss her. The longing was so intense that she felt her breathing becoming ragged and was half sad, half relieved when the short journey was over and he refused her offer of coffee, but said he would no doubt see her in the pub on the following day.

Agatha's heart sang as she went to bed. She fell asleep remembering every word and every look.

A visit from Mrs Mason the following day brought her down to earth. 'I saw you driving off with Mr Lacey in a taxi,' said Mrs Mason, settling her large bottom more comfortably in one of Agatha's armchairs.

'Yes, we had a nice evening,' said Agatha.

'Where did you go?'

'That new restaurant in Moreton, the Game Bird.'

'He entertains well when he takes the ladies out,' said Mrs Mason. 'I've heard it's expensive.'

'What do you mean, he entertains well?'

'I know he took Mrs Fortune to the Lygon in Broadway at least a couple of times and once to the Randolph in Oxford.'

Agatha felt bleak. What was one disastrous dinner compared to what appeared to be a chain of good and expensive dinners he had enjoyed with Mary Fortune? She imagined them together on a long drive to Oxford. All the glory of the previous evening was tarnished. Agatha also found to her surprise that she actually liked Mary. Mary had become a good friend. Perhaps the most graceful thing to do would be to give up trying. On the other hand, James had shown no particular interest in Mary of late.

With only half her mind on what Mrs Mason was saying, Mrs Mason having gone on to talk about parish matters, Agatha wrestled with the problem of whether to go to the Red Lion that evening or not. Perhaps she should give up this village life and return to work in London. She still had not said no to Wilson's offer. He had phoned her again and been most persuasive. But, she thought, looking at the motherly bulk of Mrs Mason, friends had not dropped round to her flat for a chat in London. In fact, she had had no friends at all.

After Mrs Mason left, she went out into her garden, which was cleared and ready for planting. It was a balmy day with big castles of white clouds floating over the Cotswold hills. Yes, she would go to the pub, but not to see James Lacey, just to meet people and have a chat.

But that evening she dressed with special care. She did not want to look *too* dressed up for a village pub and at last settled on a soft silk chiffon blouse of

deep red worn with a short straight black skirt and black suede shoes with a modest heel. She gave herself a temporary facelift with white of egg, very effective provided one did not smile too much, and strolled off in the direction of the pub. James's house had an empty look. He must be already there. With a feeling of going on-stage, she opened the pub door and went into the smoky low-ceilinged room. James was standing at the bar talking to Mr Bernard Spott, the man who headed the horticultural society. James hailed Agatha and bought her a gin and tonic. She had just taken her first sip and was looking for an inroad into the conversation about dahlias that James was having with Bernard when the pub door opened and Mary Fortune sailed in. Agatha had known the pangs of jealousy before but never anything as bad as this. She felt her face becoming stiff, as stiff as if she had just applied the white of egg.

Mary was wearing a short white jersey dress and gold jewellery. The dress clung to her excellent figure. It was the first time Agatha had seen her wear anything other than green. The skirt of the dress was very short, exposing Mary's long legs encased in tan stockings and ending in high-heeled strapped sandals. Her golden hair glowed in the light. Her eyes were very wide and very blue. She had never looked more magnificent and her entrance was greeted with a sudden appreciative silence. James, too, had fallen silent and was gazing at Mary in open admiration. Oh, jealousy as sour as bile engulfed Agatha. She felt old and diminished.

James found his voice. 'Mary,' he said warmly. 'What are you having?'

'Campari soda, darling.' Mary linked her hand over his arm and smiled at him in an intimate way that made Agatha want to strike her. Old Bernard was tugging at his tie and staring at her in rapture. 'What were you talking about?' asked Mary.

'Gardening,' said James.

'Tomorrow's my big day,' declared Agatha. 'I'm planting out my seedlings.'

'Oh, I wouldn't do that, Agatha,' exclaimed Mary. 'There's going to be a big frost on Sunday night. I'm leaving mine until the weather settles.'

Was it Agatha's soured imagination, or was this delivered with a certain, well, patronizing air?

'I didn't hear anything about frost,' she said mulishly.

Bernard Spott was a tall, thin man in his eighties, whose sparse grey hair was greased in strips over his scalp. He had a large beaky nose with which he looked down at whomever he was speaking to. He waggled an admonitory finger under Agatha's nose. 'Better listen to what Mary says. She's our expert.'

'Certainly is,' murmured James.

Agatha gave what she hoped was an enigmatic smile. The evening then proceeded to be a total disaster for her. If one has never had anything to do

with gardening before, then one has little to contribute to a conversation in which a bewildering set of Latin names fly back and forth. And so Agatha stood mostly silent, as the names came and went and mulch was discussed and other organic fertilizers. Mary held court and Agatha stood on the outskirts. At last, when she saw her cleaner, Doris Simpson, and her husband seated over in a corner of the bar, Agatha murmured an excuse and went to join them.

Doris did not help Agatha's burning jealousy by remarking, 'Mrs Fortune looks like one of them film stars tonight.'

Agatha turned the conversation away from Mary but all the while she talked of village matters she had half an ear tuned to the sound of James's frequent bursts of laughter.

Suddenly she couldn't bear it any more. She rose, said, 'Goodnight,' abruptly, and walked straight out of the pub, looking neither to right nor left.

Doris looked at her husband, her eyes shrewd behind her spectacles. 'The next murder done in this village,' she said, 'will be committed by our Agatha.'

Agatha stared up at the calm starlit sky as she walked home. The night air was balmy against her cheek. Frost, indeed. She was going to plant out her seedlings tomorrow and nothing was going to stop her!

The next day was sunny and warm, warm enough to wear a short-sleeved blouse, and Agatha hummed to herself as she planted out those tender green seedlings in well-weeded flowerbeds. She felt quiet and content. She felt she was getting on top of this gardening thing. That was the trouble about gardeners, they like to blast you with science, when it was all quite easy, really.

Before the light faded, she took a last look around the garden. She shivered in the sudden chill as the large red sun sank down behind the Cotswold hills. She glared up at the sky. There couldn't be frost, could there? Agatha, like most of the British public, swore that the meteorologists were often wrong, forgetting all the times they were right.

She stood there until the sun had disappeared, taking the light from the garden, bleaching the green from the plants. It was all so very still and quiet. A dog barked somewhere up on the fields above, its sudden noise intensifying the silence that followed.

Agatha shook her head like a baffled bull. It was nearly summer. By frost they had meant a little nip in the air, not that nasty white stuff which blanketed the Cotswolds in winter.

She went indoors, determined to watch some television and have an early night. She would set the alarm for six in the morning and would no doubt awake to a warm day.

When the alarm went off at six, shrill and imperative, she looked at it blearily, her first thought being that she had to get to the airport, which had been the case the last time she had set the alarm for six. Then memory came back. She threw back the duvet, went to the window, which overlooked the garden, took a deep breath and pulled back the curtains.

White! Everywhere. Thick white frost under the pale dawn sky. Her eyes fell slowly to the plants. Surely they would have survived. She would not fret. She would get back into bed and wait for the sun to rise and then everything would be all right. And, despite her worry, she did fall asleep and did not awake until nine. She determinedly avoided looking out of the window. She showered and dressed in the old skirt and blouse she used for gardening and then she went downstairs and marched out into the garden. The sun was blazing, the frost was melting, and it was melting to reveal each pathetic little shrivelled and blackened plant that she had so lovingly placed in the earth the day before.

She wanted someone to turn to for help. But who? She didn't want her failure spread all over the village. James certainly wouldn't tell anyone but he would tell her she ought to have listened to Mary, and Agatha felt she couldn't bear that.

And then she thought of Roy Silver. She went indoors and rang his London number.

Roy was off work because it was a bank holiday. He complained Agatha's call had dragged him out of bed.

'Listen,' snapped Agatha, cutting across his complaints. She told him about the frost and how she had refused to take advice. 'And now,' she wailed, 'I'll be damned as a failed gardener.'

'No, no, no, sweetie. It's no use going on like a sandwich short of a picnic. Cunning is what you need here. Low cunning. You've got used to simple village ways. Let me think. You know that nursery chain I handle?'

'Yes, yes. But I'm surrounded with nurseries down here.'

'Listen. Keep everyone out of your garden. Can that Lacey chap see into it from next door?'

'There's a hedge between us. He would need to hang out of the window and crane his neck.'

'Good. Now that account Wilson wants you to handle. If I can get you to promise you'll give him six months of your time, say, starting in September, I'll be down there with a truck of super-duper fencing.'



‘I’ve got fencing!’

‘You want the high non-see-through type. I’ll come with workmen. We’ll put it up all round the garden, and don’t let anyone out the back. Then, before the big day, I’ll come down with a load of fully grown exotica, stuff it in the good earth, and bingo! You’ll be the talk of the village.’

‘But what about Doris, my cleaner? She’ll find out.’

‘Swear her to secrecy, but no one else.’

‘I could do it,’ said Agatha doubtfully, ‘but six months working for Wilson . . .’

‘Do it. What’s six months?’

A lot when you get to my age, thought Agatha sadly after she had agreed to his plan and put down the phone.

She could not help feeling like a criminal. What did it all matter anyway? But she did so hope to score over Mary.

A ring at her doorbell made her jump guiltily. She opened it cautiously and saw Mrs Bloxby.

‘Did you sleep in?’ asked the vicar’s wife anxiously.

‘No,’ said Agatha. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘You’re supposed to be manning the tombola stand. Is one allowed to say “manning” these days? Does one say womaning or personing? Anyway, Mrs Mason and I have it all set up.’

‘Oh.’ Agatha blushed guiltily. ‘I had forgotten. I’ve got some men coming to put in new fencing.’

Mrs Bloxby looked surprised. ‘As I remember, there is a very good strong pine fence around your garden.’

‘Falling apart in bits,’ lied Agatha. She thought quickly. She could leave a note on the door for Roy saying she was at the tombola stand, and when he came along she could give him the keys. Not that he really needed them. The workmen could get to the back garden along the path at the side of the house.

‘Give me five minutes,’ she said. ‘I’ll follow you along.’

She wrote a note for Roy and pinned it to the door. The May festivities would take all day. On the other hand, if she could do a good sales pitch at the tombola stand, perhaps she could clear it quickly and then she would be free.

The one good thing, she thought as she made her way to the fair, which was taking up the length of the main street, blocked off to traffic for the day, was that practically everyone at the village would be working at or watching the festivities, and so there would be no one around to ask awkward questions about the fencing.

She took her place behind the table, which held a motley collection of prizes. Apart from a bottle of whisky and a bottle of wine presented by the Red Lion, the rest were odds and ends, a can of pilchards, for example, and a bottle of shampoo ‘for brunettes’.

Most of the crowd of locals and tourists were watching the schoolchildren dancing around the maypole. Agatha fretted until the dancing ended in the crowning of the May Queen, a little girl with a sweet old-fashioned face, and then she gave tongue. ‘Roll up! Roll up!’ she shouted. ‘Loads of prizes to be won. Tickets only twenty pee.’

Startled and then amused at such hustling in a quiet village, people began to gather round. Agatha had quickly slipped the tickets for the bottle of wine and the bottle of whisky into her pocket. She knew the sight of them, unwon, would spur the punters on.

‘Oh, you’ve won the can of pilchards,’ she said to elderly Mrs Boggle.

‘So what?’ grumbled Mrs Boggle. ‘I wanted the Scotch.’

‘Lovely for sandwiches, those pilchards,’ said Agatha cheerfully. ‘Try again.’

So Mrs Boggle reluctantly prised a twenty-pence piece out of an ancient purse and handed it over. She won again, this time the shampoo for brunettes. ‘This is a rip-off,’ said Mrs Boggle. ‘I’m grey-haired.’

‘Then that’ll turn you brown and make you look years younger,’ snapped Agatha. ‘Next!’

Mrs Boggle shuffled off. Agatha’s voice rose in pitch. ‘Roll up! Roll up! What have we here? A set of plastic egg-cups. Very useful. Come along. All in a good cause.’

‘Does she usually go on like that?’ Mary Fortune, over at the home-made cake stall, asked Mrs Bloxby.

‘Mrs Raisin is an excellent saleswoman,’ said Mrs Bloxby, ‘and uses her talents to help the village.’

Despite Agatha’s efforts, the day crawled on. Just as she got a crowd of people around the tombola stand, another diversion, such as dancing by the morris men, would take them all away again.

It was late afternoon when Roy popped up at Agatha’s elbow. ‘You’d better come home,’ he said. ‘I’ve got the workmen there and they need to put a padlocked gate on that path to the back garden. See, I thought of everything. And the fencing is sectioned. On the big day they’ll take the top section off.’

‘Oh, Roy, look, I’ll give you the keys. Go along and take care of everything. I can’t move until I’ve shifted this lot.’

‘No, you’ve got to be there yourself.’

‘Here . . .’ Agatha slipped him a twenty-pound note. ‘Buy all the tickets and let me out of here.’

She quickly slipped the tickets for the whisky and the wine back into the box.

‘Damn, I have to open all these,’ grumbled Roy, opening ticket after ticket. ‘Really, Aggie, plastic egg-cups, a tea-cosy, and a scarf in magenta and sulphur-yellow.’

Finally, before the amused eyes of the spectators, Roy cleared the table and gloomily piled the contents into the box which had held the tickets. Agatha gave the money to a startled Mrs Bloxby, who said, 'That was quick. And everything gone! A lot of that stuff has turned up year in and year out.'

'Before we go, Aggie,' said Roy, leading her back to the now empty tombola table, 'sign here, or fence and workmen go right back to London.'

He spread a contract out on the table which bound Agatha to Pedmans for six months starting on the first of October.

She hesitated. She could pay Roy for his time and trouble and send the workmen away. But at that moment she heard James's laugh behind her and turned around. He was chatting to Mary and he had already bought two cakes. Mary was wearing a green-and-white-checked shirt with dark green trousers. Her bright hair gleamed in the sunlight.

Agatha turned away and scrawled her signature on the contract, which Roy seized and stuffed in his pocket. 'Give that box of stuff back to Mrs Bloxby,' said Agatha. 'I don't suppose you want any of it apart from the booze.'

'Not a bit of it. It'll come in handy for Christmas presents. I've got a little staff now.'

'You are conscienceless,' said Agatha. 'When you worked for me, what would you have said if I had given you a set of plastic egg-cups for Christmas?'

'Times are hard.' Roy picked up the box of junk and held it close. 'Let's go.'

'There's that young friend of Agatha's again,' said James to Mary, turning to watch them as they walked away.

Mary laughed. 'Quite a goer is our Agatha.'

'What do you mean by that?' James's face was stiff.

'Oh, come on, James. Get real. I think she's having a little fling.'

'Rubbish. Look, I'd better be getting along.'

James marched off but got waylaid by the vicar, who explained he had found a diary in the vicarage which had been kept by one of the villagers during the Napoleonic wars. Agatha temporarily forgotten, James went along to the vicarage in high excitement. Once there, he pored over the diary with a flat feeling of disappointment. The wars may have been raging across Europe, but all this villager had been interested in was the price of everything from wheat to turnips. It was dreary, it was boring, and it was of no use whatsoever, particularly as the prices of everything in England during that period had already been well documented. Still, he thanked the vicar and said he would take it home and study it further.

As he went into his own front garden, he saw a truck with workmen and that Roy Silver driving off from Agatha's. He wondered for the first time that day if Agatha had been stupid enough to plant out her seedlings. He ran

upstairs, opened his bedroom window and leaned out.

He blinked. A great high cedarwood fence had been erected around Agatha's garden. What on earth was she doing? That fence was so high it would surely block out any sunlight. Curiosity got the better of him and he went next door and rang her bell.

Agatha answered the door and looked flustered when she saw him.

'That new fence you've got,' said James, 'will block out all sunlight. What are you doing?'

'It's a surprise,' said Agatha. 'You'll see on Open Day. Coffee?'

'Yes, please.' He followed her into the kitchen. The blind was down over the kitchen window, so he could not see the garden.

'Did you plant out your seedlings?' he asked.

'No, do it tomorrow,' said Agatha gruffly.

'That's an enormous fence you've got at the back. Are you sure the sun is going to reach your plants?'

'Oh, yes, don't let's talk about gardening. I'm bored with the subject.'

'Is that why you left the pub without saying goodbye?'

Agatha opened her mouth to say crossly that she did not think her going would be noticed, particularly by him, but a new wisdom made her say instead, 'I just remembered I had forgotten to feed the cats. By the way, I'll be leaving the village for a bit in the autumn.'

'Why?'

'Pedmans, that firm I sold out to, have coaxed me back for six months. May as well make some money.'

He looked surprised. 'I thought you had put all that life behind you.' His eyes sparkled. 'I know what it is. There isn't any gory murder to keep you occupied.'

'I'm used to being busy, and there's not much for me here.'

There was something a trifle lost and wistful at the back of Agatha's small eyes which made him say, 'That was rather a disastrous dinner we had. What about another one? There's a new restaurant just off the Evesham road, just outside Evesham. What about trying it?'

The old Agatha would have gushed. The new Agatha said quietly, 'That would be nice. When?'

'What about tonight?'

'Lovely.'

'Good. I'll call for you at seven. I've got to go now. I promised to see Mary about something.'

But the fact that he was leaving to see Mary could not spoil Agatha's sunny mood for the rest of the day. By evening, she was in a high state of excitement. When the phone rang at ten minutes to seven, she looked at it in irritation and then decided not to answer it. Nothing was going to stop her

walking out of that door with James at seven. The phone rang for quite a long time and then fell silent. Seven came and went while she sat and fidgeted, handbag on her lap.

Then the doorbell went, and with a little sigh of relief, she went to answer it. James Lacey stood there. His face was pale and his eyes glittered feverishly.

‘I’m sorry, Agatha,’ he said. ‘I’ll need to cancel our dinner. I’ve been so ill. I’ve been to the doctor and he is treating me for food poisoning.’

‘Perhaps if you had something to eat you would feel better?’ asked Agatha, willing him to recover.

‘No, no. I just want to go to bed. I feel like hell. Another time.’ And he went off.

Agatha retreated indoors and sat down feeling lost and empty. She had become friends with Mary but now she almost hated her. Mary had entertained James earlier. She had probably slipped him something. Her common sense tried to tell her she was being silly, but her emotions were in a turmoil and she felt she could not bear to have anything to do with Mary again.

## Chapter Four

Despite Agatha's determination not to have anything to do with Mary, a village is a small place and one cannot ignore people the way one can in the city. She could not hold out against Mary's friendliness, and although James had not repeated his dinner invitation, Agatha felt she no longer had any grounds for silly jealousy.

And then a series of crimes happened, which was to initially draw the villagers together and then drive them apart, as suspicion and fear crept into their normally quiet lives.

Mrs Mason found that her prize dahlias had been uprooted and mangled and stamped into the ground. Mrs Bloxby's roses had been poisoned by weedkiller, and most of James Lacey's flowers were no more. Some maniac had doused his garden with petrol and set it alight. And the crimes went on. A nasty hole was dug in Miss Simms's lawn. Even that old couple, the Boggles, had black paint sprayed on their white rosebush, turning all the roses black. Fred Griggs, the local policeman, tried to cope on his own, but as the list of incidents grew, the CID were called in from Mircester, and so Bill Wong was back at work in Carsely again.

At first, when the crimes against gardens had just started, the Red Lion did a roaring trade, as the customers gathered together to discuss the events, all deciding that hooligans from Birmingham had been descending on the village during the night and spitefully wrecking the gardens. Groups of villagers patrolled the streets at night armed with shotguns. There was a wartime feeling of a community working together against a common evil. It was Mrs Boggle, crouched over a pint in the Red Lion one evening, who administered the first blow to this cosy feeling. 'Reckon this would never have happened in the old days. In the old days we didn't have no newcomers.'

Her elderly voice had been loud. There was a sudden silence. Agatha, standing with Mary at the bar and hoping despite all her good resolutions that James Lacey would come in, felt an almost tangible chill creeping into the communal warmth. And then no one wanted to discuss the outrages with them. Not all at once, but gradually, people began to leave and Agatha and Mary were left alone at the bar.

'Oh, dear,' said Mary. 'That wretched old woman.'

The next day, Agatha had more to worry about. Bill Wong called, but not for coffee and a chat. 'I have to inspect everyone's gardens, Agatha,' he said apologetically. 'You know, to see if anyone's been using more weedkiller than they ought or got used cans of petrol stacked anywhere.'

'We're friends,' protested Agatha desperately. 'You know me. I wouldn't do anything like that!'

'But I'm an honest cop, Agatha, and you can't expect me to lie. Besides, what have you got to hide?'

'But –'

'Agatha!'

Miserably, Agatha led him through to the kitchen and unlocked the back door. Bill stared in amazement at the bare garden and then up at the high fence.

'What on earth are you doing?' he asked. 'I thought you were a member of the horticultural society.'

'Look, don't put this in your report, Bill. I planted out my seedlings and they were all killed by the frost. That friend of mine, Roy Silver, put a fence around the garden so that no one could see in. Then just before Open Day – you know, when the village gardens are open to the public – he was going to come down with a load of plants.'

'Cheating again? Led to disaster last time,' said Bill, referring to the time when Agatha had bought a quiche instead of baking it for a village competition and one of the judges had dropped dead of cowbane poisoning.

'There's no prize for Open Day,' said Agatha. 'I just wanted the garden to look pretty. And you're looking for weedkiller and things. You don't need to put any of this in your report.'

'No, so long as you don't have anything incriminating. But I thought you had grown out of this sort of behaviour.' Bill looked at her severely, and although he was only in his twenties he made Agatha feel like a guilty child.

'Don't moralize. Just get on with your search.'

'I'll look in the greenhouse because I can see there's nothing else in the garden.'

Bill searched the greenhouse and then came back. He snapped his notebook shut. 'That's all, then.'

'Stay for a coffee.'

'No, I don't think so. I'm disappointed in you, Agatha.'

'But I could help you find out who's been doing this.'

'Just keep out of it and leave it to the police.'

Bill marched through the house and let himself out by the front door without saying goodbye.

Sod him, thought Agatha, hurt and angry. I'll show him. I'll find out who's been doing this. Two murder cases he couldn't have solved without my help,

and this is all the thanks I get. A tear rolled down one cheek and she scrubbed it away with her sleeve.

The atmosphere in the village grew sourer as suspicion began to centre on Mary Fortune, of all people. Although Agatha and James Lacey were also incomers, for some reason Mary became the target, a fact that puzzled Agatha Raisin, for Mary had initially endeared herself to the villagers. The fact that Mary was a superb gardener and that *her* garden had not been touched added fuel to the suspicions. Doris Simpson, Agatha's excellent cleaner, had been sworn to secrecy about the fenced garden and Bill Wong had not said anything; still, suspicion should have centred on this incomer, who had a garden that nobody saw, yet it was Mary who was the target.

'I don't understand it,' said Mary plaintively one morning when she called on Agatha. 'After all I've done for this village!' And Agatha, despite her simmering jealousy of Mary, could not understand it either. And yet, when she went with Mary to the pub, the hostility towards Mary was evident. 'I'm sick of this,' said Mary. 'As soon as the horticultural show is over, I'm leaving.'

'Surely they won't be having one now,' said Agatha. 'It's not fair on the ones who have had their gardens destroyed.'

'Oh, all of them, even James, claim they have salvaged enough to at least put one bloom in for the show. What about you, Agatha? What are you submitting?'

'I won't bother,' said Agatha, thinking guiltily of her bare garden. She had been going to buy something and put it in as her own, but the memory of Bill Wong's disappointment in her still rankled.

There was a final crime just before the competition which was out of line with the rest. Mr Bernard Spott, the chairman of the horticultural society, that elderly and scholarly gentleman, had his magnificent goldfish poisoned. They were found floating belly-up in the garden pond, as dead as doornails.

As the show approached, the sourness in the village increased but then abated somewhat when it was announced that Mrs Bloxby was to be judge and present the prize for the best. No one could suspect Mrs Bloxby of being anything but fair.

Agatha invited Roy Silver down for the weekend. She did not want to go to the show without any support. James talked to her frequently and even called around for the occasional coffee, but he always seemed preoccupied and somewhat distant and never issued any more invitations to dinner.

Despite her good intentions, Agatha cracked before the show and drove to a nursery in Oxfordshire and bought a magnificent rosebush, almost blue roses, called Blue Moon. She did not even have to take it out of the pot because other contestants had potted their exhibits.

'You're learning, or getting back your old evil ways,' said Roy. 'Love it,



love it. You'll be a credit to Pedmans.'

And that made Agatha suddenly wish she had not decided to cheat. But old habits die hard and she forgot about her guilt as she walked along to the competition with Roy. The day was sunny and warm. 'Do you know,' she said, 'I think whoever was playing these nasty tricks was doing it to put other people out of the running. I've a feeling that when this show is over, the village will return to its normal calm.' She had told Roy about the attacks on the gardens.

The band was playing, the hall was full of villagers, and the air was heavy with the scent of flowers. There were also stands of home-made cakes and jam and the tea-room at the side of the hall was doing a brisk business. Roses of all kinds seemed to be the favourite flower. To Agatha's delight, the prize was to be a silver cup. It would look good on her mantelpiece.

Mrs Bloxby began the judging. She walked from exhibit to exhibit, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses on the end of her nose. She stopped before Agatha's and stood very silent for a moment. Then she looked directly at Agatha with her mild questioning eyes. To Agatha's horror, she felt herself beginning to blush all over. The blush started somewhere at her toes and worked its way up to her face in a great surging tide of red.

Roy suddenly muttered under his breath as Mrs Bloxby moved on and he leaned past Agatha and whipped something off the pot. 'What are you doing?' whispered Agatha.

'There was a little label there with the name of the nursery,' hissed Roy.

'Oh, God. Do you think Mrs Bloxby saw anything?'

'Probably not. But you're slipping, dearie. The crafty old Aggie would never have done anything stupid like that.'

'Let's get a cup of tea,' said Agatha. 'It's too agonizing waiting for a decision.'

In the tea-room, James and Mary were sitting side by side. They saw Agatha and Roy and called them over.

'At least nothing awful has happened,' said Agatha as she sat down and Roy went up to the counter to buy them both tea. 'I almost expected some maniac with a flame-thrower to burst into the hall.'

'That little Chink friend of yours has been poking around all our gardens,' said Mary languidly.

Agatha looked at her in irritation. 'I sometimes can't make you out, Mary,' she said. 'You're as nice as anything and then you come out with some rather nasty remark. My friend, Bill Wong, is half Chinese. His mother is from Evesham. I do not like hearing anyone call him a little Chink.'

Mary laughed. 'I think you're sweet on him, Agatha. I think I've found the Chink in your armour.' Her glance moved to the approaching Roy. 'You do like them young.'

‘Don’t bitch me, Mary,’ said Agatha, her eyes narrowing. ‘I’ve been bitched by experts.’

There was a silence as Roy set down the teacups. His eyes darted from one to the other. ‘Well, aren’t we the jolly party,’ he said. ‘Who do you think is going to win?’

‘I’m fed up with the whole thing,’ said James Lacey, suddenly angry. ‘This used to be one of the best villages in Gloucestershire, the friendliest. Now it’s all spoilt!’ He left abruptly, slamming the door behind him.

‘What was all that about?’ asked Mary, her blue eyes at their widest.

‘You didn’t help the general atmosphere by your remarks,’ retorted Agatha.

Mary suddenly smiled, a warm smile. ‘I’m sorry, Agatha. You’re right. I was bitchy. I’m just knocked off beam by all the hostility towards me in this village. It’s just so unfair.’

‘Why you?’ asked Roy.

‘I’m an incomer.’

‘So’s Aggie here.’

‘Well, they’ve singled me out as the mad garden destroyer. After all I’ve done!’

‘They’ll get over it,’ said Agatha.

‘I don’t think I’ll wait around to see it happen.’ Mary got to her feet. ‘I’d better go and make my peace with James.’

‘She a friend of yours?’ asked Roy when Mary had left.

‘Yes, I suppose she is. She was a bit bitchy while you were getting the tea, but I suppose the strain is getting to her.’

‘She looks like megabitch-woman to me,’ said Roy. ‘You’re slipping, Aggie. In London, you would have given old plastic face a wide berth.’

But in London, thought Agatha, all those years in London, I didn’t know how to make friends. My work was my friend. So I try to make the best of people.

‘It’s different in a village,’ she said. ‘It’s not like London, when you don’t even know your neighbours.’ A London, she thought, suddenly and bleakly, that she would be returning to all too soon. Would James miss her? Probably wouldn’t notice she had gone.

The microphone in the hall gave that preparatory whine that it always seems to make at amateur functions, and then Mrs Bloxby’s voice could be heard announcing that she was about to name the prizewinner.

Agatha and Roy hurried into the hall and joined the crowd standing in front of the platform.

Mrs Bloxby picked up the silver cup. I wonder if they will engrave it for me, thought Agatha, or whether I have to get it done myself.

‘The first prize,’ said Mrs Bloxby, ‘goes to . . .’

I should have prepared a little speech, thought Agatha.

‘. . . Mr Bernard Spott for his roses. Come up, Mr Spott.’

Probably poisoned his goldfish himself to make him look innocent, Agatha decided in a sudden rush of bile. Probably damaged all those other gardens to put everyone else out of the running.

But as elderly Mr Spott, his face pink with gratification, went up to the platform, her new better nature took over and she began to applaud, and everyone else followed suit.

Mr Spott took a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and went up to the microphone.

‘Friends,’ he began, and then droned on about how grateful he was.

‘The old bugger had a speech prepared,’ marvelled Roy.

Mr Spott went on for fifteen minutes, until Mrs Bloxby coughed and pointed to her watch.

‘And the second prize,’ said Mrs Bloxby, ‘is to Mr James Lacey for his delphiniums.’

‘I thought someone executed the scorched-earth policy on his garden,’ said Roy. ‘Maybe he bought something, only *he* remembered to take the name of the nursery off the pot.’

‘Shhh!’ admonished Agatha. Surely she would get third prize.

‘And the third prize goes to Miss Simms for her Busy Lizzies.’

‘Rats,’ said Agatha. At least neither James nor Miss Simms felt obliged to make speeches.

‘That’s that,’ said Roy. ‘Fun over. Let’s go somewhere for a late lunch.’

‘Perhaps James might come to lunch with us?’ suggested Agatha.

‘Get real, Aggie,’ said Roy brutally. ‘He’s not interested in you.’

Agatha felt old and depressed as she followed Roy out of the hall. Her life stretched before her one long and dusty road to the grave. Nothing would ever happen again to make her happy or excited or interested. She looked back at the villagers and felt like an outsider, a stranger, belonging nowhere except perhaps to the Birmingham slum from which she had sprung. And then Miss Simms, flushed and excited, caught up with her. ‘You’ve got a special ticket on your roses, Mrs Raisin.’

Surprised, Agatha turned back. There was a little red card in front of her rosebush. Excited, she bent down and read the commendation. ‘Mrs Agatha Raisin, special commendation for ingenuity.’

Roy read it at the same time. ‘Oh, wicked Mrs Bloxby, Aggie. Come away. A plate of steak-and-kidney pie will make you feel lots better.’

‘You know, Roy,’ said Agatha as she drove him into Oxford to catch the train on Sunday evening, ‘I think you should forget this scam about bringing all those plants down. Just do me a favour and send the workmen back to take

the top part of the fence off. I'll buy some plants from a nursery myself and let everyone see me planting them and I won't open my garden to the public.'

'Oh, come on. Just because you were stupid enough to leave that nursery label on the pot doesn't mean you're going to fail. I'll be down myself with the truck at two in the morning. Bingo, instant garden. You know yourself nothing moves in Carsely during the night. Besides, I've got more news for you. Pedmans is paying for the lot.'

'Why?'

'It's instead of a golden hello.'

'You mean that little ferret, Wilson, knows I am going to cheat?'

'Of course not. As far as he is concerned, you just want to beautify your garden. He's mad keen to get you, Aggie. And the stuff is going to be magnificent.'

Agatha felt herself weaken. Nothing could go wrong. And Mrs Bloxby might be forced to think she had made a mistake. She did not want to lose respect in the eyes of Mrs Bloxby.

'Oh, all right,' she said. 'But you'd better be there on the great day to help me out.'

The next night found her among a large crowd in the Red Lion. It was the publican's, John Fletcher's, birthday, and he was dispensing free drinks all round. With a lift of the heart, Agatha saw James and went to join him. 'I didn't know it was John's birthday,' she said guiltily, eyeing the pile of presents on the bar. 'Why didn't anyone tell me?'

'They probably thought you knew. You were here last year, after all.'

'Perhaps I should go home and see if I have anything in the house I can give him,' said Agatha, yet not wanting to leave James's side. She could hardly believe that Mary was not there to monopolize his attention, which she did so well.

'Congratulations on your prize,' she said. 'I didn't think there was anything left in your back garden after the attack on it.'

'Well, you can hardly see into it now,' he said. 'Not with that great fence you've got around it. Why such a high fence?'

'I'm keeping my plants sheltered.'

He looked puzzled. 'I don't know how you even managed to grow those roses. That must be what Mrs Bloxby meant by ingenuity.'

Agatha did not normally like her conversations with James to be interrupted, but she looked up in relief as Mr Galloway, a large Scotsman who ran a garage in a neighbouring village, leaned over and said, 'I was talking to Fred Griggs and he says they still don't have a clue who was responsible for wrecking those gardens. I thought you would have tracked down the culprit

by now, Mrs Raisin.’

‘I’ll maybe get to work on it.’ Agatha preened a little. ‘The police don’t seem to be doing much of a job.’

‘Where’s Mary?’ asked James.

Mr Galloway scratched his thatch of hair. ‘I dunno,’ he said. ‘Maybe herself is prettifying to make an appearance.’

‘It is odd, all the same,’ pursued James to Agatha’s distress. ‘I’m unhappy about this stupid dislike for Mary. To think she had anything to do with wrecking gardens is madness.’

‘Not as if *she* won any prizes,’ commented Agatha maliciously.

‘That was a strange thing,’ said Mr Galloway. ‘We all thought herself would take the first with those dahlias of hers.’

‘I thought no one wanted her to win,’ said James.

‘Aye, but Mrs Bloxby was doing the judging and Mrs Bloxby woundnae be fashed by gossip.’

‘Another drink, James? Mr Galloway?’ Agatha felt they had talked about Mary for long enough.

But just as Mr Galloway was beginning to say, ‘That’s very kind of you,’ James rose to his feet. ‘I think I’ll walk up to Mary’s cottage and see if she’s coming.’

Agatha rose as well. ‘I’ll go with you. Get you a drink when I return, Mr Galloway.’

As they walked together through the still-balmy summer night, Agatha could not help wishing they were walking out together and not going to visit some blonde. The gossip in the village relayed by Doris Simpson was that Mary and James were only casual friends and that he did not visit her cottage or take her out for dinner any more. Agatha began to wonder what she really knew of Mary. Jealousy had coloured her opinion, clouded her judgement. So, she had decided, let’s look at Mary objectively. Take jealous thoughts away, and Agatha had to admit to herself that Mary was a very attractive woman with a certain warmth and charm. And yet sometimes, through that warmth and charm, there sparked little darts of . . . malice? Uncomfortable remarks. The remark she had made about Bill had been downright bitchy, and it was not like her to slip up like that.

James looked down at her quizzically. ‘Not like you to be so quiet.’

‘I was thinking about Mary,’ said Agatha. ‘I was thinking that I don’t really know her very well.’

‘That’s surprising. I thought the pair of you were the best of friends.’

‘Well . . .’ Agatha realized with surprise that she had accepted Mary’s friendship only to look for ways to make sure that the coolness between her and James stayed that way. ‘What do you really know of her?’ she asked.

‘Come to think of it, not much. I know she was married because she’s got a

daughter studying at Oxford, St Crispin's, I think.'

'I've never seen her daughter, and she never talks about her.'

'The daughter never visits her, even in the holidays. I assumed there was some sort of family rift there, so I didn't ask any questions. I also assumed that what you saw was what you got – perfect cook, perfect gardener, perfectly turned out. Then she has charm, and charm always stops you from seeing the person underneath.'

Not like me, thought Agatha. What you see is definitely what you get. And she longed for charm or mysterious depths.

'They were approaching Mary's cottage. 'No lights,' said James. 'Maybe she's gone out, Oxford or somewhere.'

'That's another thing,' said Agatha. 'She never does leave the village, except perhaps when she is dining with you.'

'Well, let's see if she's at home.'

Instead of going around the back, as was usual village practice except at homes like Agatha's, they walked up through the front garden where flowers, bleached by the moonlight, crowded the borders on either side of the lawn. The air was heavy with the scent of the flowers. They walked into the front porch. James rang the bell, which echoed off into the dark silence of the house.

Down in the road behind them, a young couple walked home. The girl laughed, a high, shrill giggle. Their footsteps and voices died away, leaving night silence behind.

'That's that,' said Agatha cheerfully. 'We've done our bit for community life. Now back to the pub.' With any luck, she thought, the crowd might have thinned out and she could have James to herself.

He hesitated. He tried the door handle. It turned easily and the door swung open. 'She might be ill.' He walked inside and Agatha reluctantly followed him. He fumbled around for the light switch in the hall. With a little click the small hall became flooded with light, intensifying the odd feeling of emptiness, of loneliness, in the house. They walked through the rooms, switching on the lights. No one in either the living-room, dining-room or kitchen.

James ran up the stairs, calling, 'Mary! Mary!' Agatha stood in the hall, waiting uneasily. She had never considered herself a fey or even a sensitive person, but as she stood there she began to feel a creeping unease.

'Not home,' said James, coming back down the narrow staircase.

'There's her conservatory at the back,' said Agatha. 'We may as well make a proper job of it.' Afterwards she was to wonder at her sudden persistence when a moment before all she had wanted to do was forget about the whole thing and return to the pub with James. After a brief and sharp struggle with the planning authorities, Mary had gained permission to have a small

conservatory attached to the back of the house. They walked through the kitchen and James opened the conservatory door and switched on the light. A wave of steamy moist air greeted them. Mary grew tropical plants. They walked into the middle of the conservatory and stood still, shoulder to shoulder. All was still. 'Let's go,' said James.

And then Agatha said in a choked voice, 'Look! Look over there!'

And James looked.

Someone had planted Mary Fortune.

Her head was not visible; it was covered in earth. Someone had hung her upside down by her ankles and buried her head in earth in a large earthenware pot. There were hooks on the ceiling beams for hanging plant pots. Someone had tied her ankles with rope and slung her up on to one of these hooks. She was dressed in that inevitable colour of green; green sandals, green blouse, and green shorts.

'Cut her down!' Agatha's voice was harsh with horror.

But James was bending over Mary and feeling for any life in the pulse at her neck and in her wrist.

He straightened up. 'Leave everything as it is for the police. She's been murdered and she's stone-dead.'

'Murder!'

'Pull yourself together, Agatha,' he said sharply. 'She didn't plant herself. I'll phone.'

He left the conservatory. Agatha gave one last horrified look at the body and scrambled out after him on shaky legs.

James was in the living-room. He called Fred Griggs and then sat down heavily on the sofa and clutched his thick hair with both hands. 'It's terrible . . . terrible,' he said. 'I slept with her, you know.'

Agatha, already overset, sat down and began to cry weakly. 'Don't cry,' he said gruffly. 'She cannot feel anything now.'

But Agatha was crying from a mixture of shock and shame. All her feelings for James now seemed like some sort of dismal schoolgirl crush. She had always thought that he led a monkish life, shy of women, always unattached, and because she herself had not indulged in an affair for some time, she had found it easier to dream about him as romantically as a schoolgirl. She had been jealous of his friendship with Mary, but she had considered it just that – friendship, with a bit of light flirtation, nothing more. But he had lain in Mary's bed and in Mary's arms. Her mind writhed under the weight of her miserable thoughts.

PC Griggs lumbered in. He looked like a village policeman, stolid, red-faced. One almost expected him to say, 'Ello, 'ello, 'ello. What 'ave we 'ere?' But he was a shrewd and clever man in his slow way.

'Where's the body?' he asked.

James unfolded his length from the sofa. 'I'll show you.'

Agatha looked longingly at the drinks trolley in the corner. She felt a stiff brandy might help her to pull herself together. Just as she was wondering whether she could risk pouring one by wrapping a handkerchief around the bottle, the CID arrived. Detective Sergeant Bill Wong was part of the group. Behind them came more cars. Pathologist, doctor, forensic team, police cameraman, and the press from the local newspaper, whose enterprising editor listened in on the police radio.

Bill Wong looked at Agatha's tear-stained face and, thinking she was mourning Mary, said with quick compassion, 'You go on home, Agatha. We'll be along to take a statement later. You found the body?'

'Yes, me and James Lacey.'

'Is he here?'

'Yes, with the body.'

'Right. He'll do for now. I'll get one of my men to take you home.'

And Agatha was at such a low point that she let a policeman put a strong arm about her and lead her away.



## Chapter Five

Agatha sat nursing a glass of brandy in one hand and a lighted cigarette in the other. She noticed with a numb clinical interest that her hands were shaking slightly. She wished now she had stayed at Mary's. Her home was so quiet under its heavy thatched roof, unusually quiet. Mostly the old house creaked comfortably as it settled down for the night.

Who could have done such a thing? What had she ever known of Mary? What had she ever really known of James Lacey, for that matter? He was intelligent, handsome, in his mid-fifties, a retired colonel who had settled in the country to write military history. They had investigated a previous murder together. She knew he could be resourceful and quite ruthless in dangerous circumstances. They had talked together quite a lot then, but about books and plays, about the murder case, about people in the village. What really made him tick? Would *he* be capable of murder?

But whoever had done the murder had probably also mined those gardens and she could not believe for a minute that James would do something as petty and spiteful as that. It all centred on gardening, of that she was sure. Therefore, her mind ran on, whoever had destroyed the gardens and poisoned Mr Spott's fish and then murdered Mary was quite mad, and viciously so. It had not been enough just to knife Mary or strangle her. Someone had been evil enough to want her humiliated in death. Please, God, let it be someone from Mary's past.

The sound of a car drawing up outside interrupted her thoughts. She stubbed out her cigarette and carefully put her brandy glass down on a side-table, noticing with an odd sort of pride that her hands had stopped shaking. She went to answer the door. Bill Wong stood there with a policewoman.

'I'll take an initial statement from you, Agatha,' he said, 'and then I would like you to report to headquarters in Mircester tomorrow while we go through it again. I have asked Mr Lacey to come as well, so perhaps you can travel in together.'

Agatha led Bill and the policewoman into the living-room. 'Would you like coffee?'

The policewoman sat down demurely on a hard chair in the corner of the room and flicked open her notebook. 'Not this time,' said Bill.

‘No tape recorder?’

‘We’ll tape your statement tomorrow, have it typed up and read it back to you. So begin at the beginning.’

Agatha spoke of the start of the evening in the pub and how James had become anxious over Mary’s non-appearance. She described how they had called at the cottage and found the door unlocked, gone inside, searched, and then found the body in the small conservatory.

‘It would take someone of considerable strength to hoist a dead body up like that,’ ventured Agatha.

‘Perhaps,’ said Bill. ‘The forensic chaps have taken the rope away, along with every speck of dust in that house. It’s amazing what they can find out these days. Now who else was in the pub when you left with Mr Lacey?’

Agatha wrinkled her brow. ‘Let me see. James and I were talking to Mr Galloway. Miss Simms was over at the bar with old Mr Spott. Mrs Mason and her husband were at the bar as well, and those pests, the Boggles, were complaining about the strength of the beer in another corner. In front of the fire was my cleaner, Doris Simpson, and her husband.’ She half closed her eyes and continued to list the villagers. ‘Oh, and there was one stranger, on his own, at the far left of the bar.’

‘What did he look like?’

‘Early twenties, jeans, designer stubble, thick sandy hair worn in a pony-tail, nondescript face. You know, two eyes, one nose, one mouth. I only noticed him because he was the only stranger there. He seemed to be waiting for someone. This is all a vague impression. You see, I was talking to James.’

‘Yes, I see what you mean,’ said Bill with a faint twinkle in his eyes. ‘Now, when you both approached Mrs Fortune’s cottage, did you meet anyone?’

‘I don’t think so. Everyone in this village says hello. I was thinking about Mary, as a matter of fact.’

‘Mrs Fortune? What were you thinking?’

‘I was thinking that although we were friends, I knew so little about her. I mean, she was all charm and warmth and then she would come out with some sort of bitchy remark.’

‘Such as?’

‘She called you a Chink.’

‘Nothing to what I get back at the station. It’s probably the sort of thing she usually said.’

‘No, she was out to be nasty. I was surprised that she was so overtly bitchy. I mean, often there was something you just couldn’t put your finger on.’

‘Lacey must have known her better than anyone.’

‘Why?’ demanded Agatha defensively.

‘Well known in the village he was romancing her.’

‘Nothing to it.’ Agatha’s heart had begun to hammer against her ribs. ‘He

took her out for a few dinners and then that stopped. They were just friends.’

Bill looked at her distressed face. Lacey had been quite open about the fact that he and Mrs Fortune had been lovers earlier in the year, but all at once he could not bring himself to tell Agatha that.

The doorbell went. ‘I’ll get it,’ he said.

He answered the door and then came back followed by Mrs Bloxby, who was carrying a small travel bag.

‘I thought you would feel better if someone stayed here with you for the night, Mrs Raisin.’

Agatha’s eyes filled with tears again and she blinked them away.

‘That’s all for now,’ said Bill. ‘Come along to the police station at ten tomorrow. Get a good night’s sleep. I’ll call on Lacey and tell him to pick you up.’

Agatha escorted Bill and the policewoman to the door. Bill smiled at her. ‘Not like London, hey?’

‘They have lots of murders in London.’

‘I didn’t mean that. I meant that there would be no Mrs Bloxby in London to think of sitting with you.’

‘Oh, that. See you tomorrow.’

Agatha returned to Mrs Bloxby. ‘Come through to the kitchen and I’ll make some tea.’

‘Yes, but I’ll make it. And then you’d better go to bed. What a dreadful experience. News travels fast here, but I found it hard to believe. Mrs Griggs, Fred’s wife, phoned me to tell me that someone had *planted* Mrs Fortune.’

‘Yes, it was horrible,’ said Agatha. ‘She had been strung up by the ankles and her head had been buried in a big flowerpot. And she was wearing that damn green like she always did. We didn’t see her at first because of that green, because . . .’ Agatha began to shake.

‘There now. There now. I’ll just put the kettle on. I am very distressed as well, although I did not have such a vile experience as you, Mrs Raisin.’

Agatha smiled weakly. ‘We should not be so formal with each other. I think you should call me Agatha and I will call you . . .?’

‘Margaret.’

‘Were you fond of Mary?’

‘It’s not that.’ Mrs Bloxby’s thin hands busied themselves putting tea in the teapot and filling it with boiling water. ‘I let my personal feelings interfere with my judging of the horticultural show and I have never done that before.’

Agatha blinked. ‘I find that hard to believe. Why?’

The vicar’s wife filled two mugs with hot tea, took milk out of the fridge and waited until they were both seated at the kitchen table. She stirred sugar into her tea and then said slowly, ‘I was one of Mrs Fortune’s admirers at first. It is so pleasant when a newcomer involves herself in helping out with church

and village activities. She called at the vicarage quite a lot. She used to flirt with Alf.'

Not for the first time, Agatha considered Alf quite an unsuitable name for a vicar. 'I did not mind because Mary Fortune is . . . was . . . a well-travelled, pretty woman, of the kind, I thought, who flirts automatically. Then she wanted Alf to take her confession. Well, our church is quite *low* and Alf does not have a confessional, but he will always listen to any parishioner in trouble, so he agreed to an interview with her in his study. I do not know what happened, but he told me afterwards that he considered her not a very nice woman and somewhat unstable. Then, when she called, he always found some excuse to leave the house.

'Mrs Fortune began to make little remarks to me, little disparaging remarks. You know, it was a pity I had let myself go. She could recommend a good hairdresser and so on. I have varicose veins, but I wear my skirts long so people don't usually notice, but Mrs Fortune did. And then the next time I saw her, she would be all sweetness and light and friendship, but the poison began to seep in and I began to feel diminished and dowdy. To my horror, I began to dislike her and I never usually dislike people very strongly. One cannot like everybody and I sometimes find the Boggles, say, a sore trial, but there was something about her that got under my skin.

'She would smile at me slowly and pityingly. She would ask how many countries I had visited, and Alf and I have not been abroad in *years*.'

Agatha began to feel better. It was a relief in a way to find that Mrs Bloxby, whom Agatha had hitherto regarded as a saint, was capable of normal human feelings.

An idea came to her and she leaned forward eagerly. 'It must be like being blackmailed or conned. That's it. Conned.'

'What do you mean?'

'I remember reading a case in the papers where a chap in a village had tricked various people out of their savings by pretending to be a stockbroker. He wasn't very good at it and the first couple he had conned quickly found out about it. But they did not take him to court. They were too ashamed of being gulled, don't you see. So he was able to go on for a bit, tricking other people.

'Now, when people talked to you about Mary, I am sure you murmured something nice because to say you did not like her would mean you would have to explain why, and the very explanation would make you feel more diminished. I bet she riled more than you. Why did you tell me, of all people?'

Mrs Bloxby looked at her in mild surprise. 'You never judge or condemn, Agatha. I suppose that's it.'

Only in my head, and nearly all the time, thought Agatha ruefully.

And then somehow it was easy for her to say, 'James was having an affair with Mary.'

'So I gathered.'

'But no one said anything to me! James told me last night.'

'It's well known you are a friend of his,' said Mrs Bloxby tactfully. 'People would assume that you knew.' She knew that the reason had been that people did not want to hurt Agatha. 'But there's a thing. Although he stayed on friendly terms with her, he definitely cooled off her when you arrived back. It might be worth finding out why. I feel if we all knew Mary Fortune better, then we could learn who murdered her and why. You will be finding out, will you not? It is not only the murder, you see, that destroys and rips apart the tranquillity of the village, but the intrusions of the press. Such a colourful murder, you see. The press are already arriving in droves. Sooner or later, someone is going to check the press library and find out about your previous investigations and your phone will start ringing and your doorbell.'

As if in reply, the doorbell shrilled. 'I will deal with it,' said Mrs Bloxby. Agatha heard the vicar's wife open the door, then the murmur of voices, then Mrs Bloxby saying firmly, 'Mrs Raisin has had a bad shock. She is not to be disturbed,' and then the slam of the door.

'Thank you,' said Agatha when Mrs Bloxby returned to the kitchen, although her vanity stabbed her. If she had been on her own, she would probably have invited the press in.

Then the phone rang. Without asking permission, Mrs Bloxby answered it, repeated that Mrs Raisin was not well enough to be interviewed, and then returned. 'I pulled the phone out from the wall. You will not be disturbed again. I'll just go upstairs and unplug the extension as well.'

Agatha rose to her feet and opened her mouth to say she was well able to deal with the press, but her knees trembled and she felt weak and shaky. 'You know,' she said, 'I think I *will* go to sleep.'

But half an hour later when she closed her eyes, visions of James in the arms of Mary Fortune swam in her mind, and with a great effort she willed herself to go to sleep to make all those nasty pictures go away.

James called for her at nine the following morning. In an obscure way, Agatha was glad the old elation at the thought of going out with him had gone. She felt like a silly middle-aged woman. She had once had a crush, when she was at school, on one of the older boys, and she had behaved with James Lacey just like that. Her distress at learning of his affair with Mary had gone, to be replaced with a strange kind of relief to be free of what had gradually been becoming an obsession. She had put on the minimum of make-up and a plain white blouse, a tailored skirt, and low-heeled shoes. 'We'll take my car,' said

James. ‘Silly for both of us to drive separately.’

They drove off. The silence lasted all the way up to the A44. Then James said, ‘Have you been thinking about it?’

‘The murder? Of course. Thought of nothing else.’

‘Maybe after we have made our statements, we should have lunch and talk about it.’ He glanced sideways, wondering at the unusually silent response. ‘If you want to,’ he added finally.

‘Yes, all right,’ said Agatha. Her reluctance came from a new desire to stay free of any emotional entanglement, that is, her emotional entanglement with James. She could never believe now that at any time he had felt anything warmer for her than friendship.

‘Good, then we’ll leave the talking until then.’

At the police headquarters in Mircester, James and Agatha were interviewed together and then separately. This time Agatha was not interviewed by Bill Wong. She asked for him and learned he was in Carsely with the other detectives who were investigating the case.

She had her statement read over to her and signed it. She had been asked if there had been any man in Mary’s life and had replied with a firm negative. It was up to James to tell them if he wanted to.

She waited in the entrance hall of the police station for James and was almost beginning to wonder if they had arrested him on suspicion when his tall figure appeared.

‘Well, now, what sort of food do you want to eat?’ James asked.

‘Something light,’ said Agatha. ‘I’m still on a diet of sorts.’

He glanced down at her. ‘Yes, it shows. There’s a new place in the square. They do very good salads and things like that and the tables are set well apart, so we don’t have to worry about anyone overhearing us.’

They walked together across the square. The sunny day was now overcast and an irritating, busy little wind tugged at Agatha’s hair and blew swirls of dust about their feet. It had been an unusually dry summer and to date the gardeners had complained about the need for the constant watering of plants.

The restaurant was quiet and they were given a table at the window. Agatha asked for a Caesar salad as a main course and James ordered grilled steak and fried potatoes and onion rings.

‘Now,’ he began, ‘have you thought of anything?’

Agatha hesitated. Before she would cheerfully have repeated everything Mrs Bloxby had told her, laying the confidences of the vicar’s wife on the altar of desire, but a queer loyalty stopped her this time, and she said instead, ‘I do not think Mary was as popular as I believed her to be.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She would never usually say anything directly nasty, but she had a way of making people feel silly and provincial.’

‘Perhaps. But not enough to cause murder. It surely has something to do with gardens. In some way it all must tie in with the destruction of the gardens.’

Agatha thought again about Mrs Bloxby and wished she could tell him. Instead, she said, ‘Whoever did the murder must have been mentally unbalanced. It was a murder that was planned and thought out, thought out in a sort of smouldering, burning hate. Let’s see. You said she had a daughter. She seemed to be a very wealthy woman. Money might be the motive, with the ruin of the gardens and the elaborate way of dealing with the body as a sort of smokescreen, to make it look as if it had been done by some sort of barmy local. The daughter, you said, is at Oxford University. She could be somewhere abroad during the holidays. But if not, she’ll be there today. I wonder if she inherits, and how much. I suppose the press will hang around.’

‘Even with a murder like this, only a few days and then they’ll leave it to the local men. We could call at Mary’s this evening to offer our condolences, if the daughter is there.’

‘There’ll be press at the gate and a copper on the door,’ Agatha pointed out. ‘I think we should leave it. I would like to ask some of the people who knew Mary what they really thought of her.’

‘She’s too recently dead. I don’t think anyone’s going to come right out at the moment and say they didn’t like her.’

Agatha thought of Mrs Bloxby, Mrs Bloxby of all people, whom Mary had managed to rile up. ‘I don’t know about that,’ she said cautiously. She looked at him awkwardly. ‘In your situation, you must have known her better than anybody.’

‘I didn’t, actually. It was a brief fling.’

‘And why did the brief fling, as you call it, come to an end?’

There was silence as their meals were delivered to the table. When the waitress had left, James said, ‘She came on to me very strongly and she gave the impression that she was used to affairs and only wanted to have a good time. She was charming and she could be very funny.’ He shifted uncomfortably. Mary’s humour, he remembered, had often consisted of being funny about the villagers. And then Agatha Raisin had come back among them, squat, blunt Agatha, who somehow seemed very much a part of the village. But it was not only that contrast that had brought about the end of the affair.

‘I think,’ he said slowly, ‘that Mary had begun to expect marriage. She became very proprietorial.’ Then he thought, the sex was competent and efficient but lacking tenderness or warmth, and a feeling of revulsion had set in, a feeling of shame.

‘You’re not eating your steak,’ said Agatha, looking at it longingly.

‘You’re not giving me much of a chance.’

She waited until he had eaten several mouthfuls and then asked, 'You must have said something to her to break it off.'

'Well, yes, of course. At first I did the usual cowardly masculine thing of staying clear. But then she called at my home and asked me bluntly what I was playing at. I told her it was over. For one awful moment I thought she was going to strike me. Her eyes blazed with pure hate. But the next moment, she laughed and said, "Well, you are quite right. You are not exactly God's gift to women in bed," and . . . and . . . a few other things I do not care to repeat, but all in an amused voice and I did not get angry because I thought I deserved it. We agreed to remain friends. I then began to see more of her again when she became so unpopular in the village. I thought it unkind. She never at any time referred to our affair.'

'Do the police suspect you?'

'A crime of passion? Possibly. They've certainly searched my house thoroughly in the middle of the night looking for bits of rope and examining my clothes and fingernails for traces of earth.'

'So you told them about your affair?'

'Of course.'

So Bill Wong would know, thought Agatha miserably.

'That friend of yours, Bill Wong, took me aside and told me to make sure you did not interfere in the investigation,' said James.

'Considering the success I've had in the past – we've had in the past,' added Agatha charitably, 'I think that's a bit cheeky.'

'It's because he's fond of you and doesn't want you coming across some maniac of a murderer on your own.'

Agatha thought guiltily of her garden. She sent up a prayer that the CID would not decide to turn over her house. They would see the garden and the sight of that bare garden with the huge high fence might lead them to believe *she* was mentally unstable.

'So,' she said, 'it looks as if we'll have to let the dust settle before we start asking questions.'

They discussed the wreck of the gardens, wondering over and over who in the village could possibly have done such a thing.

When lunch was over, James drove her back to the village. For the first time, he was reluctant to be on his own. It was as if the full horror of Mary's death had hit him for the first time. Agatha was a comfortable, sensible woman. She had not gone in for any of her odd behaviour for ages.

'Why don't you come into my place,' he said. 'I'll light up the computer and we could start putting down some ideas.'

How much I would have enjoyed this only a few days ago, thought Agatha, after she had agreed and followed him into his book-lined living-room, before the fact of his affair with Mary destroyed silly hopeful innocence.



He got them mugs of coffee and switched on the computer.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Let’s start with the attacks on the gardens and list all those whose gardens were destroyed. You didn’t suffer.’

‘No, but I’ve got the gates to the back, the one at the side of the house, padlocked.’

‘Okay.’ He tapped the keys. ‘We have the Boggles, Miss Simms, Mrs Mason . . . What is it?’ For Agatha had put a hand on his arm.

‘What if Mary did it? What if some maddened gardener took his revenge?’

They both looked at each other, both thinking of smooth, cool and plastic Mary creeping around the gardens of Carsely.

‘No, I suppose not,’ said Agatha.

‘I’m afraid we’re going to have to adopt your idea and start asking questions. But there’s not much we can do until the press thin out.’

‘We could go to the pub this evening,’ said Agatha hopefully. ‘Perhaps when the locals have had a drink or two, they’ll open up. I mean, the conversation will be about nothing else.’

‘Good idea.’ He switched off the computer and smiled at Agatha. ‘We’ll leave it for the moment.’

To his surprise, Agatha said, ‘Right you are. See you later.’ She picked up her handbag and left. Before, she would have stayed for as long as possible, ignoring any hints that it was time to go.

Agatha returned to her own home, feeling she had scored a victory over her own juvenile emotions. But her elation was short-lived. For on the doorstep was Bill Wong with a group of men.

‘I’m sorry about this, Mrs Raisin,’ said Bill formally. ‘But we are searching the houses in the village for anyone who knew Mary Fortune, and I’m afraid you can’t be excluded.’

‘Do you have a search warrant?’ asked Agatha feebly.

‘Come on, now. You know we can get one. What have you got to hide?’

‘Joke,’ said Agatha miserably.

It was not the search of the house that troubled her but the dread moment when they moved out into the garden. The small group of men surveyed the neat lawn bordered by well-weeded empty flowerbeds. One scratched his head and said, ‘You’re a woman after my heart, Mrs Raisin. Can’t stand gardening myself. But why such a high fence? I see it’s got a top section which could be lifted off and let some of the sun in.’

‘I don’t like nosy neighbours,’ said Agatha defiantly.

‘But the only person who could see into your garden is that Mr Lacey next door,’ said another. ‘Doesn’t look the nosy type to me.’

‘Just get on with what you have to do,’ snapped Agatha and turned on her

heel and walked back into the kitchen.

The case simply had to be solved before Open Day or these coppers would still be around and would know she had created an instant garden, that she had cheated.

At last the search was over. Bill Wong stayed behind.

‘Has the daughter arrived?’ asked Agatha, setting a mug of coffee down in front of him.

‘Yes, her name is Beth Fortune and she is studying history at Oxford. She has brought a boyfriend with her who turns out to be the stranger you saw in the pub the day she was killed.’

Agatha’s eyes gleamed. ‘There’s the motive. Beth inherits the lot and gets him to do the dirty work. Does he explain what he was doing in the village?’

‘His name is John Derry. He said he had been visiting friends in Warwick, and on the road home he decided to call in at Carsely. He had heard about it from Beth, he said, and was curious to see the village. He had not called on Mary because he had met her once with Beth for a lunch in Oxford and she had taken a dislike to him. We checked with his friends in Warwick and they swear he was there until seven in the evening.’

‘And when was Mary killed?’

‘They’re still finding out when and how.’

‘Will you let me know?’

‘Agatha, whoever killed Mary Fortune is mad and dangerous. Leave it alone.’

‘Okay,’ said Agatha meekly, and Bill looked at her suspiciously.

## Chapter Six

It had been a week since the murder, and the national press had exhausted every angle. Just when it looked as if interest was dying, some reporter found out that Mrs Josephs, the librarian, had been murdered in that very cottage, and that brought down the feature writers from the noisier tabloids to describe the 'house of death', and the more respectable heavies kept it going by sneering at the Grub Street tabloids and repeating paragraphs out of the 'house of death' stories to prove their point, which was their traditional way of seeming to avoid sensationalism while indulging in it.

But a week is a long time in journalism, and so it was left to the local papers and news agencies to keep tabs on developments while the television people packed up their cameras and sound equipment and satellite dishes and went back to town.

Agatha and James had had a non-productive evening in the Red Lion and so had decided to let the dust settle before they started on their inquiries. It was James who reported at last to Agatha that the daughter, Beth, and her boyfriend were in residence at Mary's cottage, that the press had gone from the gate and the policeman from the door. It was time to make a move.

There was to be no funeral in the village. The body, when finally released by the pathologist, was to be cremated in Oxford and the ashes scattered out to sea at some point within the regulations of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. That much, said James, as he sat in Agatha's kitchen, he had gleaned from Mrs Bloxby. He had asked if there was to be a memorial service in the church, and Mrs Bloxby, he said, had been strangely cold and had said that was a matter for Mrs Fortune's family and the villagers to decide.

'It seems,' said Agatha, 'that the villagers will not really say what they thought of Mary until they've been given some time. I think the same applies to you. Mary was nasty to me on several occasions, so it follows she must have been nasty to other people. From what you said, or more from what you did not say, I think she was particularly poisonous to you in a highly personal way when you ended the affair, and yet you continued to see her on a friendly basis. Why?'

He hesitated for a long moment, looking down into his coffee cup as if seeking inspiration. Then he looked up with a wry smile and said, 'Shame and

guilt. Guilt because I felt I had really hurt her. Shame because I felt I should never have had an affair with such as Mary. Also arrogance. I wanted to persuade myself that she was really all right and that we could be friends. As if any kind of emotional involvement can ever turn into friendship.'

Too right, thought Agatha gloomily, wondering if she would ever get over a feeling of wistfulness when she looked at him.

'There was something else,' he said quietly, 'something I have only realized now. I think that somewhere inside Mary was a capacity for violence.'

'Interesting, but it doesn't get us anywhere,' Agatha pointed out. 'Someone laid violent hands on *her*.'

'But don't you see,' he said eagerly, 'violence can beget violence. And it's usually in the family. We must try to find out where her ex-husband is and whether he is in this country. I gathered she was married in America, in Los Angeles.'

'She said she lived in New York!'

'Well, she may have moved there after the divorce.'

Agatha rose to her feet. 'I think we should get on with making a call on the daughter. Does the daughter know you were making love to her mother?'

James coloured slightly. 'I don't know. I shouldn't think so. I got the impression that mother and daughter were barely on speaking terms.'

'Let's go anyway. Should we take something? Does one usually take something?'

'Flowers or cake? No, I don't think so. Condolences in hushed whispers seem to be the order of the day.'

Agatha left the living-room after shutting the door carefully behind her and let her cats out into the back garden. She winced as she looked at it. The cats made their way to the one patch of sun that had been able to shine over the high fence.

They made their way to Mary's cottage, each thinking of the last time they had walked there together. They went up the front garden to the glassed-in porch that Mary had had built at the front of the house, in addition to the conservatory at the back. In fact, she had altered and changed the cottage so much, it was hard to remember what a poky little place it had seemed when Mrs Josephs lived there.

For a moment after James had rung the bell, Agatha almost expected Mary herself to answer the door. It suddenly seemed incredible that she was dead, that she had been killed in such a macabre way.

But the door was answered by a girl in her early twenties who did not look at all like Mary. She had brown eyes, a sallow skin, a long thin nose, and a quantity of glossy black hair. She was wearing a man's tartan shirt loose over a pair of brief shorts. Her legs were very long, very white, and quite hairy.

‘Miss Fortune?’ asked James.

‘Yes?’ The girl looked at him curiously and then her eyes moved to Agatha.

‘This is Mrs Agatha Raisin, a friend of your late mother. I am James Lacey, also a friend. We came to offer our condolences.’

She stood back. ‘You’d better come in.’

In the living-room, her boyfriend, John Derry, was slouched in an armchair. In the way of modern youth, Beth did not bother introducing them. ‘Coffee or tea?’ she asked.

‘Neither,’ said Agatha quickly, not wanting a moment to be lost while Beth disappeared into the kitchen. ‘Have the police found out how your mother died?’ she asked.

‘Someone poisoned her first with weedkiller and then strung her up,’ said Beth. Her eyes were dry and her voice hard and rather impatient, with an underlying faint twang of an American accent.

‘Don’t worry,’ said James. ‘The police will soon find out who did it.’

‘How?’ asked John Derry, speaking for the first time.

‘There must be loads of clues,’ said James. ‘There’s the rope which tied her, the weedkiller, surely lots of things.’

‘The rope,’ said Beth, ‘was old-fashioned Woolworth’s-type clothes-line, probably bought a long time ago, for all you can get now is the plastic stuff. There were no fingerprints at all apart from those of the two who found the body.’ Her eyes widened a fraction. ‘Oh, that was you two, wasn’t it?’

Agatha nodded. There was something almost intimidating about Beth’s self-possession. ‘Will your father be arriving for the funeral?’ she asked.

‘Shouldn’t think so. He hated Mother.’

‘So he’s still in America?’

‘Yes, Los Angeles.’

‘Have you heard from him?’

‘He phoned a few days ago and asked if he could help . . . financially. But Mother left me comfortably off.’

‘What does he do for a living?’

‘He’s a . . .’ Beth’s eyes narrowed. ‘Look, it’s kind of you to call, but I am fed up with journalists and their cheeky questions and I don’t have to put up with being grilled in my own living-room.’

‘Sorry,’ mumbled Agatha.

James began to talk soothingly of Mary’s work for the horticultural society and how much she had been liked by the villagers. Agatha took a covert look around. Mary’s living-room had been altered already. The green wallpaper had been painted over, so that the walls were a uniform white. A lot of the little china ornaments which Mary had displayed on the mantelpiece and side-tables had gone. There were new bookshelves in the corner, or rather planks on bricks holding a great quantity of books. The green fitted carpet had been

covered with faded and worn Persian rugs. The green curtains had been taken down and replaced with Venetian blinds. Beth or John Derry had tried to take as much green out of the room as possible.

‘And are you a gardener yourself, Miss Fortune?’ Agatha realized James was asking.

‘No, I can’t be bothered. I took all those plants out of the conservatory and got a friend in Oxford who likes all that sort of tropical junk to take them away. I switched off the heating. The conservatory will make a good study.’

‘So you plan on staying here?’ asked Agatha.

Beth gave her a hard look. ‘Why not?’

‘I assumed you would have rooms in Oxford,’ said Agatha weakly.

‘Of course. But these are the university holidays, or had you forgotten?’ Beth suddenly rounded on James. ‘Wait a bit. Did you say your name was James Lacey?’

‘Yes.’

‘I want a word with you in private. John, show Mrs Raisin out.’

There was nothing Agatha could do but get up and take her leave. Outside in the porch, John looked down at her. ‘I’ve heard of you,’ he said. ‘You’re the village Nosy Parker. Don’t come round here again.’

Agatha walked off as stiff as an outraged cat.

When she returned home, her cleaner, Doris Simpson, was there. ‘See, there’s a bit in the newspapers this morning about Mrs Fortune’s husband.’

‘Rats!’ Agatha seized the papers and sat down at the kitchen table and flicked through them. The American correspondent of the *Daily Mail* had interviewed Barry Fortune, Mary’s ex. He was quoted as saying he was sorry to learn about such a terrible murder. He said he and Mary had separated amicably fifteen years ago. He had married again. He owned a chain of video-rental shops. If I had only checked the newspapers before I went out this morning, thought Agatha, it would have saved me from asking unnecessary questions.

‘And here’s your post,’ said Doris, putting a small pile of envelopes on the table.

Agatha flicked through it. There was one from a lawyer’s office in Mircester. The name was in prim black letters on the outside of the envelope, Carter, Bung and Desmond. Agatha opened it and her eyebrows rose in surprise. It concerned the late Mrs Mary Fortune’s will. If she would call at their offices, she would learn something to her advantage.

‘Come back, Doris,’ she called.

The cleaner came back into the kitchen. ‘I’m sorry for those kitties of yours, Agatha,’ she said. ‘Not much fun playing in that Gulag you’ve got out there.’

‘Open Day’s not far off,’ said Agatha. ‘The fence will be lowered then. You

haven't told anyone about it?'

'Course not! What do you want to see me about?'

'This.' Agatha held out the letter.

Doris read it slowly. 'There's a surprise.'

'I wouldn't have thought she would have left me anything either.'

'That's not what surprises me.'

'What, then?'

'She didn't know you that long. I would think she would have already made out a will. Why change it to put in something in your favour? I mean, did she know she was going to die?'

'That's a thought.'

The doorbell rang. 'That'll be James,' said Agatha, still looking at the letter. 'Could you get it, Doris?'

The cleaner glanced at her quizzically. Normally Agatha would have rushed upstairs to put on fresh make-up or a clean dress.

When James came into the kitchen, Agatha handed him the letter. 'Oh, that,' he said, sitting down next to her. 'I got one of those this morning.'

'You might have told me.'

'I felt awkward about it, under the circumstances.'

'Anyway, what did Beth want to talk to you about?'

He stood up and closed the kitchen door and then returned to the table and sat down again. 'Mary had telephoned Beth earlier this year and said she was going to get married again . . . to me.'

'Ouch!'

'Yes, exactly . . . ouch. I have a feeling Beth regards me as prime suspect. Let's get out of the village and go to the lawyers'. By the way, why do you have the lights on in this kitchen and the blind down over the window? It's a lovely day.'

'Never mind that,' said Agatha hurriedly. 'Let's go.'

And so here I am again, she thought ruefully, running about the countryside with James, only this time it all seems rather . . . ordinary. And she congratulated herself on her new-found detachment.

The lawyers' office was down a cobbled side-street leading off the main square, where old buildings leaned towards each other, cutting out the sun. There was a faded lady behind an ancient typewriter in the outer office. They gave their names and were told to take a seat and wait. She retreated into an inner room. Dustmotes floated in shafts of sunlight that streamed through the window behind the desk. They were seated side by side on a horsehair sofa, a relic of the Victorian Age, like everything else in the musty office.

They were ushered in after a ten-minute wait. The fact that the lawyer who rose to greet them was comparatively young came as a surprise. Agatha had begun to expect an elderly gentleman with pince-nez and side-whiskers.

‘Jonathan Carter,’ he said. ‘Please be seated. You are both beneficiaries under the late Mrs Mary Fortune’s will. It is very simple and straightforward. I will not take up much of your time.’ He picked up several pieces of stiff paper and flicked through them. ‘I will only read the bit that concerns you both. I think you will not be surprised to learn that apart from a few bequests, the bulk of her estate goes to her daughter.’

Agatha felt a pang of guilt. Poor Mary. She really did like me. And I haven’t even mourned her. All I could think of after we found her dead in that terrible way was to feel shattered because James confessed to having had an affair with her.

‘Mr Lacey,’ said the lawyer, ‘you must understand that what is written here is in the words of Mrs Fortune. “To Mr James Lacey of 8 Lilac Lane, Carsely, Gloucestershire, I leave the sum of five thousand pounds in payment for services rendered, although said services were not really worth much.”’

James said, ‘Thank you,’ in a stifled voice.

“‘To Mrs Agatha Raisin of 10 Lilac Lane, Carsely, Gloucestershire, I leave five thousand pounds so that she may take herself to a reputable health farm to reduce her middle-aged bulk.’”

‘Bitch,’ commented Agatha briefly.

‘You will both be receiving the money in due course,’ said the lawyer.

‘I don’t want it.’ James’s voice was harsh.

‘Take your time,’ said the lawyer. ‘It is, I admit, a rather spiteful bequest. But do not reject it out of hand. We all need money.’

‘Are you accepting yours?’ asked James as they walked up to the square.

‘Oh, yes. She’s not alive, is she? I mean, money’s money. You know, James, if she really was as bitchy as it now seems she was, it’s not surprising someone bumped her off.’

‘The world is full of bitches,’ said James, lengthening his stride so that Agatha had to hurry to keep up with him. ‘But no one goes about murdering them.’

‘Let’s go and see Bill Wong,’ panted Agatha. ‘And do slow down a bit.’

He stopped so suddenly, she almost cannoned into him. ‘Why Bill Wong? He’s told you to keep out of it.’

‘But if we tell him about Mary’s will, we might be able to ferret some information out of *him*.’

‘I don’t want to tell him about the will.’

‘Don’t you see, the police will know the contents of the will already. I’ll tell him my bit. You don’t need to come if you don’t want to.’

He stood for a moment, his hands thrust in his pockets, rocking slightly on his heels, looking at his feet. ‘All right,’ he said abruptly.

They walked to police headquarters and asked at the desk for Bill Wong. He came down the stairs after only a short wait, a smile of welcome on his



face. 'Just at my lunch-hour,' he said cheerfully.

'If you've got the time, lunch is on me,' said Agatha. 'We've something to tell you.'

'I hope you haven't been stirring things up with any amateur detective work,' said Bill.

'No, no. Do you want to hear our news or not?'

'I'd like lunch,' said Bill with a grin.

'We'll go to that restaurant James took me to the other day,' said Agatha briskly.

In the restaurant, she ordered a sirloin steak with sautéed potatoes, grilled tomatoes and peas. 'What happened to your diet?' asked James.

'Sod the diet,' retorted Agatha. She privately thought there was no need to go on suffering. She had no one to compete with and she was no longer romantically interested in James Lacey. Of course, she had read endless articles in women's magazines about how one should slim for oneself, one should feel good about oneself. But it had never worked that way for Agatha and she doubted if it ever would.

When they were served, Bill asked, 'Now what was it you wanted to tell me?'

'I'm a beneficiary in Mary's will,' said Agatha.

'I know that,' said Bill. 'And Mr Lacey here as well.'

'James,' he corrected. 'A very rude bequest it was, too.'

'Come to think of it, she must have hated us,' said Agatha. 'And why make such a recent will? She must have expected to live a long time.'

'Not necessarily,' said Bill.

'Why?'

'I don't want you getting involved.'

Agatha reached out a hand. 'I'll take that plate of steak-and-kidney pudding away from you, Bill Wong, unless you explain yourself.'

'Leave it alone. I'm hungry. Oh, I suppose the press will get hold of it. When her husband asked for a divorce way back when, she tried to commit suicide.'

'Emotional blackmail,' said James. 'Probably didn't mean to go through with it.'

'She would have done the job all right – bottle of barbiturates, bottle of vodka – but for one little miracle. A neighbour whose flat overlooked hers passed his day in watching the women opposite through binoculars, although he subsequently swore to the police that he was bird-watching. So he saw Mary swallowing pills and drinking vodka and swallowing pills until she slumped over the table and he called for an ambulance and the police. She was rushed to hospital and her stomach was pumped out. She was subsequently treated several times for depression, the last being when she was

living in New York. She moved there after the divorce to a flat in Washington Square in the Village.'

'My cleaner, Doris Simpson, was about the only person who didn't like her when everyone else seemed to,' said Agatha. 'She said something like, "No warmth there. It's as if she's acting." Do you think that? Why come to the Cotswolds?'

'She is English,' pointed out Bill.

'Where from?'

'Newcastle originally. Her parents are dead. A lot of outsiders move to the Cotswolds. Take you two, for example,' said Bill.

'But don't you see,' said Agatha, pursuing her theme, 'she was acting being the perfect village lady, baking and gardening and so on. If she had lived, she might have tired of the act, moved somewhere else and adopted another role.'

'Speculation,' said Bill, shaking his head. 'I need more solid facts. I may as well make use of you while you're here. Let's start with the people who had their gardens ruined. Mrs Bloxby? Who would have a spite against Mrs Bloxby, of all people?'

Mary thought Agatha suddenly, but could not voice her suspicions without betraying the confidences of the vicar's wife.

But another idea struck her. She said, 'James, do you remember when you were supposed to take me out for dinner in Evesham?'

'Very well indeed. That was the day I got food poisoning.'

'And that was the day you visited Mary!'

'What are you getting at, Agatha? I didn't dine with her.'

'But surely you had something to eat?'

'Let me see, coffee and home-made cakes, as I recall.'

Agatha's eyes gleamed. 'And then you were too ill afterwards to take me for dinner. I had told Mary you were taking me for dinner.'

'Wait a minute,' said Bill. 'Just hold it there. Are you suggesting that Mary put something in the cakes so that James would be ill and would not be able to go?'

Agatha nodded.

'That's ridiculous,' said James.

'Did she eat the cakes as well?'

James said slowly. 'No, she didn't. She said something about being on a diet.' In fact, what she had said was that she had no intention of becoming as frumpish as Agatha Raisin by letting her figure go.

Bill Wong's eyes were suddenly shrewd. 'I think you're suggesting also that Mary Fortune might have been the one who ruined the gardens. Do you know something about Mrs Bloxby, say, that you're not telling us, Agatha?'

'No,' mumbled Agatha.

He gave her a long look and then said, 'Okay. Let's start with you, James.'

Now the idea was that whoever ruined the gardens wanted to put competition out of the running. But let's just give Agatha's theory a whirl. Did you upset Mary before your garden was set alight?'

'As a matter of fact, it was shortly after I had told her the affair was over.'

'So let's examine the rest. Mr and Mrs Boggle?'

'Forget them,' said Agatha. 'They annoy everyone.'

'All right. Miss Simms, then, the unmarried mother who is secretary of the Ladies' Society.'

'We'd need to ask her,' said Agatha. 'She's not the type to irritate anyone.'

'And Mrs Mason?'

'The same,' said Agatha gloomily. 'Need to ask.'

'Mr Spott, he of the poisoned fish? I mean, if by some far-fetched chance Mary was out for petty revenge, then it need not be just plants.'

'Bernard Spott adored Mary,' said James. 'He would never have said a word to annoy her.'

'We're getting nowhere,' sighed Bill. 'I don't think your argument's got a leg to stand on, Agatha. Say one of those maddened gardeners decided to get revenge on Mary, which one can you see doing it? Mrs Bloxby, Miss Simms, James here, Mrs Mason, or the Boggles or old Mr Spott?'

'Must be someone from her family or her past,' said Agatha. 'Was the husband in America the whole time?'

'Yes.'

'But it must have been someone she knew,' said James suddenly.

'Why?'

'There was no forced entry. She opened the door to whoever. She was poisoned. Someone slipped weedkiller in her drink. What drink?' he demanded, looking at Bill.

'Hard to say, but from the contents of her stomach, brandy, I think. It was a strong measure of weedkiller.'

'And you've checked all the weedkiller suppliers?'

Bill groaned. 'Do you know just how many places in the Cotswolds sell weedkiller? Legion. But yes, we are getting around to them all.' Agatha had taken a menu from the waitress and was studying it. 'Never say you are going to order pudding, Agatha?'

'Icky-sticky pudding,' said Agatha firmly. 'Anyone else?' They all ordered the sticky toffee-syrup-laced sponge. Why was it, thought Agatha gloomily when she had finished the last crumb of pudding, that desserts like this, which could slip down her gullet in the old days without any effect, immediately made the waistband of her skirt as tight as a corset?

'I think the daughter is the best bet,' she said over coffee. 'Surely it's very simple. She inherits. She did it, or her boyfriend.'

'Her own mother?' protested James.

‘She could have wanted it to look like the work of some maniac,’ said Agatha.

‘I tell you this,’ said Bill, ‘if it was a maniac, it might just have been some fellow who called at the door.’

‘And she let him in and offered him brandy! Not likely,’ said Agatha firmly.

Bill heaved a sigh. ‘Thanks for lunch. I’ve got to be getting back. It might have been done by someone from her past and we’ll never find out who it is.’

‘Makes you want to forget about the whole thing,’ said James after Bill had left.

‘I think people will start talking soon,’ said Agatha. ‘We could start off by calling on Mrs Mason. She’s a sensible lady. All we can do is keep on asking questions until we get a lead.’

## Chapter Seven

At first, that afternoon, as they sat over tea and scones in Mrs Mason's living-room, it looked as if they weren't going to get very far. Mrs Mason talked in a hushed voice about 'poor Mary'. Both Agatha and James ferreted about in their minds for a way to find out what the chairwoman of the Carsely Ladies' Society actually thought about the dear deceased.

It was James, spurred to his own defence by Mrs Mason's murmur of 'You, above all others, must be grief-stricken, Mr Lacey,' who found an opening. 'I regret to tell you, Mrs Mason,' he said, leaning back in one of her velveteen-covered armchairs and stretching his long legs out in front of him, 'that although I am shocked and saddened by the murder, I am not grieving. I did not know Mary very well.'

Mrs Mason looked startled. 'But I thought . . .'

'I had an affair with Mary Fortune. Most people in the village seem to have known that. It finished a while ago. But despite that, I repeat, I did not know her very well and I am beginning to believe that she had a knack of putting people's backs up.'

'I think,' said Agatha quickly, remembering what Mrs Bloxby had said, 'that she had a way of making people ashamed of themselves and so nobody confided in anyone else what she had said or done.' James gave her a sharp look.

'Well, of course, put like that . . .'

Mrs Mason adjusted her glasses and peered at Agatha. 'I thought I was making too much of it.'

'Too much of what?'

'She said, in the nicest way possible, that she wondered why no elections were held for the posts in the Ladies' Society. "Whatever can you mean, Mrs Fortune?" I asked. She smiled and said that she gathered that I had been chairwoman for several years and Miss Simms had been secretary. I pointed out that nobody had complained. "They wouldn't complain to you, dear," she said. "But there have been certain *murmurings*," yes, that's what she said, murmurings. "About what?" says I, getting sharpish. "Oh," says she as sweet as pie, "some of the ladies would like to see new blood at the helm." I found myself getting angry. "Like yourself?" I says, irritated-like. And she says, "Why not? Would you have any objections?" "Not me," says I, "but it's up to

the group.””

Mrs Mason paused for breath. A red tide of colour rose up her neck. ‘It would have been all right if she had left it at that. But she went on to say that the Ladies’ Society over at Little Raddington had a very *presentable* chairwoman who was quite *young*.’

Her voice was a bad imitation of Mary’s rather drawling accent. ‘I bought myself a new pale blue twin set – you remember, Mrs Raisin, you admired it – and I wore it with my pearls to one of the last meetings. Mrs Fortune looked at it and gave a little smile and I suddenly wished I hadn’t wasted the money. She had a way of smiling, she had, that seemed to say, “It doesn’t matter what you do, you’ll never look like a lady.”’

‘I spoke to Mrs Bloxby, who told me that no one had been complaining about me being chairwoman. It was the opposite. She heard a lot of praise for me. She told me to think no more about it. But I said I thought Mrs Fortune would make a better chairwoman and Mrs Bloxby said, “No, that would not do at all.” I was that riled up with Mrs Fortune that when I met her in the village shop, I says to her, I says, “I asked Mrs Bloxby if anyone had been unhappy with me being chairwoman and she said quite the opposite, so there!” And she looks at me steady-like and then says quietly, “Mrs Bloxby is such a *kind* woman,” and o’ course that made me feel bad all over again.’

‘And how soon after that was your garden attacked?’ asked Agatha eagerly.

‘Wait a minute, I’ll need to look at my diary.’ She went to a veneered sideboard and drew a leather-bound book out from the back of a knife drawer. ‘Let me see.’ She rummaged through the pages. ‘Ah, here’s the bit about meeting her in the post office part of the village shop.’ She flicked over more pages. ‘Three days after that, it would be.’

Agatha flashed a triumphant look at James. ‘But what’s all this to do with that business about the gardens?’ asked Mrs Mason.

‘We’re following up every lead,’ said Agatha obscurely.

‘So you’re playing detective again?’

‘I’m not playing,’ snapped Agatha. ‘I’m deadly serious.’

‘You’ll find it was one of those hooligans down from Birmingham,’ said Mrs Mason. ‘No one here would murder anyone for a few nasty remarks. Another scone?’

‘The Boggles next?’ suggested Agatha reluctantly. ‘I mean, someone sprayed their roses black.’

‘Must we?’ asked James. ‘It would be more a case of the Boggles putting Mary’s back up than the other way round.’

‘I can’t stand the Boggles either,’ said Agatha, ‘but it would be interesting to find out if their roses were attacked shortly after some sort of confrontation

with Mary.'

'I think you're barking up the wrong tree, Agatha. All these attacks on the gardens were within days of each other. If they had been more spaced out, there would have been more of a chance to catch the culprit, but they all happened so quickly.'

'Let's try the Boggles anyway. Don't leave me, James. Boggle-interviewing means I need support.'

Mr and Mrs Boggle lived on the council estate at the end of the village. They had bought their council house and named it Culloden, not because either had any interest in the famous Scottish battlefield but because it was a name that had taken their fancy at the local nursery which sold signs for houses.

Usually people in villages have a soft spot for the elderly, and Mr and Mrs Boggle milked this sympathy for all it was worth. They did not go in for subtle blackmail; they demanded days out and trips to town from various people as their right.

'Now remember,' cautioned Agatha, 'if they want an outing, say both our cars are off the road. Go in for blatant lying, or they'll have us driving them to Bath or Bristol or somewhere. I took them to Bath once and it was a nightmare of a day.'

'I think this is a waste of time,' said James uneasily.

'I don't like them either,' said Agatha, 'but they're so blunt, they might turn out to be more useful than anyone nicer.'

James rang the doorbell, which gave a brisk rendering of the 'Post Horn Gallop'. Odd shuffling noises came from inside as of elderly animals shifting in their lair.

After what seemed an age, there were the sounds of bolts being drawn back and locks being unlocked and then the door was opened on a chain and Mrs Boggle peered at them.

'Oh, it's you,' she said. 'What do you want?'

'We want to talk to you about Mary Fortune,' said Agatha.

Mrs Boggle's elderly eyes gleamed with malice. 'Why not ask him?' she said. 'He must have known her better'n anybody.'

'Can we come in?' asked Agatha patiently.

'Soap's on. You'll need to wait till it's finished.'

The chain was dropped, the door was opened, and Agatha and James followed her dumpy figure into a fusty living-room where a television set blared from one corner. Mrs Boggle was layered in clothes topped with a woolly cardigan and print apron. Her husband, wearing an old shirt, a sweater and a cardigan and thick trousers, was staring avidly at an Australian soap. The room was full of the smell of old Boggle, a strange smell, not of the unwashed but of the decaying.

Agatha and James waited patiently until the soap ground to its syrupy end. It was one of those irritating episodes where a well-loved character has died and so there were seemingly endless close-ups of Australian faces swimming in tears. And why were the women all so tiny? wondered Agatha. What of all those goddesses one saw in films of Bondi Beach? Maybe the undersized female in Australia went in for acting.

When it was finally over, Mrs Boggle reluctantly switched it off. 'Well?' she demanded.

'What did you think of Mrs Fortune?' asked Agatha.

'Tart!'

Agatha stifled a sigh. 'I mean, did she upset you in any way?'

'Bitch!' muttered Mr Boggle.

'Perhaps you could tell us what happened.' James's voice was patient.

'Her had told Mrs Bloxby she wanted to help in the community . . . and it's no use you two expecting tea or coffee. I've got more to do with my savings.'

Agatha ignored this. 'Go on,' she said. 'Mary asked Mrs Bloxby how she could help out in the community?'

'Yes, so she told that Mrs Fortune to take us out for the day. The painted hussy called round here, mutton dressed as lamb, if you ask me.

'I said we wanted to go to Bristol to look at the ships. Didn't I, Boggle?'

'Yurse,' said Mr Boggle morosely.

'Her said, "Oh, come now, that's too far. What about Evesham?'"

'I said, didn't I, Boggle, that it was her duty to help the old get about? I told her that not all of us had money to go gallivanting around in large cars. Yes, and I told her that the way she was going on with Mr Lacey here was a fair scandal. In my day, we got married, that's what I told her. I was never one to mince my words, was I, Boggle?'

'No,' said Mr Boggle, staring at the blank television screen.

'To which Mary replied?' prompted Agatha.

'That Mrs Fortune then had the cheek to say that we would be better off in the old folks' home than leeching off people. Can you imagine? Did you ever hear the like? I told her to get out and take her trollopy ways with her.'

'Have you any idea who damaged your roses?' asked James.

'Never had any doubt,' said Mrs Boggle. 'It was her, Mary Fortune. Did it out of spite. Knew we would take first prize with them roses.'

'But you didn't get a prize,' said Agatha.

'Cause we didn't have nothing left for the show to match them roses,' said Mr Boggle suddenly and violently. He leaned forward and switched on a large electric fire and a blast of heat scorched into the already hot room. Outside, the sun was blazing down out of a clear sky. The temperature must have been in the high seventies. The room was suffocating. The windows were covered in thick white net, and curtains which looked as if they had been made out of



red felt blocked out what was left of the light. The very stifling air seemed to be full of years of shared marital venom.

‘The wicked shall be cut down like the green bay tree,’ Mrs Boggle quoted inaccurately but viciously.

‘You mean you are glad Mrs Fortune is dead?’ asked Agatha.

‘Course. That one got what was coming to her. Unnatural to sneer at the poor aged like us. We never did get that trip to Bristol. We –’

‘Good heavens! Is that the time?’ Agatha leapt to her feet. ‘Come along, James. Thank you for your time, Mrs Boggle.’

Seeing her prey escape her, Mrs Boggle also got to her feet, but by the time she did that, Agatha and James had made their escape.

‘Whew,’ said Agatha. ‘Wouldn’t it be fun if it turned out they did it? At the back of my mind, there’s always a fear that the murderer might turn out to be someone quite nice who was temporarily deranged by Mary. But who could feel sorry for the Boggles?’

‘Mrs Raisin!’ Mrs Boggle’s voice sounded from Culloden. ‘Come back. Boggle’s fainted.’

James took a half-step towards the garden path but Agatha seized his arm. ‘Running for the doctor,’ she shouted back and set off down the street, with James after her.

‘Are we going for the doctor?’ asked James when he caught up with her.

‘Waste of time. She wanted us back there so she could bully that trip to Bristol out of us. But I’ll phone the doctor when I get home, just to be on the safe side. Yes, I know they’ve got a phone there, but it would be just like one of them to die to spite us. Come and have a coffee with me while I phone and then we’ll try Miss Simms.’

Although he accepted her invitation, Agatha, still relishing her new freedom, realized that she would not have been devastated if he had turned it down.

She phoned the doctor, a new one in the village, a woman called Dr Sturret, and reported Mr Boggle’s ‘faint’. Then she made coffee for herself and James.

‘I’m beginning to wonder if there is anyone in this village that Mary hasn’t riled up,’ said Agatha.

‘And it’s all making me feel a bit of a fool.’ James looked at her uneasily.

‘Surely you have nothing to reproach yourself with,’ said Agatha. ‘Think of Mary as an easy lay.’

‘I am not in the habit of thinking of women as easy lays,’ said James crossly. ‘Can we drop the subject of my affair? I’m heartily sick of hearing about it.’

‘Okay,’ said Agatha reluctantly, because there was still enough of her old obsession for James left to make her enjoy the trashing of Mary Fortune.

‘When you’ve finished your coffee, we’ll call on Miss Simms.’

‘Why don’t we call on Mrs Bloxby first?’

‘Why her?’

‘As the vicar’s wife, she must hear a lot of gossip. And the women of the village will talk to someone like her more openly than they would talk to anyone else.’

‘Maybe, after Miss Simms, if we have time,’ Agatha pleaded.

‘You know what, Agatha, I get a feeling Mrs Bloxby told you something and you don’t want to tell me.’

‘She told me something in confidence, James. It bears no relation to the murder. I can’t tell you.’

‘Fair enough. Miss Simms it is. Isn’t she working?’

‘Not any more. She stays at home and looks after the kids. The new man in her life is pretty generous.’

‘It’s amazing,’ said James, ‘how the ladies of Carsely not only accept having a blatantly unmarried mother in their midst but even make her the secretary of the Ladies’ Society.’

‘I think it’s because villages have always accepted an unmarried mother or two in their midst before it became fashionable,’ said Agatha. ‘Let’s go.’

Miss Simms answered her door. She was wearing the very high stiletto heels which she always wore, winter or summer. ‘This is nice,’ she said when she saw them. ‘Come into the lounge and put your feet up. Gin? Lots of ice and tonic?’

‘Lovely,’ said Agatha, reflecting it was a treat to call on Miss Simms after such as the Boggles. Miss Simms was a pale, anaemic-looking woman in her late twenties. She had a long pale face and long mousy hair. She wore a short tight jersey skirt and a cheap frilly blouse, transparent enough to show a black brassiere underneath. Mrs Bloxby had told Agatha that Miss Simms was a competent and hard-working secretary and did a great deal of voluntary work in the village. Agatha found Miss Simms a very pleasant sort of girl. She had seen glimpses of her latest gentleman – a thick, beefy, florid man who drove off with her in the evenings.

‘Are you investigating this murder?’ asked Miss Simms after she had poured them drinks. She was sitting with her skirt hitched up, unselfconsciously exposing a border of frilly French knicker.

‘Just asking a few questions,’ said Agatha self-importantly.

‘So what can you ask me?’

‘We thought that if we could find out more about Mary, we could find out why someone killed her, and if we could find out why, we might find out who.’

‘I know that line,’ said Miss Simms. ‘It was in *Morse*, or one of them detective things. Well, let me see. Mary . . . I didn’t like her, of course. Sorry, Mr Lacey.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ he said gloomily. ‘I’m beginning to think I didn’t know her at all, although I can’t get anyone to believe me.’

‘I can,’ said Miss Simms. ‘I had a gentleman over in Pershore once. We had a few good times and then the police came around and said he’d disappeared with the firm’s takings. He worked for Padget, the paper people. I was shocked, but could I tell them a blind thing about him? I said he had a loud laugh and he wore his socks in bed, but the police said that was no good at all.’

‘So what about Mary?’ asked Agatha. ‘I mean, I thought you liked everyone.’

‘Usually. But that one got up my nose. She wanted to chair the Ladies’ Society. I told her roundly we was all happy with Mrs Mason, but if she had any doubts about that, she could call for a vote. She said a few nasty things about Mrs Mason and I told her what I thought of her. No one criticizes any of my friends to me.’ Miss Simms paused and took a birdlike sip of her drink. ‘So then she got stuck into me.’

‘What did she say?’

Miss Simms turned pink. ‘Reckon as I don’t want to say.’

‘You mean what she said hurt.’ Agatha looked at her sympathetically. ‘You’re not the only one.’

Miss Simms looked at her in surprise. ‘I’m not? But everyone else said how she was an angel.’

‘Because no one wanted to tell about the things she had said to them,’ said Agatha. ‘Come on, you can tell us.’

‘I s’pose. She said that unmarried mothers like me living off the state should be shot. She said that if she got the chair of the Ladies’ Society, the first thing she would do would be to find a more respectable secretary. I told her I took nothing off the state. “You don’t have to,” she says. “You get the men to pay, and that’s the same as being a prostitute.” I said to her that we didn’t all have money and the fact that she was doing it for nothing . . . Sorry, Mr Lacey. Anyway, I told her to get out and that was that. Do you know the next time I saw her, she was ever so nice to me that I began to think I’d imagined the whole thing.’

‘This is dreadful,’ said James. ‘I never knew she was as bad as that.’

‘That’s us women for you,’ said Miss Simms cheerfully. ‘We always show the fellows our best side. Any idea who dug that big hole in my lawn?’

‘No,’ said Agatha. ‘And the more I think about those attacks on the gardens, the more puzzled I am. It must have taken a great deal of daring, combined with a great deal of malice. It was dug on your front lawn, wasn’t it? Anyone passing could have seen what was happening.’

‘Fred Griggs asked all the neighbours and the people across the road, and no one saw anything,’ said Miss Simms. ‘But then, sometimes when I come

back with my gentleman friend early in the morning, there's not a soul around.'

'What about your children?' Miss Simms had a boy of four and a girl aged two. 'Mrs Johns, next door, takes care of them,' explained Miss Simms.

'And she didn't see anything?'

'Not a thing. My gentleman friend, he's from the north originally, and he says that the air down here is so heavy that it makes everyone sleep like the dead.'

Agatha had to accept the truth of this statement. Any time she came back to Carsely after some time away, she found it hard to keep awake.

'You weren't at the last meeting of the Ladies' Society,' said Miss Simms.

'I was busy,' mumbled Agatha. The truth was she had known that Mrs Bloxby had been going to ask for a volunteer to take the Boggles on a day's outing and so had not gone, fearing that the gentle vicar's wife would somehow, by her very presence, constrain Agatha to offer to drive the horrible couple.

'There's another meeting tonight,' said Miss Simms.

'I'll be there.' Agatha stood up. 'I think we'd better go. Anything to ask, James?'

He shook his head. 'I think I've heard enough.'

Outside, James said, 'So you won't be going to the Red Lion?'

'I'll join you there after the ladies' meeting. What about rounding up the day with a visit to Mr Spott?'

'All right. But that one will have nothing but praise for Mary.'

Mr Spott's cottage, like Agatha's, was thatched. The external woodwork was painted bright harsh blue; window-frames, front door and fencing. It made the cottage look unsuitably garish, like a children's drawing executed in chalk colours. He had a small garden fronting on the road.

'The pond must be at the back,' said Agatha as James rang the doorbell.

Bernard Spott answered the door promptly. He was in his shirt-sleeves and gardening trousers, but his thin hair was as carefully greased across his bald spot as ever.

'Come in, come in,' he said.

They followed him into a pleasant living-room, low-beamed and with some fine old pieces of furniture.

'We have been trying in our amateurish way to find out what happened to Mary Fortune,' said James pleasantly. 'Strange as it may seem, Agatha and I feel we never really knew her and wondered if you had any insights.'

'It was a shocking murder,' said Bernard, 'really shocking. All that beauty and life extinguished in such a barbaric way.' He took out a handkerchief and blew his large nose in it with a trumpeting sound. 'It hardly bears thinking about.'

‘How did you find Mary?’ asked Agatha. ‘I mean, being chairman of the horticultural society, you must have known her quite well.’

‘Yes, we were very good friends,’ said Bernard. ‘She not only was a superb gardener, she used to bake me cakes and bring them round.’

‘We have found,’ said Agatha, ‘that contrary to what we both thought, she was not all that popular.’

‘You amaze me.’

‘It seems she had a way of riling people up. Did you experience any of that?’

‘No.’ He looked bewildered. ‘She was always kind to me.’

‘To go on to another matter,’ said James, ‘have you any idea who poisoned your goldfish?’

‘No, and our police force are inept, to say the least. I wrote to the chief constable to complain about Fred Griggs.’

‘That’s not fair,’ protested James. ‘Fred’s a good man.’

‘Tcha! What crime has he ever had to deal with? Those murders we had here before, it was the CID who solved them.’

‘It was more Agatha here than the CID,’ corrected James. ‘Besides, the CID have been investigating the garden sabotage and they haven’t come up with anything, so it’s not fair to blame Fred.’

‘He knows the people in this village. He should have come up with something,’ said Bernard mulishly.

‘So,’ said Agatha helplessly, ‘you have absolutely no idea who might have poisoned your fish or who might have murdered Mary?’

‘No, and if you will both take my advice, you will leave the whole thing to the police.’

‘But you just said the police weren’t doing a good job!’

He stood up as a sign that he wanted them to leave. ‘I do not mind being interviewed by the police,’ said Bernard. ‘I accept that as one of the more unpleasant duties of being a British subject. Coming from you, however, it seems like vulgar curiosity.’

There somehow did not seem to be anything to reply to that.

As they walked away from the cottage, Agatha said, ‘I’ll find out what I can, and then I’ll meet you at the Red Lion.’

As they turned into Lilac Lane, Agatha exclaimed, ‘There’s Beth waiting on your doorstep.’

They hurried towards her. She held out a couple of books as they came up to her. ‘I just remembered my mother saying something to me about your interest in the Napoleonic wars, Mr Lacey, and wondered if these books might interest you.’

‘How very kind.’ James glanced at the titles. ‘Diaries! Where did you get these?’

‘I borrowed them from the college. History is my subject.’ She smiled at him suddenly and that smile gave her face something like beauty.

‘Come inside,’ said James. ‘We’ll have coffee.’

‘I’d like that,’ said Beth, ‘but I would like to talk to you in private as well.’ She looked at Agatha.

‘See you later, James,’ said Agatha and went slowly along to her own house, burning with curiosity.

She had just fed her cats when her doorbell rang. She was expecting to see James, come to report on Beth’s visit, but it was Bill Wong who stood there.

‘Oh,’ said Agatha, that ‘oh’ being a little dying fall of disappointment. She reminded herself about her new-found freedom from emotional involvement with James and invited Bill in.

‘I’ve come to ask you about Mrs Bloxby,’ said Bill.

‘Can’t you ask Mrs Bloxby about Mrs Bloxby?’

‘Don’t be defensive, Agatha. I could tell she had told you something.’

Agatha stared at him for a long moment as she remembered something that Mrs Bloxby had told her, not about Mary’s disparaging remarks or about the horticultural show; something she should have told Bill.

‘I’ve just remembered,’ said Agatha.

‘I don’t believe that, but out with it.’

‘Mary got Mr Bloxby, the vicar, to take her confession.’

‘Now that *is* something. Something must have been troubling her badly. I mean, the vicar doesn’t normally take confessions, does he?’

‘No, but he’ll listen to anyone in trouble.’

‘I’d better go and ask him. I wonder what it was about.’

It was about making a pass at him, thought Agatha, but there might have been something else there.

Bill left and Agatha prepared herself an early-evening meal. She wondered how Beth and James were getting along, and the more she wondered, the more she worried. Why had Beth, who had been so rude, done such an about-face as to offer books to her mother’s ex-lover?

## Chapter Eight

Bill Wong drove along to the vicarage. It was, he reflected, not like going to see a Roman Catholic priest. It had not been a formal confessional, surely, and the vicar was not High Church of England.

Mrs Bloxby welcomed him. 'I always expect to see our Mrs Raisin with you,' she said, ushering him in. 'What can I do for you?'

Bill stood in the shadowy hall of the vicarage. 'Actually, it was your husband I came to see.'

'Alf's in the church.'

'What is he doing?'

Mrs Bloxby looked surprised. 'Praying, I suppose. You can step over. He's never very long.'

Bill went back out of the vicarage and walked through the cemetery to the church next door. Huge white clouds were moving slowly above over a large summer sky. It was as if, during a good summer, the skies over the Cotswolds expanded in size, giving the impression of limitless horizons. Old gravestones leaned over the smooth cropped grass of the churchyard, the names faded long ago.

He went to the side door, pushed it open and walked into the warmth of the old church. The foundations were Saxon but the powerful arches were Norman. It was a simple church, with plain wooden pews and plain glass in the windows, Cromwell's troops having smashed the stained-glass ones. There was an air of benevolence and calm.

The vicar was kneeling in the front pew before the altar. What was he praying for? wondered Bill. For the murderer to be caught, or simply for his village to return to its usual sleepy calm?

As if aware of a presence behind him, the vicar rose and turned around.

'Mr Wong, is it not?' he said, walking down the aisle towards the detective. 'May I be of assistance?'

His scholarly face was gentle and kind.

'Perhaps we could talk outside?' suggested Bill, thinking obscurely that discussion of a nasty murder should take place outside the church.

'Very well.' They walked outside and sat down together on a mossy table gravestone, feeling perhaps that the last resting place of someone who had

died no doubt respectably in his bed many centuries before was a more suitable place to get down to business. 'I suppose you want to ask me about the murder,' said the vicar.

'I learned that Mrs Fortune had asked you to take her confession.'

Bill waited nervously for a disclaimer or a demand as to how he had come by such a piece of gossip. But Alf Bloxby had lived long enough in rural villages to know that one has not much private life at all.

'Yes,' he said simply.

'You must understand that in view of the circumstances, I must ask you what she said.'

'I suppose you must. If there had been anything of the real confessional about it, I might refuse to tell you, but the matter is very simple. It amused Mrs Fortune to see if she could lay a priest.'

'Do you mean . . .'

'Oh, yes, what is it they say these days? She came on to me.'

'Are you sure?'

'I am not, I think, a vain man in that respect. We were in my study. She sat down on my lap and wound her arms about my neck and tried to kiss me.'

'And what did you do?' asked Bill, fascinated.

'I said, if I remember rightly, "Mrs Fortune, your figure belies your weight. You are, in fact, a heavy woman, and your weight is giving me a cramp in my left leg." She got up and sat opposite me. I told her I had a great deal to do about the parish and so would she get to the point of her visit. She said she had sinned. I asked her in what way. She said she had been having an affair with Mr Lacey. The only reason I tell you this is because the affair was well known in the village.

'I pointed out that as Mr Lacey was a bachelor and she a divorced woman, what they did together was no concern of mine. I even ventured to lighten the atmosphere by suggesting she had seen too many old Hollywood movies. You know, where the heroine says, "Father, I have sinned."

'She became a trifle incoherent in her explanations, but I gathered that I was supposed to talk to James Lacey and suggest he marry her. Perhaps her time in the States had given her a rather naïve and old-fashioned view of what goes on in English villages. I said that whether he married her or not was entirely up to Mr Lacey.

'Mrs Fortune was a fascinating contradiction. On the surface, she appeared a witty and mondaine woman. After talking to her, I came to the conclusion that she was really quite stupid, a trifle common, and possibly mentally unbalanced. "Common" is probably an old-fashioned word. I do not mean she was of low class, rather that there was a streak of coarseness in her.'

'But would you say,' asked Bill, tilting back his head to look at a flock of pigeons wheeling over the churchyard, 'she would be capable of driving



anyone hitherto considered normal to commit a brutal and fantastic murder?’

‘Yes, I think she could.’

‘Come, Vicar, do you mean to tell me she gave you murderous thoughts?’

‘No, she embarrassed me considerably. What I have told you is mere speculation. My wife has not discussed her with me and yet I know my wife did not like her, and it is a very rare person whom my wife does not like.’

‘So apart from making a pass at you and then wanting you to emotionally blackmail Lacey into marriage, she had no real confession to make? No darker secrets?’

‘No, had she revealed anything of importance, I would tell you. People here talk about some maniac from Birmingham who might have come to rob her, but I firmly believe that one of the villagers is responsible.’

Bill smiled. ‘No doubt our Mrs Raisin will be trying to find out who did it.’

‘No doubt,’ said the vicar drily. ‘A most abrasive female, but there must be good in her, for my wife thinks the world of her.’

‘Oh, there’s a lot of good in our Agatha.’ Bill got to his feet. He looked down curiously at the vicar, wondering if this cleric was as mild and gentle as he appeared on the surface.

‘If you hear anything you think might relate to this case, Mr Bloxby, please let me know.’ The vicar rose as well.

‘Certainly.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Time for tea. My wife makes an excellent tea. Perhaps you would care to join us?’

This last was said with such a reluctant politeness that Bill refused.

The vicar nodded and strode off in the direction of the vicarage. A man of iron, thought Bill, just like his wife, armoured in goodness against the likes of Mary Fortune.

Agatha sat down in the vicarage that evening and wished she had not come. The discussion was about gardens open to the public. Some of the villagers evidently made extra money for charity by serving teas. Agatha toyed with that idea and then rejected it. The fee for entry to each garden was twenty pence a head. Agatha had not thought before how much to ask and was depressed that her Great Deception was going to bring so little reward. She quite forgot that she was supposed to be putting out feelers to find out what they all thought of Mary Fortune, and became sunk in gloom. A stupid, childish trick was going to cost her six months of slavery for Pedmans in London.

By the time she went along to the Red Lion, she began to feel that it was just as well that she had been forced into going to London. There was no elation any more at the thought of seeing James. The more one learned about Mary, the more James became diminished in a way, because he had chosen to

have an affair with her. The village in the quiet summer's evening felt alien and almost threatening. Agatha had that old feeling of being on the outside of life looking in. And what did she really know of the private thoughts and lives of these villagers? If the murderer was someone they knew and respected, would they not all band together to protect that person?

She would have been surprised could she have known that James's thoughts were running along roughly the same lines. He was feeling isolated as he stood at the bar, surrounded as usual by the easy friendliness of the locals, that peculiar village friendliness which was all on the surface and never really gave anything away.

He saw Agatha entering the pub and felt relieved. There was something very reassuring and honest in Agatha's pugnaciousness. When she went to join him, he bought her a gin and tonic and suggested they take their drinks to a table at the corner of the bar. Before, Agatha would have been highly gratified that he preferred her company away from that of the locals, but she could not get rid of the flat, depressed feeling that was assailing her.

'So how did you get on with Beth?' she asked.

'She was very charming. And very helpful with those historical diaries. She is a highly intelligent girl.'

'Where's the boyfriend?'

'He's gone off for a few days to see friends in Oxford.'

'Did she talk about her mother?'

'Only to say that they never got on very well and that she blames Mary for the break-up of the marriage. I invited her out for lunch tomorrow because I thought it might be a good idea to get to know her better and that way find out more about her mother. Care to come along?'

Suddenly Agatha, who had been so sure that she was free at last from any involvement with him, found her temper snapping. She got to her feet. 'Don't be so bloody naïve, James,' she said and turned and walked out of the pub. He sat and watched her go, wondering what on earth he had said to annoy her.

Agatha found the following day dragging slowly along. She could not think of anyone else to call on to ask questions about Mary Fortune. She had caught a glimpse of Bill Wong in the village the day before and she hoped he might call and give her some fresh ideas.

She made herself a microwaved lunch out of a packet of frozen curry, reverting to her old cooking habits, washed it down with a glass of beer, and had two cigarettes and a strong cup of black coffee for dessert. She could imagine James and Beth cosily ensconced in some pub or restaurant, talking about early nineteenth-century history, getting to know each other better. The girl was a pill, but James had been tricked by Mary Fortune, so who was to

say he was not going to be seduced by the daughter?

The doorbell rang after she had spent half an hour amusing herself by playing with the cats in the garden. She glanced at the clock. Only two. Still, James might, with luck, have cut the lunch short.

But it was John Derry, Beth's boyfriend, who stood on the step.

'Oh, come in,' said Agatha, falling back a pace. 'What can I do for you?' He followed her into the living-room and slumped down in an armchair. He was wearing torn jeans and Doc Martens. There was something heavy and threatening about him.

'I thought you had gone away for a few days,' said Agatha.

'Obviously that friend of yours, Lacey, thought so too,' said John.

'What do you mean?'

'I met a smelly old woman in Harvey's, that post-office place, and she said something about us outsiders having no morals at all and that Lacey, having screwed the mother, was now out to screw the daughter.'

'I cannot imagine,' said Agatha, correctly identifying the culprit, 'that old Mrs Boggle would use that sort of language.'

'That's what it amounted to. What gives?'

'Beth and James share a common interest in history.'

'Is that what it is?' he sneered. 'I don't think your friend Lacey has any interest in Beth's knowledge of history. I think, along with you, he's the village snoop. Beth's got enough on her plate without being manipulated by a couple of middle-aged Miss Marples. Leave her alone.'

'Whatever happened to the modern woman?' asked Agatha sweetly. 'Is Beth not allowed to make up her own mind about who she sees?'

'She can't make up her mind about anything, the state she's in. Also, she's rich now, and I don't want any middle-aged Lothario chasing her to get his hands on her money or, for that matter, his hands up her skirt.'

'Bugger off, pillock,' said Agatha wearily.

He stared at her in amazement.

'You heard,' snarled Agatha. 'You probably murdered Mary Fortune yourself, come to think of it.' She stood up. He stood up as well and loomed over her threateningly.

'This is a nasty village full of nasty people,' he said. 'And an old wrinkly like you is one of the nastiest. Tell Lacey to keep away from her.'

'Tell him yourself,' said Agatha. 'Now get out.'

The doorbell rang. Agatha went to answer it, but he blocked her way.

'I haven't finished with you yet,' he said.

The front door, which Agatha had not locked, opened, and to her relief Bill Wong walked in. He saw Agatha standing with her eyes blazing and her hands clenched. He saw John Derry glaring down at her.

'Trouble, Agatha?' he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Agatha. ‘Mr Derry has just been threatening me.’

‘Indeed? Well, Mr Derry, you come with me and we’ll have a talk about this. Come along.’

John shouldered his way past Agatha. ‘I’ll get you for this, you old trout,’ he said.

Agatha sat down weakly when they had gone. She then began to worry about her burglar-alarm system. It had gone on the blink while she had been away on holiday and she had done nothing about phoning up the security people. But part of the security system was that outside lights went on all around the cottage when anybody approached and she did not want her back garden floodlit when Roy and his men arrived to put in the plants. But right after that, she would get it fixed.

She turned on the television set and stared blankly at a movie, the kind which tried to make up for lack of script with exploding cars and blasting guns.

At first she did not hear the doorbell above the noise and then a sudden cessation in the shooting and screaming brought it to her ears and she scrambled to her feet and went to answer it.

‘Why didn’t you just walk in like last time?’ she asked Bill Wong, who stood there grinning at her.

‘The reason I walked in last time was because one of the locals said they had seen John Derry going into your cottage, and when you didn’t immediately answer the bell I decided to let myself in. You always run to answer the bell, Agatha, and when you see me, your face always falls in disappointment, as if you were expecting someone else.’

‘You’re imagining things,’ said Agatha curtly. ‘Come in.’

She switched off the television and turned to him. ‘So what did he have to say for himself?’

‘Derry? He thinks you are an interfering old bag and that Lacey is either out to pinch his girlfriend or prove she murdered her mother.’

‘That’s mad. James and I only called on them once. Admittedly James has been seeing more of her since then, but . . .’

‘No doubt they have heard about your reputation for sleuthing. I warned him not to disturb you again.’

‘You should have charged him!’

‘What with? Yes, he says he threatened you. But I believe he’s just a silly young man.’

‘You won’t say that when you find me one dark night planted in my own garden, upside down, and full of weedkiller. He’s strong enough to have hoisted her up on that hook.’

‘We’re not sitting on our bums, Agatha.’

‘So what do you know that I don’t?’

‘That the body has been released for burial.’

‘When is the funeral?’

‘At a crematorium in Oxford tomorrow. Don’t have any mad ideas about going in the hope that the murderer is lurking in the bushes. We’ve promised Beth Fortune to keep it quiet. She says she doesn’t want nosy villagers or the press.’

‘What about the husband? Is he coming over?’

‘No, he doesn’t want to know anything about it. Miss Fortune is going to the States to see him during the Christmas holidays. There’s your doorbell. No doubt that’s Lacey returned from his lunch. I’ll get it just in case Derry’s been stupid enough to come back.’

He returned, followed by James. ‘Well?’ Agatha greeted him. ‘How did you get on? While you were romancing Beth, her boyfriend was round here threatening me and telling me to warn you off.’

‘Why on earth would he do that?’

‘He thinks you’re after her money, among other things.’

‘I cannot understand what Beth sees in a lout like that.’

‘I do. Like to like,’ said Agatha, turning her eyes away from Bill’s sharp look.

‘She is a highly intelligent girl,’ said James stiffly.

‘We don’t seem to be getting very far forward,’ said Agatha in a placating tone. ‘I mean, I am beginning to think it must have been someone from outside the village, someone from Mary’s past. If it wasn’t the husband, then it could have been someone she had an affair with. Sorry, James, I meant someone else.’

‘We’re working on the American end,’ said Bill, getting to his feet. ‘I’ll leave you two to discuss the case with the usual warning. Don’t get involved and don’t go around suspecting villagers and letting them know it.’

There was a silence after he had left. Then James said, ‘I made notes on our interviews. Would you like to come next door and we’ll go over them?’

Agatha had a sudden pettish desire to say she would not. Damn Beth, she thought. Somehow Beth had reanimated all those feelings for James which Agatha thought she had lost. Competitiveness was a great part of Agatha Raisin’s character.

‘Wait and I’ll get my cigarettes,’ she said. ‘You don’t object to me smoking, do you?’

‘I don’t object to anyone smoking. I used to smoke myself.’

‘You amaze me. Most of the people who’ve stopped are militant anti-smokers. How did you stop?’

‘I got tired of it,’ said James, who had actually given up smoking several years ago to please the then-current love of his life.

‘I wish I could get tired of it. I don’t even want to stop. Wait until I get the

cats in from the garden. No, wait there!’ she added sharply, terrified that James would see the bare garden.

‘You’re planning to surprise us all on Open Day,’ he said. ‘And yet you don’t seem to spend much time in the garden.’

‘I’ve spent all morning working on it,’ lied Agatha.

In James’s cottage some few minutes later, Agatha looked around, wondering not for the first time what it would be like if she lived there. And yet the living-room was comfortable, furnished with books and elegant old furniture. There was even a bowl of flowers on the window-ledge. She could not imagine putting her stamp on anything. James was that most irritating kind of bachelor, the kind who obviously does not need anyone to look after him.

He switched on the computer. ‘I’m surprised you don’t turn one of your bedrooms into an office,’ said Agatha.

‘I like to keep the spare bedroom free for guests,’ he said. ‘My sister and her children came to stay while you were away. Now let me see, I’ll just flash this up on the screen.’

Agatha pulled up a chair beside him and read. Everything was neatly and accurately reported. ‘If we were detectives in a book,’ she said gloomily, ‘I would stare at the screen and say mysteriously, “There is something there that someone has said which is not quite right.” But all I can see is a lot of uninteresting twaddle.’

‘Or I would say,’ said James, ‘that it must be Bernard Spott because he’s the only one who said anything nice about her. Then I would go and make a citizen’s arrest and have my photo in all the papers.’

‘Did you really learn anything more from Beth about her mother?’ asked Agatha.

‘She said a bit curtly that she didn’t want to talk about her mother, that Mary had made her, Beth’s, early years hell with her tantrums and scenes. She seems very fond of her father.’

‘If she is as intelligent and charming as you say – although *I* didn’t get that impression – then why get tied up with a lout like Derry?’

‘I think he adores her and she needs that. Gives her stability.’

‘Bollocks! You’ve been reading magazines.’

‘Don’t be rude, Agatha.’

‘Sorry, but it did sound a bit like psychobabble. I say, I wonder if anyone else got a sort of backhanded bequest in Mary’s odd will. Why didn’t we ask Bill Wong?’

‘I asked Beth. We were the only ones so favoured.’

‘How odd! I can understand her wanting to get at you from beyond the grave for dumping her. But why me? I was quite nice to her.’

‘She was very jealous of you.’

‘Why? You, me, because of our friendship?’

‘A bit, but mainly because of your popularity in the village.’

‘My *what?*’

‘You’re very popular, Agatha.’

‘Oh,’ said Agatha gruffly. She stared in a bemused way at the screen, not really seeing the words. Agatha Raisin popular! She felt quite dazed with happiness and gratitude. And then the temporary feeling of euphoria faded, to be replaced by one of dread. By cheating over this Open Day thing, she was putting such precious popularity at risk.

She got to her feet. ‘I think I’d better make a phone call.’

He looked at her in surprise. ‘Aren’t you staying for a cup of coffee? I was just about to put the kettle on.’

‘Put it on. I’ll just make a call and come back.’

‘Use the phone over there if it’s that urgent.’

‘It’s private.’

‘I’ll go into the kitchen and shut the door behind me. I won’t be able to hear a thing.’

But Agatha judged other people’s actions by her own. Were the roles reversed, she would most certainly have pressed her ear to the kitchen door and listened.

When she got to her own house, she phoned Roy Silver.

‘Aggie,’ he cried. ‘All ready for the planting?’

‘No, I’m not, Roy, and I’ve gone off the idea of working for Pedmans. Tell Wilson to tear up that contract. No plants, no deal.’

There was a little silence and then Roy said, ‘Your brain’s become peasantified. There’s nothing in that legal and binding contract which you signed saying anything about a deal, about plants. You can’t get out of it, Aggie, so you may as well have the shrubbery. Come on, it’s the best on offer. You’ll knock them in the eye.’

Agatha felt herself weakening. ‘Lovely blooms,’ he coaxed.

‘What if you’re seen?’

‘We’ll be there at two in the morning and we’ll be as quiet as mice. If anyone does see any movement, you can say you got some workmen in to lower the fence for the big day.’

‘I suppose if I have to work for Pedmans, I may as well get something out of it,’ said Agatha sulkily.

‘That’s the girl. Is it safe to arrive in that little shop of horrors down there? More murder?’

‘The police are working on it.’

‘See if you can solve it while I’m there and I’ll get some publicity out of the reflected glory.’

‘Anything to oblige,’ said Agatha sarcastically and rang off. She went back

to James's cottage.

'Everything all right?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Agatha uneasily. She sat down beside him again and tried to focus on what he had written, but her uneasiness about her garden would not go away.

She had meant to stop Roy's coming. For days she had meant to stop his coming. But as more and more people said they were looking forward to seeing her 'secret garden', the more Agatha felt she had to have something to show them. If she said there had been some sort of disaster and that everything had died and she was keeping the place locked up, some busybody was sure to think her garden had been vandalized like those others and tell the police and the police would say that it had been as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard when they had seen it.

So all too soon, in the middle of the warm dark summer night, there was Roy with his team of workmen and gardeners. They finished at dawn and drove off.

'Come along,' said Roy. 'You can't sit hiding in bed. Take a look!'

Agatha went outside.

A blaze of magnificent colour met her eyes. Flowers and trees and shrubs filled what had all too recently been a bare garden. The cats slid out round Agatha and frolicked on the grass as if they, too, were enjoying the display.

'It's magnificent,' said Agatha, awed.

'So now we can go and get a bit of sleep,' said Roy. 'When do the people start coming?'

'Not till ten. How do I tell them what flowers are what? I don't want to be exposed as a cheat.'

'See! Labels tied on all of them, nicely faded and weathered, but legible. You just bend down and read.'

They retreated indoors. Roy collapsed fully dressed on the bed in the spare bedroom and went instantly to sleep. Agatha took a last admiring look out of the window of her bedroom, set the alarm for nine and went to sleep as well.

At first they came in ones and twos and then suddenly Agatha's garden was full of exclaiming and admiring people. Roy, at a table by the side gate, collected the fees.

He could hear Agatha's voice describing the plants with all the authority of a real gardener. 'Yes, that is a fine example of a *Fremontodendron californicum* and that's a *Wattakaka sinensis*. Lovely perfume.'

And then Bernard Spott, to whom Roy had been introduced, raised his



puzzled voice. 'But this is all wrong,' he said plaintively. 'Mrs Raisin, that is not a *Fremontodendron californicum*. That's a *Phygelius capensis*!'

Agatha gave a gay laugh and turned away from him to another visitor, but Bernard went on. 'And you said, Agatha, that that was a *Hydrangea paniculata Grandiflora*. Firstly, it's nothing like a hydrangea. It is, in fact, a *Robinia pseudoacacia* called Frisia. And this –'

'You don't know what you're talking about,' snapped Agatha.

'He's right,' came a woman's voice, a visitor to the village, a hard-faced woman in a straw hat and print dress. 'I would say all these flowers and plants have the wrong labels on them.' Her hard eyes fastened on Agatha. 'I've been listening to you and you do not know the first thing about the plants in your garden. I think you just bought them lock, stock and barrel from some nursery and the nursery put the wrong labels on them.'

There was a silence. Agatha was aware of Mrs Bloxby standing listening, of Bill Wong, who had just arrived in time to hear it all.

'Would anyone like some tea?' asked Agatha desperately.

People began to shuffle out of the garden until there was only Agatha, Roy, Mrs Bloxby, and Bill Wong left. 'Lock the side gate,' Agatha ordered Roy. 'What a disaster!'

'What happened?' asked Mrs Bloxby.

'I'll tell you what happened,' said Bill. 'Our Agatha has been cheating again. You did get all those plants from a nursery, didn't you? Just like you said you would.'

Agatha nodded miserably.

'That's no crime,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'A lot of the villagers buy extra plants and flowers and things to put in before Open Day. The nurseries around here do a roaring trade. It is only a pity that the nursery you went to proved to be so incompetent.'

'They're the best there is,' said Roy defensively. 'They'd never have got the wrong labels.'

Bill leaned forward and peered into a flowerbed. 'Come here, Agatha,' he said. He pointed downwards. 'I don't think any of your dedicated gardeners would tramp over your flowerbeds.' In the soft earth was a clear imprint of a large booted foot.

'I brought men with me to put them in,' said Roy. 'Probably one of them.'

Bill turned to the vicar's wife. 'Could someone possibly have *switched* the labels?'

Mrs Bloxby put on her spectacles and went from plant to flower to tree, reading the labels. Then she straightened up. 'Why, how clever of you! That's exactly what is wrong.'

'Are you sure?' demanded Agatha. From inside the house came the sound of the doorbell.

‘I’ll get that,’ said Roy, disappearing inside.

‘I think that’s what happened,’ said Bill. ‘Someone’s played a trick on you, Agatha. When could they have done it?’

‘It must have been sometime between, say, five in the morning and nine.’

‘Daylight. Someone might have seen something.’

Roy came back into the garden with James Lacey. Agatha groaned.

‘You’ve done magnificently, Agatha,’ said James.

‘You may as well know the truth.’ Agatha looked thoroughly wretched. James listened to the tale of her deception, his eyes crinkling up with laughter.

When she had finished, he said, ‘You don’t do things by halves. All these months of hiding behind that high fence – I’m glad to see you’ve got it lowered at last – and all the lies and secrecy, and all for one Open Day in an English village!’ He stood and laughed while Agatha stared at her shoes.

Mrs Bloxby’s gentle voice cut across James’s laughter. ‘You know, I think it might be a nice idea to have tea out here among these lovely flowers and things. I see you have a little garden table and chairs there. I’ll help you get the tea-things.’

Agatha, glad to escape from James’s amusement, went inside with her.

Bill turned to James. ‘Look, you’re her nearest neighbour. Did you see anyone around this cottage this morning?’

‘I saw a few people. Let me think. I was up very early. Mrs Mason has just got herself a dog. She came walking past and called out a good morning. I was tidying up my front garden. Then there was Mrs Bloxby.’

‘What would she be doing along Lilac Lane?’ asked Bill. ‘It doesn’t lead anywhere.’

‘She often goes for a walk about the village in the early morning. Then along Lilac Lane, away from the village end, I heard a couple, a man and a girl, I think. I heard the girl laugh.’ He stood for a moment, looking bewildered. ‘That’s odd!’

‘What’s odd?’

‘I just remembered. The night Agatha and I discovered Mary had been murdered, as we were waiting outside her house to see if she would answer the bell, a man and a girl passed behind us on the road. I heard the girl laugh.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me this?’ demanded Bill sharply.

‘It slipped my mind. It didn’t seem important. Just a village sound. I mean, they weren’t coming away from the house or anything like that.’

Agatha and Mrs Bloxby came into the garden carrying tea-things.

James swung round. ‘Agatha, do you remember that couple on the road the night we discovered Mary dead?’

‘Yes,’ said Agatha. ‘I do now. I’d clean forgotten about them.’

‘And now James here says he heard a couple at the end of this road this morning, early.’

‘They could have been walkers,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘There’s a lot of them about the Cotswolds. Although Lilac Lane doesn’t lead anywhere. I mean, you can’t drive anywhere, there is that footpath across the field at the end of it.’

‘You were out early, Mrs Bloxby,’ said Bill. ‘Did you see anyone?’

‘I only saw Mr Lacey’s bottom. He was leaning over a flowerbed in his front garden, weeding, I think.’

‘Do you think it could have been that Beth Fortune and her boyfriend?’ asked Roy eagerly, who had been told all the details of the murder during the night by Agatha.

‘I think I’ll pay a call on them,’ said Bill.

‘Where exactly were Beth and John on the night of the murder?’ asked Agatha.

‘They were in Beth’s rooms in college, studying.’

‘Any witnesses to that?’

‘No, but usually only guilty people arrange cast-iron alibis.’

‘Come back when you’ve seen them and let us know what they say,’ urged Agatha.

When he had gone and James, Agatha, Roy and Mrs Bloxby were seated around the table, James said, ‘Even if it turns out that John Derry and Beth played a trick on you, Agatha, it’s a far cry from murder.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Agatha. ‘I mean, surely the destruction of the gardens ties up somewhere and somehow with Mary’s death. I wish I had never thought of this silly scheme. Now I have to go and work for Pedmans, the PR firm, in the autumn, and for six months, too.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘How did that come about?’

Roy kicked Agatha under the table. She yelped, rubbed her ankle, and glared at him. ‘I’m going to tell them,’ she said. She explained about the deal.

‘You must be very good at your job,’ said Mrs Bloxby. She tried to surreptitiously feed Hodge, the cat, with a piece of muffin. Agatha had bought a packet of a product new on the market which promised ‘real American blueberry muffins from your own microwave’. They tasted like wet cardboard. Hodge took it from her fingers and then spat it out on the grass. James crumbled his, so that his plate was covered in muffin crumbs. He hoped Agatha might think he had eaten some of it.

‘She is,’ said Roy. Somehow Mrs Bloxby, without saying anything, was making him feel guilty about getting Agatha to sign that contract. Away from the world of PR, away from London, things which passed as normal business in the city had a way of appearing, well, shabby in this rural tranquillity.

He gave himself an angry little shake, like a wet dog. People didn’t go about *planting* people in London; mugging, raping, knifing and shooting, but not *planting*.

‘I think,’ said Mrs Bloxby in her quiet voice, ‘that the full enormity of Mary Fortune’s death is striking me at last. Someone in this village is mad enough and deranged enough to have killed her and left her body in such a dreadful way. What on earth could she have done to engender such hate?’

‘So you believe she was a murderess?’ asked James. ‘I mean someone who is going to get murdered because of some flaw in their character?’

How can you talk about Mary with such academic interest when you once made passionate love to her? thought Agatha. Aloud, she said, ‘If only it would turn out to be an outsider!’

‘You sound more like a villager every day, Agatha,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘I must go and look at some of the other gardens. Why, James, what about yours?’

‘It’s open,’ he said easily. ‘I do what the others do and just leave a box at the gate for the money.’

‘Then I’ll have a look. Agatha?’ Mrs Bloxby turned to her. ‘Care for a walk?’

Agatha shook her head. ‘I couldn’t bear the looks and whispers.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about it. Yes, they will most of them be laughing over it, but I think with affection. You are regarded as something of a character.’

‘That’s me,’ said Agatha. ‘The village idiot complete with cats. So where do we go from here?’

Bill came back into the garden. ‘Until this murder is solved, Agatha,’ he said, ‘you should keep your front door locked at all times. Come to think of it, with that expensive security system in your garden, the lights must have been blazing while the men were working. Or did you switch it off?’

‘It switched itself off ages ago,’ said Agatha. ‘I’ll phone the security people and get them to fix it. What did Beth and John have to say for themselves?’

‘John did it,’ said Bill, sitting down. ‘And he’s quite unrepentant about it.’

‘What!’ screeched Agatha. ‘Have you charged him?’

‘It’s up to you. But for a schoolboy trick? And have your deception come out in court?’

‘But if he did that to me, maybe he did it to the other gardens. What was his reason for switching those labels?’

‘He said he went out for a long walk because he couldn’t sleep. He turned along Lilac Lane. As he passed your house, he saw the truck outside leaving. Wondering if it might be a burglary, because it was dawn and no one was about, he started to go up to the front door. He heard voices from the back garden and went to the side path and listened. He heard someone say, “So now we can go and get a bit of sleep. When do the people start coming?”’

‘Roy,’ breathed Agatha.

‘And then your voice saying, “Not till ten. How do I tell them what flowers are what? I don’t want to be exposed as a cheat.” And then Roy here replying,

“Labels tied on all of them, nicely faded and weathered, but legible. You just bend down and read.” So he thought he would pay you back for “meddling in his life”, as he put it, by switching the labels. He went down the lane a little and sat by the hedge and waited until the house became quiet. Then he went into the garden and moved all the labels around. I still can’t think him guilty of anything else. He seems to me typical of a certain type of Oxford University student, boorish and somewhat sulky.’

‘Damn him,’ muttered Agatha. ‘I would look a fool if this ever came to court.’

‘Thought I’d let you know,’ said Bill.

‘How did the funeral go?’ asked James. ‘You did go to it, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, I was there at the crematorium. Very sad. Only me and two other detectives and Beth and John.’

‘Some of us from the village should have gone,’ said Agatha, suddenly conscience-stricken because all at once it was hard to think of the Mary who had been exposed since her death. She could only remember Mary’s warmth and charm. Agatha suddenly became more determined than ever to see what she could do about solving Mary’s murder. Whatever Mary had been, she had not deserved such a death.

## Chapter Nine

Agatha remembered Bill Wong's warning when she was putting on make-up in her bedroom and heard her front door open the next day and someone walk into the hall. She was looking wildly at her dressing-table for some sort of weapon and seeing only the nail scissors when James's voice called up, 'Agatha, are you there?'

'Coming,' she yelled, and put some Blush Pink lipstick over her chin, swore dreadfully, wiped it off, and applied it properly.

She ran down the stairs. 'What's the matter?'

'I wondered whether you would fancy a trip into Oxford,' said James. 'I remembered this professor friend and phoned him up. He's at one of the other colleges but he's got us an introduction to a don at St Crispin's. I phoned him and asked him to lunch. That way we can find out more about John Derry.'

'And Beth,' said Agatha eagerly. 'Wait a minute. I'd better change.'

He looked appraisingly at her flowered blouse and plain skirt. 'You'll do. We're lunching at Brown's and no one dresses for that. I'll drive.'

And Agatha was happy as they drove off. She tried to persuade herself that she was happy because the day was sunny, because she was getting out of the village and ahead with the investigation. She did not want to admit that James's company was beginning to exert its old magic.

He took the road through Chipping Norton and Woodstock. 'Do you think anything will come out of this lunch?' asked Agatha.

'It might. I don't think either Beth or John Derry had anything to do with the murder, but we may as well try everything.'

'I wonder what he'll be like, this don. What's his name?'

'Timothy Barnstaple.'

Perhaps he'll be attractive, thought Agatha.

James parked in the underground car-park at Gloucester Green and they walked back along St Giles and so to Brown's Restaurant on the Woodstock Road.

'This is silly,' said James. 'I forgot to ask what he looked like.'

'Did you book a table?'

'No. We're meeting him now, at twelve, so it won't be too crowded, and it is the university holidays.'

They entered the restaurant and looked about. A thin middle-aged man got up as they walked in. He was leaning on a stick. He was dressed in a black jacket and black trousers. His black hair was greased back from a tired lined face. Porter from one of the hotels, thought Agatha and turned her eyes elsewhere.

But the man called out, 'Are you Mr Lacey?'

This, then, was Timothy Barnstaple.

'I took the liberty of ordering a drink while I waited for you,' he said. His voice was beautiful. In these days of the cult of the common accent, it was a pleasure to hear a well-spoken, well-modulated voice.

'I didn't know you were bringing Mrs Lacey,' said Timothy, leering at Agatha, 'but the pleasure is all mine.'

'Mrs Raisin is my neighbour and friend,' said James.

'And where is Mr Raisin?'

'I don't know,' said Agatha truthfully. 'I walked out on him years ago. I suppose he's dead.'

'Sit beside me, Mrs Raisin. But why are we so formal? What is your first name?'

'Agatha.'

'A good old name, Agatha. So sad the way they name girls these days. I have a student called Tootsy. That is her real name. She was christened that. A most scholarly girl. But how will she succeed in life? Her full name is Tootsy McWhirter, and she is a Thatcherite. Could not her parents write down, say, the Right Honourable Tootsy McWhirter and see how strange it might look? But we digress. I am very hungry. I will just order another drink while we look at the menu.'

The don ordered another double whisky and water and then peered over the menu. When they had ordered their food and Timothy had ordered a bottle of claret – 'We'll start with one bottle and then see how we get on' – he leaned his elbows on the table, pressed his knee against Agatha's and asked, 'How can I help?'

James told him briefly about the murder.

'Ah,' said Timothy, 'I read about that.'

'The thing is,' said James, 'we're just blundering about, finding out what we can about the characters of all the people close to Mary Fortune. What do you think of John Derry?'

'The college,' said Timothy, 'started to discriminate against the public schools, you know, Eton, Marlborough, Westminster, some time ago. Help the underprivileged and all that stuff. Down with elitism. The sad fact is that we have quite a lot of John Derrys, beer-swilling, loud-mouthed, at a loss at university, diligent enough swot at his comprehensive school, but not university material. Sort of chap who gets a bad degree if he gets one at all

and then blames the capitalist system. Subsequently can't get a job and refuses to believe that turning up for interviews in torn jeans and a boorish manner has anything to do with failure. He latched on to Beth in their first year.

'Beth, on the other hand, is a highly intelligent girl.'

'So why get tied up with John Derry?' asked Agatha.

'The brighter the girl, the more sexually naïve. They think they are being feminist and liberated when they enter into a sexual relationship with some man at college, not aware that by funding him, washing his socks and making his meals, they are more in chains than their mothers. It's all sex.'

He pressed his knee harder against Agatha's. It was a small table. She moved her legs away and found them pressed against James's, apologized and moved them away again, where Timothy's insistent knee was waiting under the table to welcome her leg back.

The food arrived, solid English food. 'Do you think either of them could have committed a murder?' asked Agatha.

He held up a hand ornamented with dirty fingernails for silence and then attacked his food. He ate very rapidly, washing the meal down with great gulps of wine. 'Perhaps another bottle?' he said, breaking his silence at last.

James ordered another bottle and poured a glass for Agatha and himself before serving Timothy. 'Now,' said James, 'as I am sure you don't want to drink claret with the pudding, perhaps we can talk.'

But Timothy, it transpired, could eat apple pie and ice cream and double cream washed down with claret.

Agatha waited in silence and then said sharply, 'Let's get down to it. We brought you out for lunch to get a few facts.'

Timothy smiled dreamily at Agatha's pugnacious face. 'Dear lady,' he crooned. 'So forceful. I am but jelly in the hands of a forceful woman.'

He seized hold of Agatha's hand and kissed it. She snatched it away. 'Come on,' she snapped. 'Tell us more about John Derry.'

He drained the last of the claret and signalled the waitress. 'Perhaps a brandy with the coffee . . .' he was beginning but Agatha waved the waitress away. 'We'll call you when we need you. No brandy, Timothy, until you talk to us. Tell us more about John Derry. Any incidents in college involving him? He and Beth are in their final year when the term starts, are they not?'

He sighed and leaned back and lit a cigarette. 'There was an incident in John's first year. He beat up a fellow student in a drunken brawl. It never got to court. He was disciplined by the college.'

'What caused the brawl?'

'He said the student he had attacked had made a pass at Beth. Some witnesses said Beth had encouraged the advances and seemed delighted at the subsequent punch-up, egging John on to greater efforts. But I find that hard to



believe. She is such a sweet girl. She'll get a good degree.'

He began to talk about college life, and time after time Agatha steered him back to the characters of John and Beth, but without much success.

Reluctantly James ordered brandy for Timothy – 'A double, my dear,' called Timothy to the waitress – and said, 'The one thing we have got out of this is that report that Beth had incited John to fight.'

'Beth Fortune is no Lady Macbeth,' exclaimed Timothy, waving one hand expansively so that cigarette ash dropped into Agatha's coffee cup. He focused his tipsy eyes on James and nodded in Agatha's direction. 'What's she like in bed? Feisty, I'll bet.'

James sighed. 'I have not had that pleasure.'

'Why?' asked Timothy.

'Can we stick to the subject?' Agatha's voice was beginning to get a nasty edge to it. 'On the night of the murder, John and Beth claim they were in Beth's rooms. But the police say there are no witnesses to give them an alibi.'

'But there is a witness.' He tapped his nose and then stubbed his cigarette out in the remains of his pudding.

They both leaned forward. 'Who?'

'Me,' he said triumphantly. 'Of course, it should be "I", but I always feel one can appear a trifle pedantic if –'

'What are you talking about?' howled Agatha. 'What did you see?'

'I was crossing the quad below Beth's rooms on the evening of the murder. I looked up and distinctly saw John Derry and Beth Fortune standing by the window, talking.'

'At what time?'

'At about eight thirty.'

'Did you tell the police this?'

'They didn't ask me.'

'But you must have known that they were looking for witnesses,' said Agatha impatiently.

'I saw no reason for my evidence, dear lady. Such as Beth Fortune does not kill her own mother, and in such a gruesome way. Nor, for that matter, would John Derry. The manner in which she was killed suggests a brooding hatred. A real village murder.'

'What do you mean – village murder?'

'We don't go in for such colourful deaths in the city. Lots of inbreeding still in these old Cotswold villages, and witchcraft and all that sort of thing. Take my word for it, it's a village murder.'

His eye roved round the restaurant for the waitress and James, guessing correctly that Timothy meant to ask for another brandy, forestalled him by asking for the bill.

Agatha was glad to escape and take a deep breath of fresh air when they got

outside. 'I thought we would be meeting a scholarly old gentleman,' she said bitterly. 'Do you think he meant all that, about being a witness?'

'Yes, I think he was telling the truth. Why should he lie?'

'Sing for his supper? Get more free booze out of you? When was the time of death exactly? Did we ask Bill Wong? We found her at eight o'clock.'

'I asked. They estimate she was killed about an hour before we arrived.'

'Why didn't I think of asking Bill?' demanded Agatha fretfully.

'Because we weren't exactly looking for alibis for people but more for reasons for killing Mary. Oh, God, think of the time it took to kill her and then to string up the body. He or she could have left only minutes before we arrived. And if John and Beth were seen at eight thirty, they could have had time to get back to Oxford, so they haven't really got an alibi, now I come to think of it.'

'Thank you for lunch, James. I should give you my share.'

'That's all right. Take me out for dinner next week and we'll call it quits. Are you going to give away the money Mary left you, Agatha?'

'No, I think I'll keep it.'

'Then you can afford to buy me dinner. Where now?'

'Back to Carsely, I suppose,' said Agatha. 'We might think of some ideas on the road.'

But nothing occurred to either of them, although they swapped various theories.

'Mrs Bloxby was right,' said Agatha with a shiver as they approached the village. 'The murder seems more awful the further one gets away from it. I think the shock of the whole thing has kept reality at bay.'

'There's the boy scouts' fête,' said James, slowing the car outside a field above Carsely. 'Want to have a look? They've got stalls and things, and I could do with some home-made jam. Mary used to keep me supplied. Damn it! Why did I have to think of that?'

'May as well have a look,' agreed Agatha.

He stopped the car on the verge and they walked into the field, admission twenty pence. Admission to everything in Carsely seemed to cost twenty pence. They wandered along the stalls. Mrs Bloxby, raising money for charity as usual, was selling home-made jam. Agatha and James bought a jar each. James chatted away while Agatha edged off and stood waiting. She was still ashamed about her trick with her garden.

There were small boy scouts leaping about on a trampoline and boy scouts vaulting over a hobby horse. There was also a boy scouts' band playing tinnily.

Over in the corner was something that looked like a scaffold but turned out to be a 'mountain rescue' display. Three boys were hoisting a chubby boy scout up on ropes. He missed his hold and turned upside down and swung in

the air.

‘Just like Mary Fortune,’ said Agatha with a shudder. ‘Let’s go.’

They turned away. A wind had sprung up and the clouds above were heavy and grey. There had not been rain for some time and little dust devils swirled up from between patches of bare earth among the scrubby grass of the field. There was also a faint chill damp in the air, heralding approaching rain. Agatha rubbed her bare arms and shivered.

Then, from behind them, they heard a familiar voice shouting, ‘Harder, boys, harder! You’re not pulling hard enough. I’ll show you.’

Agatha and James stopped and turned round and looked back.

Bernard Spott had taken off his jacket and was rolling up his sleeves to expose sinewy arms. He edged the boys at the ‘mountain rescue’ display aside and seized the rope and pulled one of the boys up easily. ‘You see how it’s done?’ said Bernard. ‘You use the strength of your forearms. Don’t jerk the whole body. Just the forearms.’

‘Walk away with me,’ said James urgently. ‘Don’t show too much interest.’  
‘Why?’

‘Because that’s how it could have been done.’ He put an arm about her waist and drew her along.

Good heavens, thought Mrs Bloxby, I do believe Agatha has succeeded in attracting James at last.

‘Bernard? You can’t mean *Bernard*. He’s an old man.’

‘But a very fit one. We kept discounting people because they weren’t strong enough. But all anyone would have to do would be to bind her ankles with rope, leaving one long end, throw the end up over the hook, and pull the body up. Tie it up and cut the end.’

‘Granted. But why Bernard?’

‘I don’t think it’s Bernard,’ said James, stopping suddenly. ‘We’ve been arguing and thinking and speculating for so long, I’m jumping to mad conclusions.’

They had reached the entrance to the field. Agatha looked back. Bernard Spott was standing quite still, staring across the field at them.

‘I say,’ said Agatha, ‘let’s go to his house and wait for him. We could ask him if he knew of anyone else in the village who has his way with ropes. Don’t look now, but he’s staring and staring at us.’

‘May as well try,’ said James. ‘But why not ask him now?’

‘I don’t know. I want a look at his back garden. We could even spot something the police have missed. I mean, they’re not going to have searched the garden of a respectable old villager like Bernard very thoroughly.’

‘I wish I’d never mentioned Bernard,’ said James peevishly. ‘I’ve had enough of this for one day.’

‘Then drop me off,’ said Agatha. ‘I’ll go on my own.’

‘Oh, in that case I’d better go with you in case you make a fool of yourself,’ said James ungraciously. ‘Must you smoke?’ he demanded, as Agatha lit a cigarette as soon as she was in the car.

‘I thought you didn’t mind people smoking.’

‘So I lied.’

Agatha tossed the lit cigarette out of the car window.

He had moved off as he was speaking, but he immediately slammed on the brakes. ‘Of all the stupid things to do, Agatha. The ground’s as dry as tinder. You could set the countryside alight.’

Agatha stayed in the car, a mulish look on her face, as he searched the ditch until he had found her discarded cigarette and put it out. He had no right to speak to her in that tone of voice.

‘You’re a male chauvinist pig,’ she said as soon as he got back in.

‘And you, my dear Agatha, are the greatest female chauvinist sow it has ever been my ill luck to come across.’

‘Oh, sod you, James, and bugger the countryside and all who sail in her. Are we going to Bernard’s or not?’

‘I’ve a good mind not to go. Do you know what? We’re being childish even thinking that old man could do such a thing.’

‘I didn’t like the way he was looking at us,’ said Agatha.

‘Woman’s intuition?’

‘Something like that, James dear.’

‘So what are you going to do if he comes back while we are ferreting around, looking for God knows what? Point a finger at him and say, “You did it!” and he will break down and say, “Mea culpa, O great detective lady”?’

‘Why are you so beastly angry all of a sudden?’ demanded Agatha.

There was a silence while he steered the car round a corner and then up the hill to Bernard’s cottage. ‘I don’t know,’ he said in a mild voice. ‘I really don’t know.’

‘Well, figure it out next time before you open your trap,’ said Agatha, still ruffled. When the car stopped she got out and went up the garden path and round the side of Bernard’s house to the back.

James sat tapping the wheel and watching her disappear. Then he shrugged and got out as well and followed her.

The sky above was growing darker. Little snatches of sound from the scouts’ band filtered to his ears. He went round the side of the cottage. The back garden was quite large, heavy with the scent of roses. A sharp wind sent a drift of blossom scattering over the grass. In the middle of the garden was a round pond where goldfish darted here and there in the greenish water.

Agatha turned and saw him and said in a quiet voice, ‘Come here and look at this.’

He went to join her. There was a square patch of bare, well-raked earth

planted with neat little wooden crosses. On each cross was a carved name, Jimmy, William, Harry, George, Fred, Alice, Emma, Olive, and so on.

‘Animals’ cemetery?’ asked James.

‘Do you know what I think those are?’ said Agatha. ‘I think they’re the graves of those goldfish that were poisoned.’

‘Come on, Agatha. Nobody gives names to goldfish.’

‘I think he did. There’s one way to find out.’ She bent down and started digging in the earth with her fingers.

‘Stop that, Agatha,’ said James. ‘It’ll be a cat.’

‘Then, if all these graves are animals, there’s still something up with him. Aha!’ She straightened up and pointed downwards. The remains of a nearly decomposed goldfish lay unearthed. ‘Don’t you see?’ she said, her eyes gleaming. ‘If he was as potty as this about a lot of goldfish and if Mary poisoned them and he knew about it, it could have turned his brain.’

They both stiffened as they heard the front-garden gate squeal on its hinges. ‘Cover that up, quick,’ said James.

‘No,’ said Agatha. She turned to face the entrance to the back garden. Bernard came round the corner of the house, his jacket over his arm. He stopped short at the sight of them for a moment and then walked quickly up to them. He looked down at the open grave at Agatha’s feet and said in a quiet voice, ‘Why have you desecrated Jimmy’s grave?’

‘You killed Mary,’ said Agatha in a flat voice. ‘You discovered she’d poisoned your fish and so you killed her.’

‘Oh, really, so where are the police, Agatha?’

‘They’ll be here any moment,’ said Agatha, moving behind James for protection. She improvised wildly. ‘The forensic people traced that rope to you.’

‘That’s not possible,’ he said. Then, as if realizing that by remark he had given himself away, he sat down suddenly on the grass.

‘Why did you do it?’ asked James.

‘She humiliated me,’ said Bernard, his head bowed. ‘She flirted with me and when I made a pass at her, she laughed in my face and called me a silly old man. I was furious. I told her that she had deliberately led me on to make a fool of me and that I would tell everyone so. But of course I didn’t. It would make me look too ridiculous, a man of my age.’

‘I heard a movement in the garden. The old do not sleep heavily. I looked out. There was bright moonlight. I saw her bending over the pond. I did not go out. I had become frightened of her, frightened she would laugh and jeer at me. But I found my goldfish dead in the morning, all my friends, my pets, my family. I used to sit by the pond and talk to them. I could think of nothing else but punishing her.’

‘It was surprisingly easy. The next time I saw her in the intervening weeks,

she was easy and friendly with me, as if nothing had happened. She even called round, bringing me a cake. So I made my preparations. I called on her and asked her for a drink. I said I would like brandy, knowing that she often liked a glass of brandy. When she had poured two glasses, I said I thought I heard someone moving outside. When she went off to look out of the window, I put the poison in her glass.

‘I had an agonizing time wondering whether she would drink it or not. At last I said when I was in the navy we used to drink our brandy down in one go, but I couldn’t expect a lady to be able to do that. She laughed and said, “Why not?” and tipped the contents of her glass down her throat.

‘I watched her die. I felt nothing at all. Nothing. I hadn’t yet touched my own drink. I poured it carefully into the bottle after I had pulled on a pair of gloves, and then put the top back on the bottle. I put my own glass in my pocket, along with the one she had drunk out of, to take away with me. I sponged the vomit from her mouth off the carpet. I knew traces of it would be found by the police, but I did not want to make matters easy for them.

‘I lifted her up . . . and well, the rest you know. I wanted her to be found desecrated, the way she had desecrated those gardens and in revenge for killing my fish. I knew she was the one who had tried to destroy the other gardens. She was mad.’

‘I’ll see if the police have arrived,’ said Agatha in a thin voice.

She ran from the garden, round the front and to the cottage next door, where she screamed at the startled lady, a Mrs Bain, to let her use the phone. She called Fred Griggs and then went back reluctantly to join James and Bernard.

But when she reached the back garden, James was alone.

‘Poor mad old man,’ said James. ‘He’s gone in to lock up a few things before the police take him away.’

At that moment, Bernard reappeared. ‘I’ll just feed my new family before I go,’ he said. He crossed to the goldfish pond. With a sigh of relief, Agatha heard the wail of a police siren in the distance.

James suddenly put his arms around her and she gratefully leaned against him and buried her face in his chest. ‘That’s that,’ came Bernard’s now quavering voice. ‘I’ll just get something from the kitchen.’

Agatha raised her head. ‘You should go with him. He might run away.’

‘We’d better go in anyway. The police will be hammering at the front door.’

They went in by the kitchen door. Sure enough, there was banging on the door. Agatha opened it and Bill Wong and two detectives came in. ‘We got your message on the police radio. Where is he?’

Agatha looked wildly around. ‘I don’t know. Somewhere.’

And then a drumming sound reverberated down from the ceiling overhead.

Bill and his colleagues raced for the stairs. James pulled Agatha back. 'Don't go,' he said. 'It won't be pretty.'

'What do you mean?'

'I think he poisoned his new fish – and then he poisoned himself. They may be able to pump him out in time, but I doubt it.'

Upstairs, radios crackled as they called for an ambulance. 'Let's go and sit in the garden, Agatha,' said James. 'There's nothing more we can do here.'

## Epilogue

It was two days after the death of Bernard Spott. The rain, which had broken the long spell of good weather, had ceased and the sun once more shone down.

Agatha and James were sitting in Agatha's garden. James was enthusiastic about the flowers and bushes, so much so that Agatha was almost able to forget about her deception. They had been questioned separately and this was the first time they had got together since they had discovered that Bernard was the murderer.

'Why did you let him go off alone into the house?' asked Agatha. 'Did you guess he would take his own life?'

'I thought he might. He was a brave man during the war. As soon as I heard that awful drumming sound upstairs, I knew it was his heels drumming on the floor after a swig of poison. He poisoned his new fish as well. I should have kept an eye on him and let him stand trial. My only excuse is that I was so shocked and upset, I didn't really know what I was doing.'

'He may have been a brave man,' said Agatha sharply, 'but he committed a most dreadful crime and should have stood trial for it.'

Bill Wong appeared around the side of the house, Agatha having no reason to lock the gate any more.

He sat down and studied them for a few moments and then said, 'We were almost on to Bernard, you know.'

'You're just saying that,' said Agatha.

'No, we had been scouring the nurseries far and wide for someone who might have bought that particular brand of weedkiller around the time of the murder.'

'What brand?'

'Clean Garden. An innocuous name for some quite lethal stuff.'

'But lots of people buy it, surely?'

'We had photographs of people in this village, even you pair, which we had taken when you weren't looking. We showed them around the nurseries, and right over in darkest Oxfordshire they recognized Bernard Spott. That and his navy background and the fact that he was once a keen yachtsman made him look like our man. The knots on that rope had been done by an expert.' He



looked at their outraged faces and laughed. ‘Don’t worry. I’m not taking the credit away from you. We had no real proof. What put you on to him? I mean, you said you had watched him helping the boy scouts, but surely that wasn’t enough.’

‘It was the graves in his garden,’ said Agatha.

‘Graves? What graves?’

‘All those little graves for his poisoned fish, all with crosses and names.’

‘We saw those,’ said Bill. ‘But we asked him and he explained it was part of his garden which he reserved as an animals’ cemetery, and when anyone in the village had a dead cat or dog, they brought it to Bernard. But what I cannot understand is why you two gave him time to poison himself.’

James flashed a warning look at Agatha. ‘We were in shock,’ he said blandly. ‘We did not think he would take his own life.’

Bill gave a little sigh and clasped his tubby hands over his chest. ‘Mad. All mad. What exactly was up with Mary Fortune, I doubt we’ll ever know. She was diagnosed in America as being depressed, which seems to cover a multitude of mental ailments.’ He looked at James. ‘Why it was you never suspected anything was wrong with her, considering the circumstances, is beyond me.’

‘Even Agatha here did not know she was that deranged,’ said James. ‘Look, she seemed a flirtatious, easy-going woman out for a good time, with no strings attached. When she was quite foul to me when I broke it off, I felt so guilty about having misunderstood her – by that I mean that it had never crossed my mind before that she was considering marriage to me – I felt guilty. Then, as other people might have told you, and even Bernard told us, she could be really nasty and then, the next time you met her, so warm and charming, it was as if you had imagined it all.’

‘And Beth and John are completely in the clear.’ Agatha sounded as if she regretted that fact. ‘I suppose the dreadful couple will be settling in the village.’

‘No, they’re putting the house up for sale,’ said Bill. ‘I expected to see your pictures all over the newspapers, Agatha – “Village Sleuth Strikes Again”.’

‘I thought you might have told them it was I who solved your bloody murder,’ said Agatha peevishly.

‘Not my decision. My superiors seem to have carefully omitted that fact when they spoke to the press.’

Agatha looked huffy. ‘You would think, with my reputation, they would have called round here.’

Bill smiled. ‘You’ve still got time to let them know it was you.’

‘Too late,’ said Agatha, wise in the ways of newspapers. ‘The story is dead already. That find of two headless corpses in Birmingham knocked it off the pages. If I step in now, they’ll just think I’m some bragging old trout trying to

get in on the act.'

'You forget,' put in James, 'that if it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have got on to Bernard in the first place.'

Agatha's bearlike eyes fastened on him. 'What had you got to do with it? Yes, you did say it was Bernard and then immediately went back on it and if I hadn't insisted on going, if *I*, I repeat, I hadn't discovered those graves and dug one up, he'd still be at liberty.'

'I doubt it,' said Bill. 'We found a neatly typed and signed confession to the murder in his desk. It was addressed to police headquarters in Mircester. He'd probably have sent it to us soon enough.'

'Well, I think I did brilliantly,' said Agatha, 'and if I don't say so, who else is going to? Oh, here's Mrs Bloxby. Mrs Bloxby . . .'

'Margaret.'

'Margaret, I mean. I solve this murder and James and Bill are trying to take the credit away from me.'

Mrs Bloxby sat down. 'Such a sad affair. And Bernard had been in this village for quite a long time. Who would have thought it? One never really knows what goes on inside people's brains. I went up to Bernard's after his fish had been poisoned to sympathize with him and he shrugged and said, "They were only fish. I can get more." Bernard Spott was one of the fixtures of the village that no one ever really thought much about. He has a sister, a spinster of seventy-five, called Beryl Spott, who has inherited the cottage. I must warn you, Agatha, that she has already visited the vicarage to say she intends to reside here.'

'Why warn me?'

'She is convinced that her brother was innocent and that you, Agatha, hounded him to his death.'

'Just as well I'm going to London.'

'Must you?' Mrs Bloxby looked at her sympathetically. 'Have you a copy of the contract? There might be some clause in it letting you off the hook due to illness or something like that. I mean, if you were ill, you could not go.'

Agatha brightened. 'I'll go and get it. Roy sent me a copy.'

She went into the house and a short time later returned with the contract. She bent over it and scanned every line and then sighed. 'No let-out that I can see. I'd better just go and get it over with. It might be fun to be back in harness.'

'You could fail miserably and be a rotten PR,' said Bill, 'and then they would be glad to send you home.'

'I couldn't do that,' exclaimed Agatha. 'My pride wouldn't let me. What about my poor cats, Hodge and Boswell, locked up for six months in a London flat?'

'I'll take them,' said James suddenly. 'I like cats. I'll look after them until

you come back.’

‘Thank you,’ said Agatha. ‘I’d feel better about things knowing they were with you.’ She brightened. If James had her cats, then she would have plenty of excuses to phone him up to ask how they were.

‘And you will be able to come down at weekends, surely,’ said Mrs Bloxby.

Agatha shook her head. ‘They’ll work me to death. It’ll be weekends as well most of the time.’

‘I’ll take care of your garden,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘It’s so lovely, and by the time you return, spring will be here again.’

Agatha had a sudden thought. ‘Did you ever find out about that couple, Bill? You know, the ones we heard out on the road the night Mary was murdered.’

‘Oh, them, it’s hard to believe. After we learned about them, we put out an appeal on television for them to come forward, without any success. Then, after the solution to the murder had been reported in yesterday’s papers, they walked into the police headquarters as bold as brass.’

‘Who are they?’ asked James. ‘Why didn’t they come forward before?’

‘It was a young fellow who lives on the council estate, Harry Trump, and his girlfriend from Evesham, Kylie Taylor. When asked why they hadn’t come forward before, they said that you could never trust the police and we might have pinned the murder on them. I must go. Call in and see me before you leave for London, Agatha.’

‘There’s some time to go before then,’ said Mrs Bloxby, getting to her feet as well.

After they had left, James said, ‘I’d better be getting along. See you in the Red Lion later, Agatha, and don’t forget you owe me dinner.’

He bent down to kiss her cheek, but at that moment she turned her head and the kiss landed full on her mouth, a mouth which was warm and tingling. As James straightened up, Agatha looked up at him in a dazed way.

‘Goodbye,’ he said abruptly and strode out of the garden.

Agatha could not quite believe those last weeks before her departure for London. It was like the bad old times. James was polite to her when he met her in the pub, but quite distant. She invited him out for dinner several times but he always had an excuse ready. She began to long for her departure as much as she had so recently dreaded it.

At last the day arrived and she delivered her cats to James. She had already said goodbye to her other friends. She stood in James’s hallway, the cat baskets at her feet, and said awkwardly, ‘I’m off, then.’

‘Have a good time,’ he replied.

‘I’ll phone.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Well, er, goodbye.’

‘Goodbye, Agatha.’ He held open the door for her.

Agatha went out stiffly to her car and climbed in. She drove off without looking out of the window. James watched her go. He should not have been so cold towards her but that kiss had alarmed him. He wondered if he would ever get over the shame of his affair with Mary Fortune. He did not even want to think of any emotional entanglement. Perhaps once he was feeling better about himself, he might travel up one day and take her out to lunch. He went back in and stared at the computer screen. It was a cold, windy day and leaves were swirling down from the trees outside.

The horror had left the village and Carsely was settling down for its long winter sleep, safe and calm and untroubled. And boring, he thought dismally, half his mind still occupied with that forlorn figure of Agatha getting into her car.

Agatha arrived at Pedmans at Cheapside on the Monday. The receptionist took a note of her name and phoned upstairs. Then she smiled at Agatha.

‘Your secretary, Peta, will be down in a minute.’

But Agatha waited a whole ten minutes before a lank girl in an Armani trouser suit drifted down the stairs.

‘Oh, there you are, sweetie,’ Peta said by way of greeting. ‘Follow me and I’ll show you to your sanctum.’

Agatha grimly followed her. She looked around a small dark office and bared her teeth. ‘Let’s get one thing straight, Peta,’ she said. ‘When you have informed Mr Wilson that this office is an insult and found me a better one, you will remember to never dare call me sweetie again. I am Mrs Raisin to you at all times. And when you’ve finished doing that, get me a cup of coffee.’

Peta made a brave stand. ‘We all get our own coffee in this firm. Secretaries are not waitresses, you know.’

‘Just do it,’ barked Agatha, ‘or find yourself another boss. Jump to it!’

And Peta jumped.

A short time afterwards, Agatha was ensconced in a larger office while Peta silently placed a tray of coffee and biscuits in front of her.

For one brief moment, Agatha thought of James, of Mrs Bloxby, of her cats, her home, her garden, and closed her eyes in pain.

Then she opened them again and pulled the phone towards her.

She was back in business and there was work to be done.

Carsely could wait.

**AGATHA RAISIN**  
and the  
**WALKERS of DEMBLEY**

M. C. Beaton

ROBINSON  
London

# Chapter One

Agatha Raisin watched the sunlight on the wall of her office in the City of London.

It was shining through the slats of the Venetian blind, long arrows of light inching down the wall as the sun sank lower, the sundial of Agatha's working day.

Tomorrow it would all be over, her stint as a public relations officer, and then she could return to her home in the village of Carsely in the Cotswolds. She had not enjoyed her return to work. Her short time away from it, her short time in retirement, had seemed to divorce her from the energy required to drum up publicity for clients from journalists and television companies.

Although she had enough of her old truculence and energy left to make a success of it, she missed the village and her friends. She had gone back initially for a few weekends when she could get away, but the wrench of returning to London had been so great that for the past two months she had stayed where she was, working at the weekends as well.

She had thought that her new-found talent for making friends would have worked for her in the City, but most of the staff were young compared to her fifty-something and preferred to congregate together at lunchtime and after work. Roy Silver, her young friend who had inveigled her into working for Pedmans for six months, also had been steering clear of her of late, always claiming he was 'too busy' to meet her for a drink or even to talk to her.

She sighed and looked at the clock. She was taking a journalist from the *Daily Bugle* out for drinks and dinner to promote a new pop star, Jeff Loon, real name Trevor Biles, and she was not looking forward to it. It was hard to promote someone like Jeff Loon, a weedy, acne-pitted youth with a mouth like a sewer. But he had a voice which used to be described as Irish parlour tenor and had recently re-recorded some old romantic favourites, all great hits. It was necessary then to give him a new image as the darling of middle England, the kind that the mums and dads adored. The best way was to keep him away from the press as much as possible and send in Agatha Raisin.

She went to the Ladies and changed into a black dress and pearls, suitable to foster the staid image of the client she was representing. The journalist she was to meet was new to her. She had checked up on him. His name was Ross

Andrews. He had once been a major league reporter but had been demoted to the entertainments page in middle age. Ageing journalists often found themselves relegated to reporting on the social or entertainments page or, worse, to answering readers' letters.

They were to meet in the City, Fleet Street being no more, the newspaper companies having moved down to the East End.

She had agreed to meet Ross in the bar of the City Hotel and to eat there as well, for the restaurant was passable and its windows commanded a good view of the River Thames.

She twisted this way and that in front of the mirror. The dress, a recent purchase, looked suspiciously tight. Too many expense account dinners and lunches. As soon as she got back to Carsely, she would take the weight off.

As she walked down to the entrance hall, the doorman, Jock, sprang to open the door. 'Goodnight, Mrs Raisin,' he said with an oily smile, and muttered under his breath once Agatha was out of earshot, 'Rotten old bat!' For Agatha had once snapped at him, 'If you're a doorman, then open the bloody door every time you see me. Hop to it!' and the lazy Jock had never forgiven her.

Agatha walked along with the thinning home-going crowds, a stocky, pugnacious woman with a short hairstyle, bearlike eyes and good legs.

The hotel was only a few streets away. She left the evening sunlight and plunged into the gloom of the hotel bar. Although she had never met this Ross Andrews before, her experienced eye picked him out immediately. He was wearing a dark suit and a collar and tie, but he had that raffish seediness about him of a newspaper journalist. He had thinning hair of a suspicious black, a fat face with a smudge of a nose and watery blue eyes. He might have once been good-looking, thought Agatha as she walked towards him, but years of heavy boozing had taken their toll.

'Mr Andrews?'

'Mrs Raisin. Call me Ross. I ordered a drink and put it on your tab,' he said cheerfully. 'It's all on expenses anyway.'

Agatha reflected that quite a number of journalists were expert at putting in fake restaurant bills for clients they should have entertained and never did, pocketing the money themselves. But when it came to anyone else's expenses, it seemed to be a case of no holds barred.

She nodded and sat down opposite him, signalled to the waiter and ordered a gin and tonic for herself. 'Call me Agatha,' she said.

'How are things on the *Daily Bugle*?' she continued, knowing that it was pointless talking business until the journalist considered he had sunk enough booze to warrant a few lines.

'On the skids, if you ask me,' he said gloomily. 'The trouble is that these new journalists don't know their arses from their elbows. They come out of

these damn schools of journalism and they're not a patch on the likes of us who had to learn to fly by the seat of our pants. Come back off a job and say, "Oh, I couldn't ask him or her that. Husband just dead," or some crap like that. I say to them, "Laddie, in my day, we got it on the front page and the hell with anyone's feelings." They want to be *liked*. A good reporter is *never* liked.'

'True,' agreed Agatha with some feeling.

He signalled the waiter and ordered himself another whisky and water without asking Agatha if she was ready for another drink.

'It all happened when they turned the running of the newspapers over to accountants, seedy jealous bods who cut your expenses and argue about every penny. Why, I remember . . .'

Agatha smiled and tuned him out. How many times had she been in similar circumstances, listening to similar complaints? Tomorrow she would be free and she would never go back to work again, not as a PR anyway. She had sold her own PR firm to take early retirement, to retire to the Cotswolds, to the village of Carsely, which had slowly enfolded her in its gentle warmth. She missed it. She missed the Carsely Ladies' Society, the chatter over the teacups in the vicarage, the placid life of the village. Keeping a practised look of admiration on her face as Ross wittered on, her thoughts moved to her neighbour, James Lacey. She had had a drink with him on her last visit to the village but their easy friendship seemed to have gone. She told herself that her silly obsession for him had fled, never to return. Still, they had had fun solving those murders.

As Ross raised his arm to order another drink, she forestalled him by suggesting firmly that they should eat.

They walked into the dining-room. 'Your usual table, Mrs Raisin,' said the maître d', showing them to a table at the window.

There had been a time, reflected Agatha, when being known and recognized by maître d's was gratifying, underlying how far she had come from the Birmingham slum in which she had grown up. No one said 'slum' these days, of course. It was Inner City, as if the euphemism could take away the grime, violence and despair. The do-gooders chattered on about poverty but no one was starving, apart from old age pensioners who were not tough enough to demand benefits owing to them. It was a poverty of the very soul, where imagination was fed by violent videos, drink and drugs.

'And old Chalmers said to me when I came back from Beirut, "You're too wily and tough a bird, Ross, to get kidnapped."'

'Absolutely,' said Agatha. 'What would you like to drink?'

'Mind if I choose? I find the ladies know nothing about wine,' which Agatha translated into meaning that the ladies might order inexpensive wine, or half a bottle, or something unacceptable. She thought, he will choose the



second most expensive wine, being greedy but not wanting to appear so, and he did. Like some of his ilk, he ordered in the way of food what he thought was due to his position rather than because he enjoyed the taste of it. He did not eat much of it, obviously longing for the brandy at the end of the meal and for someone to take all the expensive muck away. So he barely ate snails, followed by rack of lamb, followed by profiteroles.

Over the brandies, Agatha wearily got down to business. She described Jeff Loon as a nice boy, 'too nice for the pop world', who was devoted to his mother and two brothers. She described his forthcoming release. She handed over photographs and press handouts.

'This is a load of shit, you know,' said Ross, smiling at her blearily. 'I mean, I checked up on this Jeff Loon and he's got a record, and I mean *criminal* record. He's been found guilty on two counts of actual bodily harm and he's also been done for taking drugs, so why are you peddling this crap about him being a mother's boy?'

The pleasant middle-aged woman that had been his impression of Agatha Raisin disappeared and a hard-featured woman with eyes like gimlets faced him.

'And you cut the crap, sweetie,' growled Agatha. 'You know damn well why you were invited here. If you had no intention of writing anything even half decent, then you shouldn't have come, you greedy pig. I'll tell you something else: I don't give a sod what you write. I just never want to see your like again. You chomp and swig like the failed journalist you are, boring the knickers off me with apocryphal stories of your greatness, and then you have the cheek to say that Jeff is a phony. What about you?'

'Oh, it's not on for PRs to complain, but hear this! I'm going to break the mould. Your editor is going to hear all your stories, verbatim, and get it along with the price of this evening.'

'He'll never listen to you!' said Ross.

She fished under the napkin on her lap and held up a small but serviceable tape recorder. 'Smile,' said Agatha. 'You're on *Candid Camera*.'

He gave a weak laugh. 'Aggie, *Aggie*.' He covered her hand with his own. 'Can't you take a joke? Of course I'm going to write a nice piece on Jeff.'

Agatha signalled for the bill. 'I couldn't care less what you write,' she said.

Ross Andrews had sobered rapidly. 'Look, Aggie . . .'

'Agatha to you, but Mrs Raisin will do now that we've got to know each other so well.'

'Look, I promise you a good piece.'

Agatha signed the credit card slip. 'You'll get the tape when I read it,' she said. She got to her feet. 'Goodnight, Mr Andrews.'

Ross Andrews swore under his breath. Public relations! He hoped never to meet anyone like Agatha Raisin again. He felt quite tearful. Oh, for the days

when women were women!

Far away in the heart of Gloucestershire in the market town of Dembley, Jeffrey Benson, seated in the back of a schoolroom which was used for the weekly meeting of the rambling association, the Dembley Walkers, was thinking pretty much the same thing as he watched his lover, Jessica Tartinck, address the group. This feminist business was all very well, and God knew he was all for the equality of women, but why did they have to dress and go on like men?

Jessica was wearing jeans and a workman's shirt hanging loose. She had a pale scholarly face – she held a first in English from Oxford – and thick black hair worn long and straight. She had superb breasts, large and firm. She was rather thick about the thighs and did not have very good legs, but then the legs were always in trousers. Like Jeff, she was a schoolteacher at the local comprehensive. Before she had somehow declared herself leader of the Dembley Walkers, they had been a chatty, inoffensive group of people who enjoyed their weekend rambles.

But Jessica seemed to delight in confrontations with landowners, whom she hated like poison. She was a frequent visitor to the Records Office in Gloucester, poring over maps, finding rights of way which, buried in the mists of time, now had crops planted over them.

Jessica, on arriving to teach at the school a few months before, had immediately looked around for A Cause. She often thought in capital letters. She had learned of the Dembley Walkers through a fellow teacher, a timid, fair-haired girl called Deborah Camden who taught physics. All at once Jessica had found her cause, and in no time at all, without any of the other ramblers' knowing quite how it had happened, she had taken over. That her zeal in finding rights of way for them across private land was fuelled by bitterness and envy and, as in the case of her previous 'protests' – she had been an anti-nuclear campaigner on Greenham Common – by a desire for power over people, never crossed her mind. Jessica could find no fault in Jessica, and this was her great strength. She exuded confidence. It was politically incorrect to disagree with her. As most of the genuine ramblers who just wanted a peaceful outing had left and been replaced by ones in Jessica's image, she found it easy to hold sway. Among her most devout admirers, apart from Deborah, was Mary Trapp, a thin, morose girl with bad skin and very, very large feet. Then there was Kelvin Hamilton, a professional Scot who wore a kilt at all times and made jokes about 'saxpence'; he claimed to have come from a Highland village but actually came from Glasgow. There was Alice Dewhurst, a large powerful woman with a large powerful backside, who had known Jessica during the Greenham Common days. Alice's friend,

Gemma Queen, a thin, anaemic shop-girl, did not say much except to agree with everything Alice said. Lastly were two men, Peter Hatfield and Terry Brice, who worked at the Copper Kettle Restaurant in Dembley as waiters. Both were thin and quiet, both effeminate, both given to whispering jokes to each other and sniggering.

Jessica looked particularly attractive that evening because she had found fresh prey. There was an old right of way across the land of a baronet, Sir Charles Fraith. She herself had surveyed the territory. There were crops growing across the right of way. She had written to Sir Charles herself to say that they would be marching across his land the Saturday after next and that there was nothing he could do about it.

Deborah suddenly found her hand shooting up. ‘Yes, Deborah?’ asked Jessica, raising thin black eyebrows.

‘C-couldn’t we j-just once,’ stammered Deborah, ‘j-just go for a walk like we used to? It was fun when old Mr Jones used to lead us. We had picnics and things and . . .’

Her voice trailed away before the supercilious expression on Jessica’s face.

‘Come, now, Deborah, this is not like you. If it weren’t for rambling groups like ours, there wouldn’t be rights of way at all.’

One of the original pre-Jessica rambles, Harry Southern, said suddenly, ‘She’s got a point. We’re going back to Farmer Stone’s land this Saturday. He chased us off with a shotgun a month ago and some of the ladies were frightened.’

‘You mean *you* were frightened,’ said Jessica haughtily. ‘Very well. We will put it to a vote. Do we go to Farmer Stone’s this weekend or not?’

As her acolytes outnumbered the others, the vote was easily carried. Even Deborah no longer had the courage to protest, and after the meeting, when Jessica put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a hug, she felt her doubts ebbing away and all her usual slavish devotion returning.

POETS day in the City, the acronym standing for Piss Off Early Tomorrow’s Saturday, had arrived at last. Agatha Raisin cleared her desk. She had an almost childish desire to erase all the telephone numbers of contacts on the Filofax to make it harder for whoever replaced her, but managed to restrain herself. Outside her door, she could hear her secretary singing a happy tune. Agatha had gone through three secretaries during her short stay. The present one, Bunt Dunton, was a big jolly county girl with a skin like a rhinoceros, and so Agatha’s often virulent outbursts of temper had seemingly left her untouched. But she had never sounded so happy before.

It would be all right when she returned to Carsely, thought Agatha. She was popular there.

Her office door opened and Roy Silver edged in. His hair was slicked back with gel and now worn in a pony-tail. He had a spot on his chin and his suit was of the type where the jacket appears to be hanging off the shoulders and the sleeves are turned back at the cuff. His silk tie was broad and a mixture of violent fluorescent colours which seemed to heighten the unhealthy pallor of his face.

‘Off then?’ he asked, looking poised for flight.

‘Oh, sit down, Roy,’ said Agatha. ‘I’ve been here six months and we’ve hardly seen anything of each other.’

‘Been busy, you know that, Aggie. So have you. How did you get on with the Jeff Loon account?’

‘All right,’ said Agatha uneasily. She was beginning to wonder why she had gone over the top like that. Not that she had actually taped the creep. She just happened to have had her tape recorder in her handbag and had taken it out while he was absorbed in bragging about himself and put it on her lap under her napkin to trick him.

Roy sat down. ‘So you’re off to Carsely Look, Aggie, I think you’ve found your niche.’

‘You mean PR? Forget it.’

‘No, I meant Carsely. You’re a much easier person to know when you’re there.’

‘What d’you mean?’ demanded Agatha truculently. She held up a silver paper-knife she had been about to drop into a box on her desk along with her other belongings.

Roy cringed but said firmly, ‘Well, Aggie, I must say you’ve been a success, back on your old form, rule by fear and all that. I’d got used to Village Aggie, all tea and crumpets and the doings of the neighbours. Funny, even murder in your parish didn’t bring out the beast in you quite the way PR has done.’

‘I don’t indulge in personality clashes,’ said Agatha, feeling a tide of red starting at her neck and moving up to her face.

‘No?’ Roy was feeling bolder now. She hadn’t thrown anything at him. ‘Well, what about your seccies, love? Darting along to Personnel in floods of tears and sobbing their little hearts out on Mr Burnham’s thirty-four-inch chest. What about that rag-trade queen, Emma Roth?’

‘What about her? I got a spread on her in the *Telegraph*.’

‘But you told the old bat she had the manners of a pig and her fashions were shoddy.’

‘So she has, and so they are. And did she cancel her account with us? No.’

Roy squirmed. ‘Don’t like to see you like this. Get back to Carsely, there’s a love, and leave all this nasty London behind. I’m only telling you for your own good.’

‘Why is it,’ said Agatha evenly, ‘that people who say they are only telling you things for your own good come out with a piece of bitchery?’

‘Well, we *were* friends once . . .’ Roy darted for the door and made his escape.

Agatha stared at the door through which he had disappeared, her mouth a little open. His last remark had dismayed her. The new Agatha surely *made* friends, not lost them. She had blamed London and London life for her loneliness, never stopping to think that by sinking back into her old ways, she had once more started alienating people.

There was a separate box on her desk, full of cosmetics and scent, products of her various clients. She had been going to take it home. She called out, ‘Bunty, come in here a moment.’

Her secretary bounced in, fresh face, no make-up, ankle-length white cotton skirt and bare feet. ‘Here,’ said Agatha, pushing the box forward, ‘you can have this stuff.’

‘Gosh, thanks awfully,’ said Bunty. ‘Too kind. Got everything packed, Mrs Raisin?’

‘Just a few more things.’

There was something lost and vulnerable in Agatha’s bearlike eyes. She was still thinking of what Roy had said.

‘Tell you what,’ said Bunty, ‘I’ve brought my little car up to town today. When you’re ready, I’ll give you a run to Paddington.’

‘Thank you,’ said Agatha humbly.

And so Agatha, unusually silent and not back-seat driving one bit, was taken to Paddington by Bunty.

‘I live in the Cotswolds,’ volunteered Bunty. ‘Of course, I only get home at weekends. Lovely place. We’re over in Bibury. You’re near Moreton-in-Marsh. If I’m home during the week, I go with Ma to the market on Tuesday.’

And so she rattled on while Agatha kept thinking of how lonely her stay in London had been and how easy it would have been to make a friend of this secretary.

As Agatha got out of the car at Paddington, she said, ‘You have my address, Bunty. If you ever feel like dropping over for a meal, or just coffee, please do.’

‘Thanks,’ said Bunty. ‘See you.’

Agatha trudged on to the train, taking up the seat next to her with her boxes. When the train moved out, gaining speed, and London fell away behind her, Agatha took a long slow breath. She was leaving that other Agatha behind.

Carsely again. After a long dreary winter and a cold wet spring, the sun was

blazing down, and Lilac Lane, where Agatha had her cottage, was living up to its name, heavy with blossoms of white, mauve and purple. She saw James Lacey's car parked outside his house and her heart lifted. She admitted to herself that she had missed him – along with everyone else in Carsely, she told herself sternly. Her cleaner, Doris Simpson, who had been caring for Agatha's two cats while she had been away, had been looking out for her, and came out on the step with a smile of welcome.

'Home again, Agatha,' she said. 'Coffee's ready, and I got a nice piece of steak in for your dinner.'

'Thank you, Doris,' said Agatha. She stood back a moment and looked affectionately at her cottage, squatting there like a friendly beast under its heavy roof of thatch. Then she went indoors to a chilly reception from her cats, who in their catlike way would not stoop to any raptures on the return of an owner who should have had more consideration than to go away.

Doris carried Agatha's boxes in and put them in the small hall and then went through to the kitchen and poured Agatha a cup of coffee.

'I forgot about the garden,' said Agatha. 'Must be a right mess.'

'Oh, no, the Ladies' Society took it in turns to do a bit of weeding, and that Mr Lacey did quite a bit. Why, what's the matter, Agatha?'

For Agatha had begun to cry.

Agatha took out a serviceable handkerchief and blew her nose loudly. 'I'm glad to be home,' she mumbled.

'It's London,' said Doris, nodding her head wisely. 'London never did folks any good at all. Me and Bert go up now and then to the shops. It's all crowds and push. Glad to get back to where it's quiet.'

The cleaner tactfully turned away until Agatha had composed herself.

'So what's been going on in the village?' asked Agatha.

'Not much, I'm glad to say. Reckon as how us is in for a nice quiet time. Oh, there's a new thing. We've got a rambler's group.'

'Who's running that?'

'Mr Lacey.'

Agatha was suddenly conscious of the expense-account rolls of fat around her middle. 'I'd like to join. How do I go about it?'

'Don't think anyone *joins*, 'zactly. Us meets up outside Harvey's after lunch on Sunday, about half-past one. Mr Lacey takes us on one of the countryside walks and tells us about the plants and things and a bit o' the history. Lived here all my life and the things I don't know!'

'No trouble with the landowners?'

'Not around here. Lord Pendlebury's people keep the walks nice and neat, and signposted, too. We did have a bit of trouble over at Mr Jackson's.' Mr Jackson owned a chain of computer shops and had bought a large piece of land. 'We was following the marked path and came up against a padlocked

gate right across it and there was Harry Cater, Jackson's agent, with a shotgun, telling us to get off the land.'

'He can't do that!'

'No, but Mr Lacey said with so many nice places around, it wasn't worth the trouble making a fuss. Miss Simms, she told Cater what to do with his shotgun and where to put it, and with the vicar and his wife listening and all. I didn't know where to look.'

'Rambling,' said Agatha thoughtfully. 'Now there's a thing.' This was Friday. On Sunday she would see James again if she did not run him to earth before then.

Roy Silver walked into Mr Wilson's office the following morning, wondering why he had been summoned to work on a Saturday.

Mr Wilson, the boss of Pedmans, was sitting with a copy of the *Daily Bugle* spread on his desk in front of him.

'Seen the paper this morning?' he asked.

'The *Daily Bugle*? No, not yet.'

'Our Mrs Raisin has turned up trumps again. Lovely piece about Jeff Loon, worth thousands in free publicity. My God, if she can promote a pillock like Jeff Loon, she can promote anything. He was your account and we turned it over to Mrs Raisin when you weren't getting anywhere with it.'

'Well, no one wanted to know,' said Roy defensively.

Mr Wilson looked at Roy over the top of his gold-rimmed glasses.

'I'm not blaming you. I don't think anyone else in PR could have pulled off a coup like this.' He leaned back in his chair. 'I thought you and Mrs Raisin were best friends.'

'So we are.'

'I noticed you seemed to avoid her while she was here. I overheard her asking you to go for a drink with her after work one day, and then you came out with the lamest of excuses.'

'Must have heard the wrong thing. I adore Aggie.'

'You see, I want you to get close to that woman. I want you to talk to her about money, lots of money. I'll even make her a partner. She can choose her own accounts. She doesn't like me. If there's any affection left between you . . .'

'Lots,' said Roy fervently.

'Okay, get down there. Take your time. Don't rush her. Look for a way to get her back.'

'Maybe next weekend?'

'No time like the present.'

'Of course, of course. I'll go now.'

Roy rushed off home to pack a weekend bag and then took a taxi to Paddington. He had not phoned Agatha, fearing she would suggest another weekend or put him off altogether. If he just arrived on the doorstep, so he reasoned, she could hardly turn him away.

\* \* \*

Had James Lacey been in the Red Lion that Saturday evening, which is where Roy finally ran Agatha to earth, then she might have told Roy to get lost. But the thought of seeing James again on the Sunday was filling her with nervous anticipation. To have even the weedy Roy along might mean she would not be tempted to monopolize him. So she ungraciously said, 'I am surprised an *ex-friend* should be so anxious to stay with me, but I suppose I'll have to put up with you putting up with me. Prepare for an energetic day tomorrow. In fact, it'll probably bore the pants off you and serve you right. Tomorrow morning we go to church, and after that we join the Carsely Ramblers for a long and healthy walk.'

'Just what I need,' said Roy, smiling ingratiatingly. 'Ready for another drink, Aggie?'



## Chapter Two

Sir Charles Fraith sat at his desk in his study and looked again at the letter from the Dembley Walkers. It was signed by a Ms Jessica Tartinck and was militant, to say the least. 'You aristocrats think you own the countryside,' went one sentence. 'But we do,' murmured Sir Charles. 'I own this land, anyway.' He looked at it again. It claimed that there was an old right of way across his land. He spread out the maps of his property. There was a thin dotted line marking the right of way. He had never even noticed it before. They could use it all right, but with one exception. At one point it went right through a field of oil-seed rape. These old rights of way had originally been paths to the school or the church or work, as far back as the Middle Ages. They were not really intended for suburbanites to clump across in serious boots.

Sir Charles was a baronet who lived in a large Victorian mansion which commanded one thousand acres of good arable land. Although in his mid-thirties, he was still unmarried. He was a small neat man with fine fair hair and a mild, sensitive face. In him occasionally warred three characters. There was the bluff squire type, on the hearty side, given to rather obvious jokes and puns; then there was the clever intellectual who never talked about his first in history from Cambridge; and then there was the withdrawn character who really trusted no one and did not like anyone to get too close to him.

He lived with a faded aunt, his late mother's sister, a Mrs Tassy who, although absent-minded, acted as hostess for him at house parties and saw to little else. The running of the household fell on the shoulders of his late father's butler, Gustav. Gustav still styled himself 'butler', but in these days of dwindling servants Gustav was really a sort of houseman, doing light cooking when required, ordering in the groceries and wine, and helping out sometimes in the garden, or with the housework if one of the cleaners who came in from the village fell ill. He was no old retainer but was in his early fifties and kept his country of origin a well-guarded secret. He had a clever, mobile face, a male dancer's figure, and small black eyes.

He came into the room quietly and began to make up the fire, for the day had turned chilly. Sir Charles held out the letter. 'What do you think of this, Gustav?'

Gustav took out a pair of spectacles and scanned the letter. ‘Screw the silly bitch,’ he said.

‘Probably not screwable, Gustav. Can’t offend them or they’ll put in a complaint under the 1980 Highways Act, and you know what a trouble that will cause. Best to send back the soft answer, hey? Tell you what, I’ll tell them this time to walk *round* the edge of the field and invite them for tea.’

‘Got more to do with my time than serve tea to a bunch of Commie bastards,’ said Gustav.

‘You’ll do as you’re told,’ said Sir Charles mildly.

He rolled up the maps and proceeded to write a polite letter to Ms Jessica Tartinck.

The Carsely Ramblers gathered outside Harvey’s, the post office/general stores, on Sunday.

At first Agatha had only eyes for James. ‘Back again,’ he said mildly.

‘Thank you for looking after my garden,’ said Agatha, suddenly wishing Roy weren’t glued to her side.

‘Not at all.’ He turned away and addressed the small group. There were Mrs Mason, the chairwoman of the Carsely Ladies’ Society; Miss Simms, the society’s secretary; Mrs Bloxby, the vicar’s wife; Mr and Mrs Harvey from the stores; Jack Page, a local farmer, and two of his teenage children; and, horror upon horrors, that elderly and constantly complaining couple, Mr and Mrs Boggle. Although the sun was shining, the day was unseasonably cold, and grey clouds were piling up in the west.

‘Now, as it is so cold,’ said James, raising his voice, ‘we will walk up to Lord Pendlebury’s estate by the back road. There is a pretty walk round the edge of the fields that we haven’t been on yet. Nothing too strenuous. Are you sure you are up to this, Mr and Mrs Boggle?’

‘Course,’ said Mrs Boggle truculently. ‘Us’ll probably do better than this young whipper-snapper here.’ She jerked a thumb at Roy.

James set off. Agatha wanted to run forward and walk with him but felt suddenly shy. He was as handsome as ever with his thick greying hair, tanned face and blue eyes. She fell into step beside Mrs Bloxby.

‘Nice to see you back,’ said the vicar’s wife. ‘It’s been a dreary winter. Horrible weather. Nothing dramatic, just rain and more rain.’

‘You don’t notice the changing seasons much in the City,’ said Agatha. ‘Just look at the weight I’ve put on! Taking taxis everywhere and eating expensive food.’

‘This is as good a way as any to take it off,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘I really find it hard to have Christian thoughts about the Boggles.’

‘Is this the first time they have turned up?’

‘Yes, and how they will stay the distance, I do not know.’

‘Don’t walk so fast,’ shouted Mrs Boggle, and they all slowed down to a crawl.

‘They’ll give up in a minute,’ said Mrs Bloxby on a sigh, ‘and demand someone runs them home, and somehow I fear that someone is going to be me. Did you enjoy your stay in London?’

‘Aggie was a whiz,’ put in Roy eagerly. ‘Best PR ever.’

‘And according to you, the most unpopular one ever,’ said Agatha waspishly.

‘Just my joke, sweetie. You always take things too seriously.’

‘I have always wondered,’ commented Mrs Bloxby, ‘why it is when someone says something cruel or offensive, they immediately try to cover it up by saying, “It was only a joke. Can’t you take a joke?” There was a woman, a visitor to the vicarage, the other day, who said, “Don’t you just look like a typical vicar’s wife!” I said crossly I did not think I looked like a typical anything and she said, “Can’t you take a joke?” But she said it so nastily, you know, obviously implying that I looked mild, correct, prim and faded. I could have struck her. Oh, here we go!’

Mrs Boggle’s voice was raised in complaint. ‘Me heart! Me heart! Take me home before I die.’

‘I’d better go,’ said Mrs Bloxby regretfully.

To Agatha’s dismay, James swung around. ‘No, you stay. I’ll get my car. Go ahead. I’ll come back and catch up with you.’ He set off back down the hill with long athletic strides. They waited while Mrs Boggle panted and gasped and her husband muttered it was all their fault for keeping up such a cracking pace, no consideration for the elderly, and young people these days were downright selfish, ignoring the fact that Roy was the only member of the party, apart from the teenagers, who could be considered young.

After James had driven up and collected the Boggles, the rest of them walked on. A chill wind from the north rustled the young leaves of the trees over their heads. Everything was very fresh and green. They turned off on to the back road which ran along the edge of Lord Pendlebury’s estate. Fields of oil-seed rape spread out on either side, virulent yellow, Provençal yellow.

‘Not allergic to rape, are we, Mrs Raisin?’ called out Mrs Mason.

‘Chance would be a fine thing,’ Roy giggled. ‘At her age, our Aggie takes anything she can get.’

‘Shut your face,’ exclaimed Agatha wrathfully.

‘Just my joke,’ said Roy, avoiding Mrs Bloxby’s clear gaze.

Oh, this is not what I expected, thought Agatha. I thought I could sink back into Carsely like lying back in a warm bath. I wish Roy hadn’t come. He seems to have brought that part of myself I don’t like with him from London. She cast a covert glance at him. His thin white face was pinched with cold.

Why had he come? At first she had naïvely thought he had regretted his remarks, but now she was not so sure. Roy moved away to speak to Miss Simms.

‘So are your PR days really over?’ The vicar’s wife was looking inquiringly at Agatha.

‘Oh, I hope so.’ Agatha, gazing out across the golden fields, felt quite weak and tearful again. Was this the menopause at last? Was she tired? ‘The last account was the pits, pop singer called Jeff Loon. I had to sweet-talk some pill from the *Daily Bugle*.’

‘Would that be Ross Andrews?’

‘Why, yes!’

‘We take the *Daily Bugle*. There was a big spread about Jeff Loon, highly complimentary, on the entertainments page. Was that your doing?’

‘As a matter of fact, it was.’

Agatha stared at Roy. Suddenly she was sure she knew what had happened. She herself had not even bothered buying a copy of the *Daily Bugle*. But that spread would make a tremendous impact in the PR world. She knew for the first time how much Pedmans would want her back. Wilson must have sent Roy down, and so the nasty little creep had oiled his way on to the train, babbling, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll get her back.’

The party started to climb over a stile on to a path which ran alongside a field. It was a muddy path. Agatha was wearing flat shoes, fine for walking in London, but not really suitable for the country. Roy was wearing loafers and thin socks. Miss Simms was wearing a pair of Doc Martens and Agatha reflected it was the first time she had seen Carsely’s unmarried mother wearing anything other than spindly high heels. Roy squelched into a muddy puddle and let out a wail of dismay.

He turned back and joined Agatha. ‘Let’s jack this in.’

But Agatha, who had been turning round from time to time to see if James was coming back, saw his tall figure climbing over the stile, and said curtly, ‘Don’t whine. The exercise is good for you.’ Then she, too, stepped in a puddle, but now that James was catching up with the group, she was determined not to notice it.

‘This land,’ said James, ‘used to belong to the Church. Then it was part of the Hurford estate. Lord Hurford lost his money gambling in the twenties and Pendlebury bought it from him. He had a place in Yorkshire but didn’t like the climate. That was the present Lord Pendlebury’s father. Now that little blue flower just at your feet, Mrs Mason, is . . .’ He looked around. ‘Can anyone tell me?’

‘Like being back in bloody school,’ muttered Roy.

‘Speedwell,’ said Mrs Bloxby.

‘Very good,’ said James with such warmth and approval in his voice that

Agatha decided to buy a book on wild flowers and plants and study it before the next ramble. She had expected a gentle tour around the fields and then back home, but the indefatigable walkers ploughed ahead through woods and fields until, with a feeling of relief, Agatha saw the spire of the church and knew they were circling back home and were nearly at Carsely.

James finally joined Agatha. 'So now you are back with us, can we expect any more murders?'

'Oh, I shouldn't think so,' said Agatha, although guiltily wishing that someone in the village would bump someone off so that she and James could go detecting again.

James looked thoughtfully down at Agatha. There was something rather sad and lost at the back of her eyes. He wanted the old truculent and confident Agatha back. 'Why don't I call for you in an hour,' he said suddenly, 'and we'll have a drink together at the Red Lion?'

'I would love that,' said Agatha.

'Bring your friend, of course.'

'He will be *much* too tired,' retorted Agatha. Roy had only come down because Wilson had told him to. He was not going to spoil her evening.

And so a sulky Roy was told to watch television until she came home.

Agatha searched feverishly through her wardrobe for something attractive that would not look too overdressed. Everything felt tight. She tried on dresses and skirts and blouses, settling for a comfortable old tweed skirt and sweater at the very last minute. Life was once more full of excitement and colour. She was home.

Bugger London!

Deborah Camden trudged up the long drive which led to Sir Charles Fraith's mansion. Jessica had ordered her to walk over the route and check it out, but Deborah did not want to find herself facing some angry landowner or keeper all on her own and had decided it would be less frightening to call at the house first and explain her presence. To people who love architectural gems, Barfield House might appear a disappointment. It was not even Victorian Gothic. It was a large building built in the fake medieval style, vaguely William Morris, with mullioned windows on which the sun sparkled and winked.

The door was massive and studded. Deborah looked timidly around to see if there was perhaps not a smaller and less intimidating door but could not see anything. There was an electric bell on the wall at the side. She rang it and waited.

The door was opened by a man in a black suit, white shirt and plain silk tie. He had grizzled hair, small black eyes and a long mouth. He studied her

impassively, and yet Deborah was suddenly sharply aware of the cheapness of everything she was wearing.

‘Yes?’ he demanded.

‘Sir Charles Fraith?’

‘Who wants him?’

‘I represent the Dembley Walkers.’ A thin line of sweat was forming on Deborah’s upper lip.

A voice called out, ‘Who is it, Gustav?’

The man turned and said evenly, ‘A person from the Dembley Walkers, sir.’

Gustav drew back and his place was taken by Sir Charles. He blinked at Deborah and said, ‘You’re a girl. I thought it might be one of those big beefy chaps with big beefy boots. Come in.’

Deborah walked into a vast oak-panelled hall. A moose head glared down at her from high up near the ‘boat’ ceiling, wooden and arched like those in old churches. Sir Charles led the way into a drawing-room, with Chippendale chairs upholstered in red and cream, a large fire, oak-panelled walls like the hall, and long mullioned windows looking out over the park, where deer flitted through the trees.

‘Tea,’ said Sir Charles to the hovering Gustav.

Gustav moved noiselessly forward, picked a log out of a basket beside the fire and hurled it into the flames with unnecessary force before going out of the room.

‘Now, Miss . . .?’

Deborah held out a thin hand. ‘Deborah Camden. Pleased ter meet you.’

‘And very pleased to meet you. Sit down. Sit down. I received a letter from Mizz Tartinck. I have just sent off a reply. Part of the right of way runs straight through one of my fields. There is, however, quite a pretty walk round the edge of that field. If you would be content with that, I would be glad to supply you all with tea.’

‘Oh, you are awfully kind,’ said Deborah. She was beginning to relax. Sir Charles looked so mild and inoffensive, and Jessica could not turn down such a generous invitation.

Sir Charles smiled at her. He thought she was a decent sort of girl. She had thick, pale, fair hair, permed into curls and waves in a rather old-fashioned style. Her face was very white, almost anaemic, and she wore no makeup. She had white lashes and pale blue eyes. Her thin figure, encased in a cheap little white nylon blouse, acrylic skirt, and droopy wool cardigan, was thin and flat-chested. She had very long legs under the short skirt, and rather knobby knees which Sir Charles decided he found rather exciting.

‘This Mizz Tartinck sounds a formidable sort of lady,’ said Sir Charles.

‘Oh, she’s a darling, really,’ said Deborah, ‘and awfully well educated. She’s a schoolteacher like me and should really be teaching somewhere better

than Dembley Comprehensive.’

Wouldn’t be able to rule the roost at a more distinguished school, thought Sir Charles, but he said aloud, ‘Well, if the rest of the Dembley Walkers are like you, Deborah, then it should be quite a jolly day.’

‘They get a bit hot under the collar about landowners,’ volunteered Deborah.

‘Why?’

‘Well . . . er . . . they feel the countryside ought to belong to everyone.’

‘But if, say, I did not own and run this estate, what would happen to it? People can’t afford places like this these days. I mean, it might be sold off in lots to a builder, and bang! goes another slab of countryside. Absolutely shitters, that. I don’t want to appear hard. Not a hard man, Deborah. Soft as butter. But I notice that there are rights of way sometimes through council estates and things but you lot don’t demand the right to march through *their* gardens, now do you?’

‘I suppose not. But don’t you think it is an unfair society where someone like you should have so much and other people so little?’

‘No, as a matter of fact.’

‘Oh’

The door opened, and Gustav came in carrying a tray heavy with tea-things.

‘What’s this, Gustav, my man?’ demanded Sir Charles. ‘No cakes or biscuits?’

‘I’ll get them,’ said Gustav.

The tray was set on a low table in front of the fire between Deborah and Sir Charles.

‘Shall I be mother?’ asked Deborah.

Gustav rolled his eyes and muttered audibly, ‘Saints preserve us,’ before exiting again.

Deborah blushed painfully. ‘What did I say wrong? I just meant I would pour the tea.’

‘So you did, and so you shall. Don’t pay any attention to Gustav. He’s potty.’

Gustav came back in carrying a plate with cakes. As his return was so quick, Deborah guessed that he had expected Sir Charles to demand cakes and had left the plate somewhere outside the door. Gustav shook out a napkin and placed it on Deborah’s lap, contempt in every line of his expressive body.

She found her hands were beginning to tremble and said, in almost a whisper, ‘Perhaps Gustav should serve.’

‘See to it, Gustav.’

Deborah murmured that, yes, she took milk and sugar, and heaved a sigh of relief when Gustav left the room again.

‘So tell me about yourself,’ said Sir Charles. ‘What do you teach?’

‘Physics.’

‘How clever of you.’

‘Not really clever,’ said Deborah. ‘And I hardly ever get a bright pupil. But this is my second teaching job. Maybe I’ll move on next year.’

‘Any of the pupils give you a hard time?’

‘Ooh, yes. There was this nasty boy, Elvis Black. Ever so horrible. Always jeering and breaking things. But Jessica went round and had a word with his parents. I don’t know what she said, but he’s been quiet as a lamb ever since.’

Sir Charles was beginning to regret his invitation to the Dembley Walkers to take tea with him. He was rapidly coming to the conclusion that Jessica was every bit as horrible as she sounded in her letter. But he liked Deborah. He liked her inoffensive quiet manner, he liked her pale, bleached look. He particularly liked those knees. The more she talked about her school life, the more she relaxed, and only Gustav coming back in to throw yet another unnecessary log on the fire made her look at her watch and say that she had better be getting back.

‘I’ll run you home,’ said Sir Charles.

‘No, it’s all right,’ said Deborah, conscious of Gustav’s black eyes on her. ‘I left my little car down at the lodge gates. I like walking, really.’

Sir Charles stood up at the same time as Deborah. ‘Give me your phone number,’ he said. ‘We must do this again.’

Deborah fumbled in her bag and found a piece of paper and a pen. She scribbled down her phone number.

‘I will show Miss out,’ said Gustav.

Gustav held open the massive front door for Deborah. She ducked her head as she passed him, but he said suddenly, ‘Don’t get any ideas about Sir Charles. He isn’t for the likes of you. So keep your little hands in your pockets and your feet off this estate.’

Deborah was too intimidated to reply. She walked off down the drive, her face flaming. The only thought that gave her any comfort was that Jessica would soon put Gustav in his place.

\* \* \*

The Dembley Walkers crowded into the small classroom which they used for their meetings that evening. Jessica looked flushed and excited. She stood up and read out Sir Charles’s letter in a jeering voice. ‘As if we’re going to be bribed with offers of tea,’ she finished. She looked at Deborah. ‘Did you check out the route this afternoon?’

Deborah stood up. ‘Not exactly,’ she said. ‘I called at the house first and Sir Charles gave me tea and he was awfully nice. I mean, he’s looking forward to



seeing us, Jessica.'

'So the great man gives you tea and you roll over and play dead,' sneered Jessica. 'Honestly, Deborah, what a wet you are. I should have gone myself.'

Jeffrey Benson, Jessica's lover, unexpectedly rose to Deborah's defence. 'Sounds a nice fellow to me. That was a decent letter, Jessica. I don't know about the rest of you, but I thought we were all supposed to be walking for enjoyment.'

Terry Brice, the waiter, nudged his friend, Peter Hatfield, in the ribs and sniggered. 'Nice to be served tea by someone else for a change.'

Alice Dewhurst boomed out, 'I am all for confronting landowners, Jessica, and no one intimidates me. But when the man has gone out of his way to write a nice letter and all we have to do is walk around the edge of one field, I don't see what the fuss is about.'

'It's a matter of *principle*,' said Jessica, thin eyebrows raised, still confident of beating them down. 'Don't tell me you are all so thrilled at the idea of tea with one minor aristocrat that you are going to let him get away with this?'

'Well, ah, I cannae see anything wrong with the man,' said Kelvin Hamilton. 'We're a wee bittie mair democratic up in the Highlands, and –'

'Oh, spare us tales of Brigadoon,' said Jessica. 'We all know you come from Glasgow and probably some slum at that.'

'You bitch!' shouted Kelvin. 'Go yoursel'. I'm sick o' you.' He stormed out. There was an uneasy silence.

Mary Trapp stood up on her large feet. 'You know, Jessica,' she said, 'no one appointed you leaderene of this group or whatever. If you're determined to make trouble, I'm not going.' And to Jessica's dismay, there was a murmur of assent.

Jessica went into her favourite speech on equality and feminism, quotes from Marx and Simone de Beauvoir. Her eyes flashed. She looked magnificent, but she was heard out in a stony silence.

'All right,' she finished, glaring around at them. 'I'm going. And I'm going to walk right across that field!'

\* \* \*

Agatha Raisin waved goodbye to Roy with a feeling of relief, glad that she had ordered him a taxi and that she did not have to drive him to the station. She was sick of the sight of him. She had been enjoying a pleasant chat with James on the Sunday evening and Roy had sidled into the pub, smiling ingratiatingly all round, and then had monopolized her, telling her how much Pedmans wanted her back while James's attention had been claimed by other villagers. Agatha fervently hoped she would never see him again.

She felt quite stiff and sore after her ramble but was convinced that her

skirt was a tiny bit looser around the waist. She resolved to diet, or rather, instead of going on a formal diet, to eat fewer calories.

Then, to get closer to James again – although she would not even admit to herself that that was her motive – she decided to get really involved with the Carsely Ramblers. They needed to be organized, have meetings, stick up posters announcing their forthcoming rambles, and so on. There was no need for them to confine their walks to around the village. They could use their cars to go farther afield, have a meeting-point at some pleasant country pub, and start walking from there.

Agatha drove down to the second-hand bookshop in Moreton and found an old book on various rights of way. Then, fired with enthusiasm, she returned to the village and knocked boldly on James's door.

'Oh, Agatha,' was the unwelcoming greeting. 'I was just getting a good run on my book. But come in.'

Agatha felt she should really say something like, 'Oh, well, in that case, I'll come back later,' but she had been away so long and James had been writing that wretched piece of military history for so long that she was sure a short interruption would not matter.

'I had some ideas for the Carsely Ramblers,' said Agatha eagerly as he stood back to let her in.

'Such as?' he asked, switching off his computer. 'Coffee?'

'Yes, please.' She followed him into the kitchen.

'I thought,' said Agatha, 'that we might get a bit more organized. You know, maybe take our cars and go somewhere farther afield and start from there.'

'I suppose we could do that,' he said on a sigh. 'As a matter of fact, Agatha, I was thinking of dropping the whole thing.'

'Why?'

'I'm not really the organizing type.'

'I can do all that for you. All you have to do is show up.'

'Do you take milk and sugar?'

'Black, no sugar,' said Agatha, thinking he might at least have remembered how she liked her coffee.

They carried their mugs through to the book-lined living-room. She lit a cigarette and looked round for an ashtray. He rose and went back to the kitchen and returned with an old saucer which he put down next to her. Why was it non-smokers always made one feel so guilty? thought Agatha. Hardly anyone had an ashtray in the house any more.

The smoke from her cigarette rose to the beamed ceiling and hung there. James's eyes followed it as if measuring pollution.

'So what had you in mind?' asked James. A car slowed down in the lane outside. He looked hopefully towards the window, as if longing for some

interruption.

‘Like I said, we could go farther away for our rambles and maybe I could work out some posters and put one up in Harvey’s and one on the church notice-board. We get a few tourists and they might like to come along. Then I thought we should have membership cards and charge a fee.’

‘I don’t know about a fee,’ said James. ‘I mean, what would the fee be for? Landowners don’t charge the public for using rights of way. That,’ he added pedantically, ‘is why they are called rights of way.’

‘A fee would pay for membership cards. People like having membership cards.’

‘I don’t. Look, Agatha, I really should get on. Why don’t you go ahead and see what you can organize and then let me know about it?’

Agatha looked pointedly down into her coffee-cup as if indicating that she had had hardly time to drink any, but then she put the cup down and made her way to the door. James walked after her, switching on the computer again on the way.

Well, that’s that, thought Agatha gloomily, letting herself into her own cottage. Sod rambles. A car drew up behind her and she turned round to see Detective Sergeant Bill Wong smiling at her from the driving seat.

‘Welcome back,’ he cried, getting out, his features creased in a smile.

‘Come in,’ cried Agatha. ‘We’ll have coffee and you can tell me all about crime. I’ve just been to James’s but got turfed out after about two minutes.’

‘Oh, is that still going on?’

‘Is what still going on?’

‘Your deathless love for James Lacey.’

‘Don’t be silly. I used to have a little crush on him, but that’s long gone.’ Agatha walked into the kitchen and put on the kettle. ‘We have a rambling group in Carsely now. James was running it. All I suggested was that it could do with a bit more organization.’

‘Not one of those militant groups, Agatha?’

‘No, no. Quiet little walks, but maybe better publicized and with membership cards and things like that.’

‘I’m sure you’ll do it. So how was London?’

‘Dire.’

‘No fun being back in harness?’

‘None at all. Glad to be home. The reason I got so interested in the rambling thing is I badly need to lose weight.’

‘Don’t we all,’ said Bill mournfully, looking down at his own chubby figure.

‘So how’s crime?’

‘Quiet since you left. Usual wife beatings, drunks on a Saturday night, burglary, stolen cars and general mayhem. A few murders but nothing exotic’

He looked at her with affection. 'You're longing to play detective again, Agatha. Don't. Take my advice and stick to rambling. Nice quiet pursuit. Rambling never leads to murder!'

## Chapter Three

Jessica sat moodily on the end of the bed on Monday evening and said to her lover, Jeffrey Benson, who was propped up against the pillows, 'I don't know what came over that little twit, Deborah. Or the rest of you, for that matter.'

Jeffrey scratched his hairy chest. 'Come on, Jessica. I'm all for fighting nasty landowners, but when one of the breed is civil enough to send us a decent letter and issue an invitation to tea, then I'm prepared to meet him halfway. And if you plan on clumping over his precious field, then you can bloody well go alone.'

'I didn't think you would let me down like this, after all we've been to each other.'

'Don't use emotional blackmail on me, Jessica. You were the one who said that all we had going for each other was sex. The trouble with you feminists is that your idea of equality is to adopt the nastier characteristics of the men you despise. Maybe I should take up with Deborah. She's showing some good old-fashioned female characteristics.'

An ugly light came into Jessica's eyes. 'You'd better watch your mouth, Jeffrey *dear*. I mean, don't you think MI5 might be interested in that couple of Irishmen you gave house room to two years ago?'

A wary look shone in his eyes. 'How do you know about that? You weren't here.'

'You got blind drunk after Alice's party and bragged about it. I mean, that would be around the time that IRA bomb went off in the High Street and killed a child.'

'It was nothing to do with them. They were just friends of friends who wanted a bed. They only stayed two nights.'

'Oh, but in your cups you mumbled away about striking a blow for the freedom of Ireland.' She threw her head back and laughed, an irritatingly stagy laugh.

He plunged across the bed and seized her by the throat. He was a powerful man. One brown eye which had a slight cast gave him a sinister look when he was angry. 'You dare to tell *anyone* about those Irishmen and I'll kill you. We're finished. Get your stuff and get out, by the morning.'

Jessica struck at his hands. Her eyes flashed. 'I'm not frightened of you.'

He sat back on the bed on his heels, a powerful naked figure.

‘Oh, but you should be, Jessica. You should be.’

That was Monday evening.

‘It’s good of you to put me up,’ said Jessica, looking around Deborah’s small flat. ‘I don’t know what came over Jeffrey. But that’s men for you.’

‘Well, he has a point,’ said Deborah. ‘Why must you insist on going through with it?’

‘Because Sir Charles stands for everything we are against. Privilege, unfair wealth, keeping people from enjoying the countryside. Oh, let’s not argue.’ She smiled slowly down into Deborah’s eyes. ‘Let’s go to bed. I feel like an early night.’

‘All right,’ sighed Deborah. ‘I’ll make us some coffee first. Put your stuff in the bedroom.’

As Jessica walked through to the bedroom, the phone rang. Deborah picked up the receiver.

‘Hello there,’ came the voice of Sir Charles Fraith. ‘Look, there’s a showing of *Citizen Kane* at the Art Cinema tomorrow night. Feel like seeing it with me and having a bit of supper afterwards?’

‘Love to,’ said Deborah, clutching the phone hard and marvelling that there was someone still left on the planet who hadn’t seen *Citizen Kane*.

‘Give me your address and I’ll pick you up.’

Deborah looked nervously towards the bedroom. ‘No, I’ll meet you there. What time?’

‘Begins at seven thirty. Meet you outside at quarter past.’

‘Yes, thank you.’

‘See you then. Bye.’

Deborah walked into the bedroom, a mulish look on her normally weak face. ‘I think I’ll sleep on the sofa,’ she said to Jessica. ‘And I like my space. You can only stay here the one night.’

Jessica looked at her, feeling a hot burst of rage. What had happened to all her acolytes? ‘Who was that on the phone?’ she demanded.

‘Just a friend,’ said Deborah. ‘I do have friends other than you, you know.’

‘I’ll bet it was Jeffrey.’

Deborah remained silent, with the set stubbornness of the weak and frightened stamped on her face.

‘So it *was* Jeffrey,’ said Jessica. ‘Well, before you get the hots for that oaf, just think what he would say if he knew you had sex with me that evening he was away at the teachers’ conference in Birmingham.’

‘You wouldn’t,’ shouted Deborah, not giving a damn what Jeffrey would think, but terrified that any such gossip would get around and might reach the

ears of Sir Charles, her mind so distorted by fear that she did not pause to think it highly unlikely any part of her world would cross that of Sir Charles Fraith.

‘Oh, I would, I would.’

‘Get out in the morning!’ screamed Deborah, beside herself with fear and hatred. ‘I never want to see you again.’

That was Tuesday.

Happy and quite drunk, Kelvin Hamilton lay in bed and watched Jessica strip. He had hardly been able to believe his luck when she had arrived on his doorstep with her two suitcases, claiming to have always fancied him. Past insults were forgotten. He was not surprised that she did not wear a bra and had breasts that were quite magnificent. This, he thought, was going to be a night to remember. When she removed her jeans and he saw she was wearing men’s Y-fronts, he felt a sudden sharp diminution of lust.

She climbed into bed and he proceeded to try to make love to her, but nothing happened. After he seemed to have been thrashing around on top of her for some time, Jessica said in a disgusted voice, ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Kelvin, give up. You’ve got distiller’s droop. Go to sleep.’

The contempt in her voice sobered him. Soon she was gently snoring. He lay with the tears rolling down his cheeks. He thought he would die of sheer humiliation. He wanted her dead. He woke her up and began to shout.

That was Wednesday night.

Jessica was determined to find free lodgings. She called at the Copper Kettle, but Peter and Terry squeaked nervously like bats and backed away from her. ‘Haven’t an inch to spare, sweetie,’ said Terry. ‘Must rush. Lots of customers.’ So Jessica went round to Alice Dewhurst’s, to the flat she shared with Gemma Queen.

‘I’m all for helping one of the sisterhood,’ boomed Alice, ‘but as you can see, we really haven’t room for anyone else. Have you tried the Y?’

And so Jessica moved in with Mary Trapp, whom she secretly despised, and only found comfort in the fact that Mary slavishly adored her. Mary even said she would go with her on the walk across that field of Sir Charles Fraith’s on Saturday.

But on the Friday, Mary complained of stomach pains. Then she disappeared to the bathroom, from which sickening retching noises could soon be heard.

‘It’s your own fault,’ said Jessica unsympathetically. ‘You will buy junk from the health shops and overeat, thinking it’s all right because it comes

from a health shop. Honestly, you are a pill.'

'Leave me alone,' said Mary.

'At least you should be fit enough to come with me tomorrow,' said Jessica.

Mary hunched a shoulder. 'I won't.'

So on Saturday, wearing a large pair of – studded boots, a short denim skirt and sleeveless blouse, and with a militant gleam in her eye, Jessica Tartinck set out alone.

On the following Monday, Jeffrey approached Deborah in the staff-room.

'How's Jessica getting on?'

'I don't know,' said Deborah. 'I haven't seen her. I believe she moved in with Mary.'

'I'm meeting the others for lunch in the Grapes,' said Jeffrey, meaning the ramblers. 'We'll ask her then.'

But when they were all settled over their beer and sandwiches in the Grapes, it was to learn from Mary that Jessica had set out on her walk across Sir Charles's estate and had not returned.

'He probably sent her off with a flea in her ear and she blames all of us,' commented Jeffrey. 'You know she likes to sulk.'

'She's a bitch,' said Kelvin moodily.

'That's not true!' Mary looked outraged. 'What's happened to all of you? You should be ashamed of yourselves.'

'Why didn't you go with her, Mary?' asked Alice.

'I was too ill,' said Mary. 'Food poisoning.'

'I'm a teensy bit worried.' Peter looked around the group with wide eyes. 'The poor thing came to the Copper Kettle looking for a bed from us. Did you throw her out, Jeffrey?'

'Yes,' he said curtly. 'What happened with you, Deborah? Didn't she try you?'

'I've got a small flat, as you know, and only one bed,' said Deborah. 'I could only give her one night's lodgings.'

'I said we should have put her up,' whispered Gemma.

Alice's eyes flashed with jealousy. 'Now, we're not going to have a row about that again.'

'So what should I do?' asked Mary. 'Call the police?'

'We don't want to have anything to do with the filth,' said Jeffrey, and there was a general murmur of agreement. 'I'll ask Jones if he's heard anything from her.' Mrs Jones was the head teacher.

'I've already done that,' said Deborah. 'I asked this morning. She hasn't phoned in sick or anything.'

'Then maybe you'd better ask your friend, Sir Charles, if he saw her on



Saturday,' suggested Jeffrey, looking at Deborah.

'No friend of mine,' muttered Deborah. She had not told the others of her date with Sir Charles. She had enjoyed her evening, although, in her case, seeing *Citizen Kane* for the umpteenth time and then being entertained to supper in a Burger King had not seemed like an upper-class evening out. But Sir Charles had been easy company, although he had not suggested seeing her again. She longed to phone him. Now, surely, she had an excuse to do so.

'I could phone him up,' she offered.

'Knowing Jessica,' tittered Peter, 'she could already be shackled up with him.'

'I'll ring,' said Deborah.

She went over to the public phone in the corner. Gustav answered. She breathlessly asked for Sir Charles.

'Sir Charles is not at home,' said Gustav.

'Oh, I wondered if you had seen anything of my friend, Miss Jessica Tartinck?'

'No.'

And then, somewhere in the regions of the house behind Gustav, Deborah distinctly heard Sir Charles calling, 'Who is it, Gustav?'

'No one,' called back Gustav and put the phone down.

Deborah stared at the receiver in baffled fury. Then she slowly replaced it. Pride stopped her from telling the others she had been snubbed by a servant.

'No, he hasn't heard anything,' she said.

Jeffrey looked at her in surprise. 'But didn't one of his keepers or gardeners see her?'

'No,' said Deborah, head bent.

'Now what do we do?' demanded Alice.

'We're not in the pages of a Gothic romance,' said Jeffrey. 'I mean, if you're thinking she's in the deepest dungeon of Barfield House in chains, forget it.'

'It may have nothing to do with Sir Charles,' said Gemma. 'All sorts of awful things happen to women these days.'

'Wimmin like Jessica mug folks, they don't get mugged themselves,' said Kelvin.

It was at last agreed to leave the matter for another couple of days. A few more drinks and they all began to feel confident that Jessica was staying away to get even with them for having stood up to her.

But two more days passed, and the Dembley Walkers met in the school.

No Jessica. It was Jeffrey who addressed the group. 'I think we should all get together after work tomorrow and go out there and see if we can find any

sign of her.’

‘No need for that,’ said Mary Trapp. ‘I’m convinced she is staying away to punish and frighten us.’

‘An’ I say, whit do we pay taxes for?’ demanded Kelvin truculently. ‘Call the cops.’

‘No,’ retorted Jeffrey fiercely. ‘Let’s see what we can do ourselves first.’

It was a clear warm evening when they all met up again. Ill-assorted as they were, Jeffrey could not help thinking how relaxed and happy they all were without Jessica around. She had dominated them so much. He mentally pulled himself up. He was already thinking of her in the past tense. They marched out of Dembley in the golden evening. When they reached Sir Charles’s estate, Jeffrey unfurled a large Ordnance Survey map of the Pathfinder series and with one grubby fingernail outlined the route.

A silence fell on the group. Without the militant Jessica heading them, none could get away from an uneasy feeling of trespass. The evening was very still and quiet. They carefully shut farm gates behind them. Jessica would have left them open. Soon they reached the field of oil-seed rape blazing golden in the westering sunlight.

‘Look!’ said Jeffrey, stopping at the edge of the field. Jessica, they assumed it must have been Jessica, had certainly marched right into the field, trampling and stamping down the flowers.

‘She must have *jumped* her way along to do this damage,’ said Alice, quite awed.

They fell into single file, Jeffrey at the head, and followed the track. Over the trees at the far end of the field rose the bulk of Barfield House.

‘The track stops here,’ said Jeffrey. ‘Was she burying something?’

They all gathered around and looked down at the mound of earth and torn yellow flowers.

Kelvin edged forward and scraped at the earth with one large foot. A little cascade of loose earth fell from the mound and there, sticking out, was a booted foot and a white leg, a white hairy leg. Jessica never shaved her legs.

‘Oh, God,’ shrieked Alice. She knelt down and scrabbled at the earth with her fingers. Gradually Jessica’s body was exposed. Her earth-soiled face stared sightlessly up to the calm evening sky.

Deborah turned away and was violently sick, Gemma began to weep, and Mary Trapp fainted, falling over the dead body in a grotesque embrace.

Kelvin pulled her away. ‘We’ve done enough. Get the police. Don’t you daft pillocks see? Someone’s murdered her.’

\* \* \*

It was quickly discovered, once Jessica's body had been turned over, that someone had struck her a vicious blow on the back of the head with a spade, striking down with the edge, and then had made an ineffectual attempt to bury her. Bill Wong, waiting patiently by the tent which now covered Jessica's body for one of his superiors to give him instructions, had a fleeting thought that it was odd that Agatha should return from London to take up rambling and now here was a rambling murder. The lights placed on the field round the tent blazed into the darkness. An owl hooted from the trees. A rising wind rustled the oil-seed-rape blossoms, bleached white by the lights.

Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes came up to him. 'They're all at the house, are they?'

Bill nodded.

'We'd better start questioning them. We've learned all we can at the moment. She was struck violently from behind.'

'Must have been a pretty powerful man.'

'No, a woman could have done it. One good swing. It was a heavy spade.'

'So who would have a spade to hand?'

'That's what we've got to find out. Too early for fingerprints yet. And it's been raining since the murder, if she set out last Saturday, as she threatened to do.'

'Think Sir Charles lost his rag and biffed her?'

'We'll get a better idea of what sort of man he is after we speak to him. I hear the bane of your life is back in Carsely.'

'My friend Agatha?' Bill grinned. 'I wonder what she'll make of this.'

Wilkes shuddered. 'Don't even tell her.'

Gustav greeted them at the door. 'I have put the persons you wish to question in the ballroom.'

'We would like a word with Sir Charles first, if we may?'

Gustav inclined his head. 'Come this way.' His formal manner suddenly dropped. 'And don't take all night over it.' He looked over their shoulders. 'What is it, Parsons?'

The policeman turned round. A tall thin man with a broken shotgun in the crook of his arm stood there.

'I have shut the gates, Gustav,' said Parsons. 'But the press are trying to get to the house.'

'Then shoot them,' said Gustav patiently. 'This way, gentlemen.' He held open the door of Sir Charles's study. Wilkes hesitated a moment, obviously wondering if that order to shoot the press was to be taken seriously, and then decided it wasn't.

He introduced himself and Bill Wong.

Sir Charles sat behind a large leather-topped desk. He folded his hands neatly on top of it, and surveyed them with bright interest.

‘Now, Sir Charles,’ said Wilkes. ‘Just a few questions. The dead body in your field is that of a member of a rambling group called the Dembley Walkers. We believe she was killed last Saturday, possibly around the middle of the afternoon. That was the time she intended to be walking across your land. Did you see her?’

‘No.’

‘Where were you last Saturday?’

‘In London. I have a flat in Westminster.’

‘Address?’

He gave it to them.

‘Did anyone see you?’

‘Gustav drove me up and my aunt, Mrs Tassy, came with us.’

‘We will be having a word with both Gustav and Mrs Tassy.’

‘You can speak to Gustav for as long as you like. But must you speak to my aunt? She is lying down at the moment. All this has been a great shock to her.’

‘Perhaps tomorrow. But we must speak to her. Tell us what you know of the Dembley Walkers.’

‘Not much,’ said Sir Charles. ‘Here’s a letter Miss Tartinck wrote to me and here’s a copy of the letter I sent in return.’

They studied both. Wilkes said, ‘So with such a charming invitation, why was Miss Tartinck alone, do you think?’

‘Oh, I can tell you that. I took one of the girls from the ramblers out to the cinema. *Citizen Kane*. Jolly good film. Have you seen it?’

‘Many times,’ said Wilkes.

‘Anyway, she said that the rest didn’t like this Jessica’s militant attitude and told her to go by herself.’

‘So you knew she was coming?’

‘Yes, but I had friends to see in London and so I decided to make myself scarce.’

‘The name of these friends?’

‘The Hasseltons. But I didn’t get around to seeing them. It was a wet day and I decided to stay in my flat and watch television.’

‘So you really have no witness to the fact that you were in London?’

‘But I told you, my aunt and Gustav.’

‘We would have liked a witness less close to you.’

‘Meaning they would lie for me? That’s a bit naughty.’

‘We’ll speak to you again, if we may, Sir Charles,’ said Wilkes, getting to his feet.

‘Must you? Don’t be all night, will you?’

‘Where would the murderer have found that spade?’

‘I don’t really know. I suggest you talk to my land agent, Mr Temple. He

lives in Dembley.’ Sir Charles scribbled on a piece of paper. ‘That’s his address and phone number.’

Wilkes took it. ‘Where are these rambler?’

‘I think Gustav’s put them in the ballroom.’

‘Why there?’ asked Wilkes curiously.

‘I suppose because we hardly ever use it.’

Wilkes turned in the doorway. ‘Which one of the rambler was it you took out?’

‘Nice little thing called Deborah Camden.’

Gustav was waiting outside the door. He led the way across the vast expanse of the hall, down a corridor at the end and threw open a door. The ballroom was oak-panelled like the rest of the house. In a little island of chairs, which had been unshrouded from their covers for the occasion, sat the rambler. A great Waterford chandelier blazed overhead. In the musicians’ gallery overlooking the ballroom sat one policeman, and another stood guard beside the door.

Wilkes turned to Gustav. ‘I would like to question them one at a time. Is there somewhere we could use?’

Gustav hesitated and then said, ‘Come with me, sir.’

He opened a door next to the ballroom. ‘Used to leave cloaks here in the old days,’ he said. ‘Good enough?’

Wilkes looked round. There were a few hard chairs, a long mirror along one wall, and nothing else except a black and empty fireplace.

‘I suppose this will do. Send Deborah Camden in first.’

‘I have to attend to Sir Charles,’ said Gustav. ‘Get her yourself.’

‘I used to dream that one day I would be rich,’ said Bill Wong after Gustav had left, ‘and have servants. A short experience of Gustav is enough to persuade me that robots would be preferable.’

‘May as well get started instead of discussing the servant problem. Get Deborah in.’

When Deborah came in, Wilkes studied her closely. She was very pale. A shy, insignificant little thing, he thought, amazed that Sir Charles should even consider dating her.

‘This is just an initial interview, Miss Camden,’ he said. ‘We will need you to call at the police station tomorrow, where we will take an official statement. What were you doing last Saturday afternoon?’

‘I went shopping in Dembley.’

‘And would any of the shop assistants remember you?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. I was window-shopping. A teacher’s pay doesn’t go very far.’

‘How is it you know Sir Charles?’

‘I was sent out to check the right of way but I didn’t want to be accused of

trespass, so I called at the house. Sir Charles gave me tea, took my phone number, and then asked me out.'

'We'll return to Sir Charles in a moment. What do you know of Jessica Tartinck?'

Deborah's eyes filled with tears. 'I wish I hadn't quarrelled with her,' she said shakily.

'Was the quarrel about the right of way?'

Deborah nodded dumbly.

'It's a sad business, but try to compose yourself. Tell us what you know of Jessica's background.'

In a faltering voice, Deborah outlined what she knew. She knew Jessica had been with the anti-nuclear women protesters on Greenham Common when it had been a missile base. She had been arrested on a couple of occasions for cutting the wire. She had been vague about the posts in teaching she had held before she came to Dembley. No, no, they hadn't been *close*. Jessica had been living with Jeffrey Benson but he had thrown her out.

'Why?'

'The same reason that the rest of us got angry with her. She liked finding out rights of way that quite often the landowner didn't even know he had, and then making trouble. It was exciting for a bit, but I suppose we were all getting a bit tired of her bossing us around,' said Deborah. 'I'm only speculating, of course. I wasn't there when Jessica had the row with Jeffrey.'

Deborah visibly grew more at ease as the questioning continued. She said that although Jessica seemed to have annoyed them all in one way or another, she could not think of anyone actually hating Jessica enough to kill her. 'But I think I know who did,' she ended triumphantly.

'Who?' demanded Wilkes.

'Gustav, that servant. He's weird and I think he could be violent.'

'We'll be checking on him. We expect to see you at the central police headquarters in Mircester tomorrow to make a statement, Miss Camden. See the policeman at the door of the ballroom before you leave and he will give you a time to call on us. And send in Jeffrey Benson.'

Bill Wong studied Jeffrey when he entered. Something was tugging at the back of his mind. He felt the police had been interested in Jeffrey before. Jeffrey Benson was a big, powerful man with receding hair tied back in a pony-tail.

He was warned it was a preliminary interview and then asked about his relations with Jessica Tartinck.

'We were lovers,' said Jeffrey. 'I suppose you want the old-fashioned term.'

Being well aware of what the new-fashioned description would be, Wilkes pressed on.

'We'd like you to begin at the beginning and tell us how it came about that

Miss Tartinck went out walking along the old right of way on her own.'

For one who did not like the police, Jeffrey appeared, surprisingly, an ideal witness. He described everything from the beginning, then Jessica's speech trying to rally them all, then how they had had a row, although he omitted any mention of Irishmen, simply saying he was tired of 'bossy women'. 'There was no real affection between us,' he said. 'She wanted what I'd got and I gave it to her.' Like Deborah, he had no alibi for the Saturday afternoon. He had done a few chores at home. Maybe he had gone to the Grapes. He couldn't really remember.

The next to be interviewed was Kelvin Hamilton. When asked if Jessica had applied to him for a place to stay, he said, 'Of course not. I had no time for that lassie's bullying ways and she knew it.' Kelvin thought furiously. He had not said anything to anyone of Jessica's visit. Had he? Then he thought with a sinking heart that the police might interview his neighbours, would *probably* interview his neighbours, and might find out about the visit and the subsequent row. The walls between the flats were thin and Jessica had shouted a few choice insults at him on her road out. But he dare not tell them he had been lying. 'I think you'll find it was Deborah Camden,' he blustered.

'Why would that be?' asked Wilkes.

'Because she was so carried away wi' the idea o' being friendly wi' an aristo, och, you wouldnae think we was living in the twentieth century.'

'And you think that would be enough motive to kill a woman for simply walking across a field?'

'It's the wee quiet ones you have tae watch.'

They then took Kelvin through when he had first met Jessica, what he knew of her, what he judged her relationship with Jeffrey to have been, and where he had been last Saturday, before letting him go, wiping the look of relief off his face by saying they would see him at police headquarters in Mircester the following day.

'Another one without an alibi for Saturday,' said Wilkes.

The next was Alice Dewhurst. She wanted to be jointly interviewed with Gemma Queen and it took several minutes of argument to persuade her that they had to be seen separately.

Alice sat down sulkily after Gemma had been led away. 'So,' said Wilkes after Bill had taken down particulars of Alice's address, age and job, 'what can you tell us about Jessica Tartinck?'

She heaved her great bottom uneasily on the small hard chair. 'I dunno. Seemed to have all the right ideas, but too pushy even for a dedicated feminist. I mean, it's the men you're supposed to push around, not the women.'

Wilkes found this rather a mad piece of reasoning but he let it go.

Instead he said, 'Did any of you know Jessica Tartinck before she came to

Dembley?’

‘No,’ said Alice. Something flickered at the back of her eyes. Bill Wong had an uneasy feeling she was lying.

‘You will appreciate, Miss Dewhurst, that some of these questions may seem random, but it is important to establish what sort of person Miss Tartinck was. Miss Tartinck’s family is in Milton Keynes, I believe she has a mother and sister living there, and they are being informed of her death. But she was killed here, and so we must try to find out why someone hated her enough to kill her.’

‘It’s all very simple,’ said Alice in heavy patronizing tones. ‘Sir Charles or one of his minions on this estate lost their temper with her and struck her with a spade.’

Wilkes reflected wryly that this reasoning seemed quite logical, as no one had made any attempts on Jessica’s life before her solitary ramble, or none that they yet knew of. So they questioned Alice about Jessica, her interests, her friendships, and were left with a feeling that Alice had been jealous of Jessica and had not really liked her.

Alice said she had been at home with Gemma the previous Saturday. They had watched a video on television and had not gone out at all.

Gemma Queen, who was next, backed this alibi in a shy voice. She seemed to Wilkes to be typical of a certain type of unambitious shopgirl, the kind who should have been giggling about boyfriends with other shop-girls and not getting tied up with the tetchy and angry rambler. Asked about Jessica, Gemma had nothing but praise and admiration for the dead woman.

‘Did you share her militant views towards landowners?’ asked Wilkes.

‘Beg pardon?’

‘Did you dislike landowners as much as Miss Tartinck?’

‘You’ll need to ask Alice.’

‘Miss Queen! Don’t you have any views of your own?’

‘I dunno. To tell the truth, I don’t know half what they’re talking about. But Jessica was all right. Real attractive. She took me to the ballet once.’ Gemma suddenly giggled. ‘Alice was furious.’

Wilkes decided he wasn’t going to get anything much out of Gemma that was useful. Besides, she would be interviewed again the following day. By that time they would know a lot more about the characters in the case.

Peter Hatfield and Terry Brice appeared refreshingly gossipy in comparison to the others. Both had been working on Saturday afternoon and appeared to be the only ones with cast-iron alibis. Although they were interviewed separately, their stories were much the same. Their motive in joining the walkers on their outings was because neither of them wanted to get ‘too fat’. Yes, they usually took Saturday afternoon off, but this Saturday, when the restaurant was closed between three and seven, they had volunteered to stay



on to set up the tables for the evening. Their stories were so alike that Wilkes was sure they had rehearsed them carefully while waiting in the ballroom. Although the one alibied the other, it did cross his mind that one of them could have left the restaurant, gone out to the estate in a car, murdered Jessica, and returned.

After them, he turned to Bill Wong, stretched and yawned, and said, 'Now, for Gustav.'

But there was an interruption. A policeman who had been on guard outside the house came in and said, 'Excuse me, sir, but one of the farm labourers is here. I think you should listen to him. His name is Noakes, Joe Noakes.'

'Send him in.'

A large, burly man with a bad-tempered-looking face came in. He said he was Joseph Noakes and worked on the home farm for Mr Dyke, who ran it for the estate.

'And what have you got to tell us?'

'I seen Sir Charles and that dead woman.'

Wilkes tensed.

'Go on. When?'

'Last Satterday, it were. Her was scraping and jumping her way across the rape field. Sir Charles met her.'

'Where? Which part of the field? The middle, where the body was found?'

'No, t'war a bit towards the far side o' the field from the house.'

'Could you hear what he was saying?'

'No, I war over in t'other field. But he was waving his fists at her. Then he turned away and walked back towards the house.'

'And she was still alive?'

'Yerse,' admitted Mr Noakes with obvious reluctance.

'And then what happened?'

'I went away, didn't I, and saw nothing else.'

'Wait outside,' said Wilkes. 'We'll be taking you down to the station.'

When the door closed, he turned to Bill Wong.

'And we'll be taking Sir Charles as well. I think we've found our murderer.'

## Chapter Four

Agatha Raisin had just finished reading an account of the death of Jessica Tartinck in the local newspaper when her doorbell rang. Always hoping it might be James, she glanced quickly at her reflection in the hall mirror before opening the door.

Mrs Mason, chairwoman of the Carsely Ladies' Society, stood there. 'Oh, Mrs Raisin. May I come in a minute? I want to ask your advice.'

'Of course. I was just about to have a cup of coffee.' Agatha led the way through to the kitchen.

'So what can I do for you?' asked Agatha, pouring two mugs of coffee.

'It's this terrible murder. A relative of mine is involved.'

Agatha's bearlike eyes gleamed with interest.

'My niece, Deborah Camden, is one of the ramblers,' said Mrs Mason. 'She had heard through me of your detective abilities and begged me to speak to you. The fact is' – Mrs Mason preened slightly – 'that this Sir Charles Fraith is by way of being a friend of Deborah's.'

'The landowner?'

'Yes, and Deborah says he has been arrested for the murder and that they've got the wrong person.'

'Does she know the *right* person?'

'No, but she says Sir Charles is nice and kind and it can't be him.'

'But there was nothing in the paper about an arrest. It simply said a man was helping police with their inquiries.'

'That's Sir Charles. He hasn't been charged yet. But Deborah says it's only a matter of time. You see, he says he was up in London on the Saturday she was killed, but some farm labourer swears he saw Sir Charles in the field shouting at this Jessica and waving his arms.'

'Oh dear, does she know why Sir Charles lied?'

'No. But she begged me to ask you for help.'

'I would be delighted,' said Agatha, speaking no more than the truth. She could hardly wait for Mrs Mason to leave so that she could call on James and see if she could get him to join her in detecting adventures again.

But she asked, 'What can you tell me about your niece?'

'Deborah is a schoolteacher at the Dembley Comprehensive. She is twenty-

eight and not married. I haven't seen much of her because I quarrelled with her mother, Janice, my sister, a long time ago and we don't visit. Deborah always was a clever little thing but a bit mousy, which is probably why she isn't married.'

'I think I should talk to her.'

'She's teaching until four this afternoon. After that, I could take you over to Dembley.'

'No, I don't want to be seen with her in Dembley,' said Agatha.

'Why?'

'Well, perhaps I will be going undercover.'

'Oh. Oh, well, I'll go over and fetch her and bring her to you. We'll be here about five.'

'That would be splendid.'

As soon as Mrs Mason had left, Agatha darted upstairs and put on a new short-sleeved blouse of a soft leaf-green and then a pair of biscuit-coloured tailored slacks. Taking a deep breath to hold her stomach in, she made her way next door.

James opened the door. He frowned when he saw her. 'What is it, Agatha? I'm very busy at the moment.'

And Agatha, feeling hurt and rejected because he wasn't speaking any of the lines she had written for him in that short breathless time between Mrs Mason's departure and Agatha's arrival at James's door, said gruffly, 'Nothing. It can wait.' And turned and walked away.

Screw him, she thought. Who needs him anyway? How dare he speak to me like that!

She found to her dismay that her interest in the case was waning fast. To counteract it, she drove down to the newsagent's in Moreton and bought all the papers and retreated to a dark corner of a tea-room, one of the few which still catered for smokers, and began to read all she could about the death of Jessica Tartinck.

Jessica, who had defied the others and said she would go on the walk on her own, had been found dead in the middle of one of the fields on Sir Charles Fraith's estate. She had been struck savagely on the back of the head with a spade. Jessica Tartinck had been a campaigner for all sorts of rights – anti-nuclear, save the whales, the environment in general, and now the rights of ramblers. A don from Oxford University described her as having a brilliant academic brain and absolutely no common sense whatsoever. She had taught at a girls' school and had brought the pupils out on strike. Although her family were in Milton Keynes, since leaving university Jessica appeared to have hopped from one teaching job to another, with spaces in between to take time off to go on marches and rallies and create general mayhem. Agatha reflected cynically that such as Jessica probably kept moving on as soon as

people got used to her, as soon as she felt her power slipping. There were people like that who really did not give a fig for the environment, the whales, or anything else, but used protests as a means to gain power. Probably, thought Agatha, if she had not been killed, Jessica would soon have moved away from Dembley. She wondered what Jessica's sex life had been like. Such women often used sex as a weapon to manipulate people and gain control of them. There was a rather blurry photograph of her in one newspaper. She appeared to have been quite a striking-looking woman. There were several articles in various papers about ancient rights of way. But there was no hint at all why anyone should have wanted to murder Jessica.

At five o'clock, Agatha found her initial interest had revived. When Mrs Mason arrived with Deborah, Agatha, going to the door and glancing in the hall mirror, wished she looked more like a great detective, whatever great detectives were supposed to look like.

Deborah, decided Agatha, seemed an inoffensive sort of girl. There were hundreds like her to be seen on the streets of any town in the Midlands – fair-haired, washed out, thin and timid.

'So, Deborah,' began Agatha, 'how can I help you?'

'It's ever so worrying,' said Deborah earnestly. 'I don't know where to begin.'

'Begin by telling me how you came to meet Sir Charles.'

'It was like this. Jessica was threatening to walk across that field and she sent me to check the right of way. I didn't want to be caught out trespassing, so I called at the house first. Sir Charles was ever so nice and gave me tea. Then he asked for my phone number and then he called me up and took me out to the cinema.'

'Why?'

'Oh, well, *you* know . . .'

'He fancies you?'

'Maybe,' said Deborah. 'He seemed to like being with me.'

'Has he phoned you since?'

'No, but I phoned him today and told him about you.'

'So the police have released him?'

'They couldn't really keep him. The farm worker who saw him having a row with Jessica also saw him walking away towards the house when Jessica was still alive. If you're available, Sir Charles would like us both to go there for lunch tomorrow.'

Agatha felt a glow of simple snobbish delight. She, Agatha Raisin, was going to have lunch at a baronet's. Stuff James! She would have great delight in telling him all about it . . . afterwards.

'Do you want to use the phone to confirm it?' asked Agatha.

'No, he said if I didn't phone back, he would know we were coming. We're

expected at one.'

'So do you want me to pick you up at the school? Although I feel I should not be seen by the others if I'm going to investigate this case.'

'I have a little old Volkswagen. I'll get there myself,' said Deborah, 'and meet you there. There's one person I should warn you about. If anyone is capable of murder, he is.'

'Who is that?'

'Gustav. The manservant. He doesn't like me. He told me to stay away from Sir Charles.'

'And did you tell Sir Charles this?'

Deborah hung her head and muttered. 'No.' She hadn't wanted Sir Charles to know she was the sort of person of whom a servant disapproved.

'Don't worry,' said Agatha bracingly. 'No uppity servant is going to get the better of me.'

Deborah opened her mouth to say that she thought Gustav could get the better of anyone, but shut it again. Let Agatha find out for herself.

Agatha went and got out a serviceable notebook and sat down again. 'I'm sure you're tired of questions, Deborah. But let's go through it from the beginning.'

And so in a weary little voice, Deborah described how Jessica had first arrived at the school, how she had taken over the walkers, how much they had all admired her until her reaction to Sir Charles's civil letter had seemed to go over the top and they had all decided they had had enough of her bullying ways. She went through the stories of the others, at least as much of them as she had gleaned while they had all sat around the ballroom.

'So no one except perhaps the waiters has an alibi?'

'If we had known there was going to be a murder on Saturday afternoon, then I am convinced we would have all made sure we had alibis,' said Deborah with a rare show of spirit.

'Very well, then. Now this Gustav. Where does he come from? That's a German name. What's his second name?'

'I don't know,' said Deborah. 'No doubt the police have found out.'

'Was there a detective there who looked Chinese?'

'Yes, he was present during the interviews.'

Bill Wong, thought Agatha. I must try to get hold of him.

She asked Deborah a few more questions and then said she would see her on the following day. She wrote down instructions on how to get to Barfield House.

No sooner had they driven off than Agatha's doorbell sounded again. She patted her hair in the hall mirror. It would be James. Well, she might relent and forgive him for his earlier rudeness. Such news was too exciting to keep to herself. But it was Bill Wong who stood on the doorstep when Agatha

opened the door. Her first sharp feeling of dismay was counteracted by the immediate thought that here was the very man she should be most glad to see.

‘Come in,’ cried Agatha. ‘How’s the rambler case going?’

‘Now, how did you know that?’

‘Because I have been asked to investigate.’ Agatha, leading the way through to her comfortable kitchen, reflected that she hardly ever used her sitting-room these days.

‘Who by?’

‘Deborah Camden.’

‘Why on earth did she ask you?’

Agatha bridled. ‘Why not? She is Mrs Mason’s niece and she had heard through her aunt of my detective work in the village.’

‘What can you do that the police can’t?’

‘Well, for a start, I’ve been invited to Sir Charles Fraith’s for lunch tomorrow. It’s easier to get to know what makes people tick when you’re meeting them socially.’

‘I suppose so, Agatha. But you’ve got a way of crashing into things. The next thing we know is the murderer will be after you with a spade.’

‘Where did the spade come from?’

‘It had been left there by the farm labourer, Joseph Noakes, the one who said he had seen Sir Charles having a row with Jessica. He’s a surly chap with a big chip on his shoulder. He had been asked to clear a blockage in a ditch, had been walking back the day before, that was the Friday, got tired of carrying the spade and just stuck it among the rape at the edge of the field. There were two paths through the rape other than the mess left by Jessica. One going towards the house, which we assume was made by Sir Charles, and one leading off to the side of the field from where Jessica was struck. No footprints. Just crushed flowers.’

‘This Gustav,’ asked Agatha, ‘what’s his background?’

‘Hungarian mother, English father. Brought over here in the fifties, went into service at age fifteen in Clarence House as a kitchen porter, then footman at the Marquess of Drent’s, then started work as chauffeur, and finally butler, ending up as butler to the old man, the late Sir Charles, who died three years ago. He’s fifty-two. Unblemished record.’

‘I always thought of butlers as being very old.’

‘The few that are left these days usually are. As a profession, it’s finished. Gustav is a houseman, rather than butler. He never married.’

‘Homosexual?’

‘Don’t think so. All unmarried men aren’t homosexual. What about me?’ His eyes crinkled with amusement. ‘What about lover-boy, James, next door? Told him about this?’

‘Not yet,’ said Agatha, who had no intention of recounting to Bill how she

had been snubbed. ‘Aren’t you going to tell me to keep out of it as you usually do?’

‘Not this time. I don’t see that a harmless lunch can put you in danger. But I’ll call round here tomorrow evening. In fact, I’ll be very interested to hear what you make of Sir Charles and Gustav. What did you think of Deborah?’

‘Plain little girl. Not much character. Rather bowled over by the fact that Sir Charles took her out. Sort of girl easily swayed by stronger characters. I shouldn’t think she had any strong political affiliation with Jessica’s views. I think she just latched on to the stronger woman.’

‘Maybe. Anyway, I’ll hear how you get on.’

Logic and emotion warred in Agatha’s bosom next day and emotion won. She found she was dithering over the idea of having lunch with a baronet. Logic screamed at her that Sir Charles was a mere baronet who lived in a Victorian mansion described in the guidebooks as ‘architecturally undistinguished’. Deep down the old Agatha, product of a Birmingham slum, trembled.

Despite all the changes of dress she had put herself through, trying to find just the right outfit, she arrived at the end of the drive to Sir Charles’s house a quarter of an hour early. She forced herself to park by the side of the road, and lit a cigarette while peering at her reflection in the driving mirror. There were little lines on her upper lip. She’d need to try anti-wrinkle cream. She smoked and worried and fretted until, with another look at her watch, she realized fifteen minutes had passed. With a heightened colour and a fast-beating heart she drove up the drive.

Barfield House may have been considered ‘architecturally undistinguished’ by the experts, but it was *big*, a huge, imposing mansion.

Deborah’s car rolled to a stop just behind Agatha’s and, glad of even this weak support, Agatha went to join her and together they stood on the step while Deborah rang the bell. Agatha was wearing a blouse and skirt and lamb’s-wool cardigan. Deborah was wearing a pale-blue polyester trouser-suit and a little white blouse which seemed to make her more bleached-looking than ever.

The door was opened by Gustav. His black eyes flicked over them for a split second, but the look was somehow enough to demoralize both women. It seemed to say, ‘That I should have to open the door to such as you!’

‘Sir Charles is in the sitting-room,’ said Gustav, leading the way across the cavernous hall.

Both women entered the sitting-room. Sir Charles rose to meet them. Sitting beside the fireplace was a faded elderly lady. Sir Charles introduced her as his aunt, Mrs Tassy.

‘So you’re the detective,’ he said heartily after the introductions were over.

‘Brought your magnifying glass and fingerprint dust, hey?’

Simple fool, thought Agatha loftily and felt herself relax.

‘Raisin,’ said Mrs Tassy in a high, strangulated voice. ‘Would that be one of the Sussex Raisins?’

Gustav spoke from the corner of the room. ‘Hardly’ he said.

Mrs Tassy put on a pair of spectacles and peered at Agatha. ‘No, I suppose not,’ she said. ‘When are we eating, Gustav?’

‘Any time you like.’

Mrs Tassy rose. She was a surprisingly tall woman. At least six feet of her loomed over Agatha. ‘Good,’ she said simply. ‘I’m bored.’

‘You won’t be bored when Mrs Raisin starts grilling us, shining lights in our faces, and applying the old rubber truncheon,’ said Sir Charles. ‘Come along, Deborah. You look as if you need fattening up.’

Deborah giggled. Agatha suddenly wanted to run away. Never had she felt so timid or inadequate in years. She began to feel angry and truculent. Who the hell did these people think they were, anyway?

‘Good heavens!’ said Sir Charles, as they all sat round a long table in the dining-room. ‘Why all the silver? We can’t be having that many courses.’

Gustav remained silent. He poured wine. He served soup. Agatha had a feeling that he hoped she would be intimidated by the display of cutlery. But how could he have known anything about her? It must be little Deborah who was the target.

Mrs Tassy fixed pale eyes on Agatha. ‘If my nephew is going to employ you, what are your fees?’

‘I didn’t think of charging anything,’ said Agatha.

‘Amateur,’ said Gustav *sotto voce* from the sideboard.

Agatha swung round. ‘Cut the crap, you cheeky pillock,’ she howled.

‘I do not think we are going to have a very good summer,’ said Mrs Tassy into the brief startled silence which had followed Agatha’s outburst. Agatha tried to remain cool but she could feel an ugly tide of red washing up her face from her neck. ‘I read in the paper the other day that it’s something to do with the volcanic eruption in the Philippines. It is said to cause bad summers in Europe.’

‘It might stop you militant ramblers from frightening any more landowners,’ said Sir Charles, smiling fondly on Deborah.

‘Oh, never tell me you are one of those.’ Mrs Tassy looked curiously at Deborah. ‘You have to be careful. You don’t want to get yourself killed.’

Gustav deftly removed the empty soup plates. Agatha had been fiddling with the knives and forks beside her plate. Gustav twitched them back into place with a little sigh.

Fish in cheese sauce appeared before them next. ‘You’re doing us proud, Gustav,’ said Sir Charles. ‘But a bit extended and formal, isn’t it? I think we



would have been cosier with a bit of cold pie in the kitchen.'

By way of reply, Gustav raised his expressive eyebrows and retreated again to the sideboard.

Agatha had a thin pearl necklace round her neck. 'Are those real?' asked Mrs Tassy.

'No,' said Gustav.

Agatha tried to rally. 'No one wears real pearls these days,' she said. She could hear those dangerous twanging Birmingham vowels creeping to the surface of her voice.

'I do,' said Mrs Tassy, and that was the end of that subject.

'So how are you going to start detecting?' asked Sir Charles.

'I would like to see the field where the murder took place,' said Agatha, and then decided to move into the attack. 'Why did you tell the police that you were in London on the day of the murder?'

'Because I didn't want to be accused of it,' said Sir Charles patiently.

'You panicked?'

His eyes, turned on her, were suddenly bright and intelligent. 'No,' he said. 'I suddenly wanted to have nothing to do with all the fuss and bother. I really didn't think anyone had seen me quarrelling with that Jessica, you see.'

'What were you quarrelling about?'

'Obviously about her jumping up and down in the field and wrecking the crop. She gave me a lot of stuff about being a bloated capitalist. I've never heard such clichés since I was at a meeting of the students' union at my college in Cambridge. I told her to get knotted and walked away. When I looked back, she was standing there, shouting insults at me. I thought of calling the police and then I got fed up with the whole thing. I tend to ignore things that make me fed up. Of course, now the police are thinking of charging me with obstructing them in their investigations. Such a pain.'

'But surely you must have realized they would find out?'

'Why?' he asked in simple surprise. 'I didn't know Noakes had such a dislike of me. None of the other estate workers would have dreamt of saying anything.'

'Probably killed her himself, the silly sod,' said Gustav.

'I would like that,' said Mrs Tassy meditatively.

Agatha cracked. 'Yes, that would suit you lot very well,' she said. 'One of the farm workers being the guilty party would be just great.'

'If I'd known you were going to be nasty,' said Deborah, tossing her fair hair, 'I'd never have asked you.'

'More wine, Gustav,' said Sir Charles. 'You know, Mrs Raisin, I cannot really have someone trying to help me who is prejudiced.'

'I'm not prejudiced,' protested Agatha. 'I merely said —'

'Oh, roast beef!' exclaimed Mrs Tassy. 'You are spoiling us, Gustav.'

And Agatha could think of nothing further to say. She was totally demoralized. She envied Deborah, who was happily prattling on to Sir Charles about films and books. The dreadful meal wound to its close. When Agatha, tipsy and miserable, made her way out to her car, she was well aware that nothing further had been said about engaging her services. 'You shouldn't drink and drive,' said Gustav as a parting shot.

Agatha drove slowly home, but not too slowly in case any of the police still searching that rape field should find the slowness of her pace suspicious.

Once home, she drank several cups of black coffee and stared miserably at the kitchen wall before going through to her sitting-room and trying ineffectually to find a television programme to take her mind off her shame. What had come over her? She, Agatha Raisin, the scourge of every maître d' from Claridges to the Ritz, had been demoralized by a pretentiously long lunch in a country mansion.

Sobered by coffee and misery, she went to answer the summons of the doorbell. Bill Wong stood there. 'How'd you get on?'

'Come in,' said Agatha. 'Sun's out. We'll sit in the garden for a change.' She made more coffee and carried two mugs out to the garden table.

'Your garden's beautiful,' said Bill, looking at the glowing colours of the flowers.

'Thanks to the neighbours.' Agatha glowered down into her coffee-cup.

'So what's the matter?' demanded Bill.

'I think he did it.' Bill thought Agatha sounded positively pettish. 'Sir Charles and that servant of his.'

Bill leaned back in his chair, his almond-shaped eyes fastened on Agatha's sulky face.

'This is not like you, Agatha. Was Sir Charles high-handed with you?'

'No,' muttered Agatha. 'I think he's stupid and silly. He lied about not being there on Saturday and I think –'

The doorbell shrilled faintly from the front of the house. Agatha went to answer it and stared up at the tall figure of James Lacey.

'I was a bit rude to you yesterday, Agatha,' he said apologetically. 'I thought I was getting on fine with my writing, but then I found later that what I had written was rubbish.'

All the humiliations of the day forgotten for one brief glorious moment, Agatha begged him to come in and join them for coffee.

When James was seated at the garden table, he asked Bill, 'Are you working on this rambler case?'

'Yes, and so is Agatha, or rather, so *was* Agatha,' said Bill. 'A girl in the case, Deborah Camden, roped our Agatha in to help Sir Charles Fraith, but Agatha seems to have come back from lunch there with a flea in both ears and won't quite tell me what went wrong.'

‘Odd family, the Fraiths,’ said James, stretching out his long legs. ‘So what did go wrong, Agatha?’

‘It was that damned manservant, Gustav,’ said Agatha wearily. ‘He had it in for me and I got rattled.’

There was a short silence while both men reflected how a rattled Agatha might behave.

‘So I get the feeling Sir Charles decided he did not want your services after all, Agatha. What did you say to put him off . . . if you can think of one thing,’ James added, implying that Agatha might have let loose a string of insults.

‘Well, he’s got this odd aunt and she said it would be nice if that farm worker, Noakes, turned out to be the murderer and I said something like it suiting their type of people very well to think the hired help had done it. Sir Charles said I was prejudiced.’

James laughed. ‘Poor old Agatha. This Gustav must be quite something to get under your skin. I know Sir Charles slightly. Friend of a young friend of mine. Oh, you must not give up detecting, Agatha. I’ll speak to Sir Charles. I’ll use your phone, if I may.’

‘If he wants me back on the case, will you come with me?’ asked Agatha.

He looked down at her, his eyes twinkling. ‘Why not?’

‘So what of your ideas that Sir Charles and Gustav are murderers?’ asked Bill when James had disappeared indoors.

‘Oh, I was just joking,’ mumbled Agatha. If James were successful, then he and she could go detecting again, and that pillock, Gustav, wouldn’t matter a bit.

James got Sir Charles on the phone. ‘I gather you had a friend of mine, Agatha Raisin, over for lunch,’ he said after introducing himself.

‘Oh, her,’ said Sir Charles. ‘That little rambler, Deborah Camden, you’ll have seen her name in the papers over this business, she said this Mrs Raisin of yours was a whiz, but I thought she was a rather odd woman with one massive chip on her shoulder.’

James laughed. ‘She has her methods, Watson. But, by God, she gets results. Do you know how she started detecting? When she arrived first in this village, she wanted to make her mark by winning a quiche-baking competition. So she bought a quiche in London and put it in as her own. One of the judges dropped dead after eating it, so she had to find out who did it.’

Sir Charles chuckled appreciatively. ‘Sounds like a character.’

‘Furthermore, Agatha and I have worked on some cases together. Don’t turn her down. She’s good.’

‘I’ll try again.’ Sir Charles sounded suddenly weary. ‘Why don’t both of you come over for a drink?’

‘Right,’ said James. ‘What time? Sixish?’

‘That’ll be fine.’

James returned in triumph to the garden. 'I think you're on again, Agatha,' he said. 'We're going to Barfield House for drinks at six.'

'What! This evening? I've hardly sobered up from lunchtime.'

'Then drink mineral water.'

James looked at Bill. 'Why no stern admonitions to keep out of it?'

Bill grinned. 'Because the police are baffled. I can't see the pair of you getting into much trouble over a few drinks with Sir Charles Fraith. He's hardly likely to poison you when he's under suspicion.'

Agatha looked at her watch. 'It's five!' she said. 'I'd better go and repair myself.' She looked at James shyly. 'What should I wear?'

'I don't know,' said James. 'We're going on business, so wear anything that's comfortable. I'll drive.'

It was a different Agatha who was driven up the drive to Barfield House by James. She felt *armoured* by James. At first she had rehearsed how to explain her outburst but then decided a dignified silence on the subject would be the better policy.

Gustav opened the door to them. His eyes flicked up and down Agatha, making her feel that a plain green wool dress was not at all the thing to wear, and then led them to the sitting-room.

Sir Charles nodded to Agatha and welcomed James enthusiastically.

Gustav served drinks – Agatha stuck to mineral water – and then Sir Charles began. 'We seemed to get off on the wrong foot,' he said to Agatha.

'Waste of time, if you ask me,' said Gustav to the panelled wall.

James's head jerked round. 'Leave us alone, Gustav,' he said sharply. 'This is too important a discussion to be interrupted by your cheeky comments.'

Gustav looked at Sir Charles, who nodded, and he left the room.

'How can you put up with that man?' asked James.

'What's up with him?'

'He has a reputation for insolence.'

'I haven't noticed,' said Sir Charles, 'and since he's my man, it's got bugger-all to do with you.'

'Well, your problem.' James shrugged. 'Now, tell me how you got into this mess.'

Agatha, now able to relax – it was just a house, after all, and Sir Charles just a man – nonetheless studied the baronet closely while he talked.

It all seemed very believable this time, now that she no longer found either him, or her circumstances, threatening. He explained at length how Gustav, returning from a visit to the keeper's cottage, had reported seeing Jessica approaching the field. Confident of soothing her, he had gone out to meet her. How had he known who she was? Deborah had described her quite

accurately. When he had seen her jumping and trampling around with her great boots, he had lost his rag. He had called her a silly little girl and that had seemed to get up her nose no end, said Sir Charles with a certain amount of remembered satisfaction. Had he threatened her in any way?

For the first time Sir Charles looked uncomfortable. 'There was something so arrogant, so unpleasant about her that I told her I was going to get my shotgun and blast her if she didn't get off my land. I didn't tell the police that.'

'Why did you lie? Why did you say you were in London?' asked James.

'We're a very close-knit community at Bar-field, the keepers, the estate workers, the farm workers – didn't know about the horrible Noakes, he was taken on recently – and I didn't brief them, I just expected them to go along with my story.'

'That seems a bit naïve,' commented James.

'It does now. Now I'm in a mess, and with the police looking in my direction, they aren't likely to do their job properly, which is finding out the real murderer. I've been thinking,' he said earnestly, leaning back in a winged chair and cradling his glass in both hands against his chest, 'I'm an easygoing sort of bod, and yet look how she riled me up. I think that lover of hers, what's-his-name, did for her. Anyway, how are you going to find out anything the police can't?'

'For a start,' said Agatha, speaking for the first time, 'James and I could move to Dembley, take a flat, pose as man and wife and join the Dembley Walkers. What better way is there to get to know them?'

James showed signs of alarm, but Sir Charles said enthusiastically, 'What a good idea. I've some property in Dembley and I think there's a furnished flat vacant. Wait there. I'll call up my man and find out.'

He went out of the room. 'Agatha,' said James, 'you should have asked me first if I could spare the time to move to Dembley and if I wanted to pretend to be your husband.'

'If you don't want to do it, don't,' said Agatha.

'I didn't say that,' said James. 'It's just it's a big thing to do.'

Agatha forced herself to remain calm. 'As I said,' she remarked in as even a tone as she could manage, 'I'm quite prepared to go ahead on my own.'

Sir Charles came back. 'That's settled, then. There's a jolly nice apartment in Sheep Street, bang in the centre of Dembley. You can move in as soon as you like.'

There was a little silence. Agatha held her breath.

'All right,' said James. 'I'm not getting on very far with the writing anyway.'

'What are you writing?' Sir Charles asked.

'Military history.'

‘Which period?’

‘Napoleonic wars.’

‘My father was a great history buff. Gustav put a lot of his books up in one of the attics. Would you like to have a rummage?’

James’s eyes shone. ‘I’d love that.’

‘I’ll take you up. Want to stay here, Mrs Raisin?’

But Agatha was appalled at the idea of being left in a room which Gustav might enter, and eagerly volunteered to go with them.

When James and Agatha finally drove off together, James clutching a pile of old books, Agatha tried not to listen to his enthusiastic descriptions of the treasures he had found and how he was dying to get started writing again.

For a brief period she was to be Mrs Lacey, albeit in name only.

But who knew what delights that could lead to!

## Chapter Five

‘That’s an odd couple,’ said Jeffrey Benson a week later. It was the day after the weekly meeting of the Dembley Walkers. He was referring to a certain Mr and Mrs James Lacey, who had turned up and said they were eager to join the walkers. Jeffrey and the others were in the Grapes at lunchtime, a somewhat more relaxed group than they had been in previous days. All were getting used to frequent interrogations and diggings into their past by the police. Kelvin was feeling quite euphoric because the police had not discovered Jessica’s visit to him or the subsequent row, and Jeffrey was beginning to feel at ease because he had not heard a word about entertaining any Irishmen.

‘Bourgeois,’ said Alice, heaving her great bottom on the imitation medieval chair in the lounge bar. ‘They’ve got money. That was a Gucci handbag she was carrying.’

‘There’s something a bit common about her, reelly,’ said Deborah, who secretly, thanks to several warm telephone calls from Sir Charles, felt she was becoming an authority on the upper classes. ‘He’s all right, though.’ She giggled. ‘Quite attractive, I think.’

‘But dae we want them with us?’ demanded Kelvin. ‘We can hardly fight the good fight wi’ a couple o’ Tories tagging along.’

Gemma said uneasily, ‘Do you mean we’re still going to have to face up to angry landowners, even though Jessica’s dead?’

‘Why not?’ demanded Alice. ‘Jessica was a bit of a bully, but when you look at it, she had the right idea.’

Deborah stared into her glass of orange juice. She suddenly did not want to be part of a group that went in for confrontations. And yet, the walkers had meant friendship and a cause. What if Sir Charles did not call her any more or want to see her? Then everything would have been for nothing, she thought sadly, and she would be alone again. She found it hard to make friends, considering the quieter, milder teachers, the ones who might be considered her own sort, not glamorous enough.

Peter Hatfield and Terry Brice unexpectedly came to Gemma’s defence. ‘I think it’s Gemma who has the right idea,’ said Terry. ‘We could have lovely walks . . .’

‘Lovely walks,’ echoed Peter plaintively.

‘. . . if only we just settled down to enjoy the countryside.’

Jeffrey stretched and yawned. ‘Oh, this Saturday should be mild enough. There’s a pretty walk listed in one of the books. Most of it goes through farmland and the book says that it’s well signposted.’

‘What year was the book published?’ demanded Alice suspiciously.

‘Nineteen thirties. But they update these publications, for God’s sake, or it wouldn’t still be on sale. It’s quite a long walk. Do we take the cars out to the beginning of it?’

But the rest decided they were proper ramblers and should walk the whole distance. They agreed to meet outside the Grapes at nine in the morning on Saturday.

‘We’d better tell the Laceys,’ suggested Deborah.

‘Where do they live?’ asked Peter Hatfield.

‘Got a flat in Sheep Street,’ said Terry. ‘Here’ – he fished out a notebook – ‘I wrote it down with their phone number. That James Lacey was ever so nice to me. I’ll phone him.’

‘Oh, suit yourself,’ said Peter sulkily.

It was Agatha who took the phone call later that day. She wrote down the meeting-place and the time and then went happily back to preparing a special dinner for James.

To her initial disappointment, the flat had proved to be much larger than she had anticipated, having three bedrooms. She had fantasized about there being only one bedroom. James would sleep on a cot-bed on the floor. ‘God, this thing’s uncomfortable,’ he would moan. ‘I wish I had that nice double bed to sleep on.’ And Agatha would say huskily, ‘Why not join me?’ And he would, and then, and then . . .

But all that had happened was that he took one bedroom, she had another, and there was the third bedroom in between. Also, for the first few days, she had seen little of James, for he kept remembering things he should have brought and running back to Carsely to get them. But tonight they would have dinner together.

Agatha had bought ready-made food from Marks & Spencer, removing it from the foil dishes and putting the contents into pretty oven dishes to make it look as if she had cooked everything herself. She had candles on the table. Candlelight might be corny, but it hid the signs of ageing. How maddening that middle-aged men did not need to bother about wrinkles, or did not seem to. She had good breasts and had invested in a silk blouse with a plunging neckline and a black silk skirt which was very flattering to her still somewhat thickened figure.

As she busied herself polishing the wineglasses until they shone, she



realized with a guilty little jolt that so far she had not really been doing her job properly, and that was finding out all she could about the walkers. James had gone to the local library to look through the national press files for articles on Greenham Common and see if Jessica's name had been mentioned. She, Agatha, should have been with Deborah or some of the other walkers instead of polishing wineglasses and losing herself in fantasy. Well, just this one evening. Tomorrow she would get down to work.

James was getting weary of searching the files. He had found a mention of Jessica's being arrested after cutting the wire of the perimeter fence at Greenham Common, but among the names of the other women he could not find one of any of the other walkers. He had hoped that if someone had been part of Jessica's past, there might be something there to tie her in with the murder. He sighed. It was all very far-fetched.

'We'll soon be closing up,' said a voice at his elbow.

He looked up and saw a pretty young librarian standing there. She had long straight blonde hair and a doll-like face. She was wearing a very short, very tight skirt and high heels. Must cause chaos when she goes up on the ladders, he thought.

'I'll leave it,' said James. 'I could do with a drink.'

'So could I,' said the librarian.

The invitation came automatically. 'Like to join me?' asked James.

She held out a hand. 'My name's Mary Sprott.'

'James Lacey. Where would you like to go?'

'There's a pub next door. I'll get my coat.'

To do James justice, had Agatha said anything about a special dinner and that she expected him home at a certain time, he would have been there. But the last exchange with Agatha had been of the 'See you this evening' variety. So, wondering in an amused way whether he looked like a dirty old man, he escorted Mary Sprott to the pub.

'I haven't seen you around Dembley before,' she said. 'Are you new to the town?'

'Recently arrived.'

'In business?'

'No, I'm retired.'

She batted her eyelashes at him. 'You look ever so young to be a retired gentleman.'

'Why thank you,' said James. 'What would you like to drink?'

'Rum and Coke, please.'

'Right, back in a moment.'

As James stood at the bar waiting for his order of drinks, he saw the

walkers seated at a round table in the far corner. He waved to them. Peter and Terry raised limp hands. The rest just stared. Oh, dear, thought James. We're not going to get very far with that lot if they've taken a dislike to us. He wondered whether to buy them all a drink to ingratiate himself, but decided against it. He was beginning to get a feeling that he and Agatha were floundering about in an investigation which the police could do so much better with all their records and files. If Jessica had known any of them before her arrival in Dembley, then the police would soon trace it.

As he returned to Mary carrying the drinks, he saw looks of cynical amusement on the faces of the walkers and realized with a jolt that he was supposed to be a married man.

'Thanks ever so,' said Mary. She leaned towards him and whispered, 'You see that bunch over at that table?'

'Yes.'

'That's them ramblers. It was in the papers. One of their lot was killed.'

'Do you know any of them?' asked James.

'I know some of them by sight. They use the library. Weird lot. I doubt if one of them ever takes a bath.'

'So what about you?' asked James. 'It must be a lovely job, working in a library, all those books.'

She shrugged. 'It's a job. Gets a bit boring.'

'I suppose it does,' said James, thinking she must be only in her early twenties. 'Who are your favourite authors?'

'I don't read much. I prefer the telly.'

James tried to hide his shock. 'But my dear girl, what's the point of becoming a librarian if you have no interest in books?'

'Mum said it was a good job,' said Mary. 'It's like this: I've got ever such a good memory, so I did well at school. Mum said being a librarian was nicer than working in a shop. With a memory like mine, I'm good at it. I can remember where everything is.'

'But don't some of the people who come in ask your advice on what books to read?'

'I turn them over to old Miss Briggs. She reads everything, but she can't remember where the books are, so we make a good team.'

'So what would you like to do?' asked James, becoming bored.

'I'd like to be an air hostess. See a bit of the world.'

'Another drink?' asked James.

'Yes, please. I'm ever so hungry.'

For the first time, James thought uneasily of Agatha. 'Do they do food here?'

'They do a good steak-and-kidney pie.'

'All right. I'll make a phone call first.' James went and dialled the flat but

there was no reply. Agatha was probably out investigating. He returned to the table. He might as well have something to eat. Then he might get rid of her and go and join the walkers. That's what Agatha would do.

'I still say there's something odd about the Laceys,' said Alice. 'That's the girl from the library he's with, and I'll tell you something else. He doesn't look married. Do you think they could be police infiltrating our group in order to spy on us?'

'Oh, that's ridiculous,' said Deborah. She suddenly wanted to go home. Charles might be calling her. In her mind, it was no longer Sir Charles. She was unnerved by the conversation about the 'Laceys'. What if they were challenged by the group and confessed that it was she who had brought the vipers into their midst? A thin film of sweat formed on her upper lip. Kelvin thumped another drink down in front of her and she groaned inwardly. As soon as she had finished it, she would make her escape.

Agatha stood outside the library. But it was firmly closed for the night. Where could James be? She turned and looked about her. There was a pub across the road called the Grapes. She registered in her mind that that was where they were to gather on the Saturday for their ramble and then wondered if James had gone there for a drink.

She walked across the road to the pub and pushed open the door of the lounge bar. The first sight that met her eyes was that of James sitting with a pretty blonde. Both were eating steak-and-kidney pie. The blonde threw back her head and laughed at something James was saying. Her short skirt had ridden right up. Black rage boiled up in Agatha. She was to reflect ruefully afterwards that she must have gone insane. For in that moment, she *became* Mrs Lacey.

'What the hell do you think you're doing here, James?' she demanded in a loud voice. There was a silence in the pub.

'Oh, hello, *dear*,' said James, his face flaming. 'This is Miss Sprott, the librarian. Miss Sprott, my wife.'

Determined to get revenge on James and hating every inch of Mary Sprott, from her long legs to her blonde hair, Agatha departed into the realms of fantasy.

'Have you forgotten our anniversary?' she demanded. 'I prepared a special dinner. I *slaved* all day over it, and what do I find? You sitting here having ghastly pub grub with some tart.'

'How dare you, you old bat?' screeched Mary.

Agatha's bearlike eyes bored into Mary's. 'Just get this straight, sweetie,'

she said. 'This is my husband, so you keep your grubby little hands off him.'

Mary burst into tears, scrambled for her handbag on the floor beside her chair, seized it, and fled the pub.

'Let's get out of here,' said James, his face grim. 'No, not another word, Agatha. You're a disgrace.'

The walkers, open-mouthed, watched them go.

'Well,' marvelled Kelvin, 'if they're no' married, then I'm a Dutchman's uncle.'

'Poor bugger,' said Jeffrey. 'Let's be nice to him on Saturday.'

Deborah heaved a tiny sigh of relief, excused herself, and slipped quietly out of the pub and went to phone Sir Charles.

Agatha had never seen James so angry. In vain she did try to say that she had simply been putting on an act. 'And,' raged James, 'I am packing up and leaving. I will not tolerate such behaviour.' Agatha, now completely at a loss for words, followed him upstairs to the flat. As they entered, the phone was ringing. James answered it. It was Sir Charles Fraith.

'Congratulations to Agatha Raisin on a great performance,' chuckled Sir Charles. 'She's turning out to be as good as you said she was.'

'What do you mean?' demanded James sharply.

'Deborah's just called me. Those ramblers were talking in the pub about how you two didn't look married and that they thought you were both police spies, and then our Agatha turns up and puts on the best angry marital scene Deborah says she's ever witnessed. Went down like a charm.'

'Oh,' said James, looking round in amazement at Agatha. 'I didn't realize . . . I mean, yes, she's very good at it.'

'Call me when you learn anything,' said Sir Charles cheerfully. 'I am still suspect numero uno.'

When James had said goodbye, he turned to Agatha and said in a mild voice, 'I am so sorry, Agatha. I should have let you explain. I didn't know you were acting. That was Sir Charles. Deborah told him that the walkers didn't think we were man and wife and were beginning to think we were police spies, but after your scene, they were convinced we were what we claimed to be. You knew this, of course. I should have let you explain.'

'Of course,' said Agatha weakly. She waved her hand at the table. 'I don't suppose you want any dinner.'

'On the contrary,' he said cheerfully, 'you didn't give me time to get more than a few mouthfuls in the pub.'

'Be back in a minute,' said Agatha and scurried off to the bathroom, where she indulged in a hearty bout of tears caused by a mixture of shame and relief.

When she had served dinner, she was so sensible and composed that James

was once more intrigued by the investigation. They both decided to try to find out from the walkers' neighbours anything they could about Jessica – had she been seen with any of them – or rowed with any of them – before the murder?

James said he would try Kelvin, and Agatha said she would check on Deborah.

'Why Deborah?' asked James.

'I've been thinking,' said Agatha, 'she might have called us in to divert suspicion from herself.'

'Seems a bit far-fetched, but I suppose we have to try everything.'

Later that night, Deborah sat in Burger King in the main street of Dembley with Sir Charles Fraith. He had suggested a late supper. Deborah looked around her and thought of all the posh restaurants people ate in, hoping to dine alongside people like Charles.

But he listened with such interest when she talked of her work in the school and of the pupils. 'That's an odd bunch you've got in with,' remarked Sir Charles.

'Oh, you mean the Dembley Walkers. It's something to do.'

'Are you going out this Saturday?'

'Yes, I have to keep an eye on our detectives.'

'Pity. I've got people at the weekend and wanted to ask you over.'

Deborah spilled some coffee from her polystyrene cup. Damn the walkers. Should she say she would drop going with them? Would that look too eager? Would . . . ?

'Of course, if you're all through by the evening, you can come for dinner,' she realized he was saying.

'What time?'

'Oh, eight or eight thirty.'

'Thanks awfully.'

'My pleasure. Only hope you don't find it a bore. Gosh, I'm tired. Have you got your car?'

'No, I live quite close by.'

'Then I'll walk you home.'

Dembley was an old market town which no longer boasted a market but sometimes on calm evenings still held a flavour of the old days. The market hall with its splendid arches and clock tower now housed an Italian restaurant and an auction room. The beautiful seventeenth-century house opposite had a garish neon sign in one window flashing out chinese take-away. Concrete blocks of shops nearly obscured the view of the thirteenth-century church. White-faced youths leaned against lamp-posts at street corners and jeered at the world in a tired way, their speech liberally sprinkled with obscenities.

As they passed one group, a thin teenager shouted out, 'Getting your leg over tonight, guv?' and the rest sniggered.

To Deborah's horror, Sir Charles stopped dead in his tracks. 'Why did you say that?' he demanded, addressing the teenager.

The boy looked at his shoes and muttered, 'Sod off.'

Sir Charles stared at him curiously. Then he turned to Deborah and took her arm. 'It's not that they suffer from material poverty,' he said. 'It's a poverty of the mind, wouldn't you say?'

Deborah, head down, murmured, 'Oh, ignore them. They might have knives.'

Sir Charles turned back. 'Have you got knives?' he asked.

For some reason, his simple, almost childlike curiosity appeared to embarrass the youths more than a stream of insults would have done.

Muttering, they slid off, still in a group, used to being in a gang since they were toddlers, frightened to break away from each other and become vulnerable individuals.

'Here's where I live,' said Deborah, stopping in front of a dark doorway between a dress shop and an off-licence. 'Would you . . . would you like to come up for a cup of coffee?'

Unnoticed by Deborah, who was studying her shoes, a predatory gleam entered Sir Charles's eyes. He fancied her a lot, he thought. She was different from the girls he usually escorted. There was something so pliant and appealing about her thinness and whiteness. He was not used to shy women and found Deborah a novelty. 'Not tonight,' he said. He took her face between his hands and kissed her on the lips. 'See you Saturday. Would you like me to send Gustav for you?'

'No!' said Deborah. 'I mean, I know the way.'

'And so you do. Bye.'

Deborah scurried up the stairs, her heart beating hard. She was going to be a dinner guest at Barfield House. She telephoned her mother in Stratford-upon-Avon. Mrs Camden, a tired, faded woman, worn out with years of work in looking after Deborah and her two brothers because Mr Camden had shot off for parts unknown shortly after Deborah, the youngest, had been born, listened to Deborah's excited voice bragging about how she was going to be a dinner guest at Barfield House.

'Make sure your underwear's clean,' cautioned Mrs Camden. 'You never know what might happen.'

And Deborah knew her mother did not mean that her daughter should be prepared for a night of lust but was simply expressing an old fear that one of her children might meet with an accident and arrive at the hospital in dirty underwear.

The next morning Agatha did not rush to get to the kitchen first to make a wifely breakfast. She was appalled at her behaviour of the night before. She was determined to back off and play it cool. So she mentally shelved all her earlier plans of cooking up breakfast in a hurriedly bought satin nightgown and negligée, and bathed and dressed in a plain skirt and blouse and sensible shoes.

When she arrived in the kitchen, James was cooking eggs and bacon. 'I put some on for you,' he said over his shoulder. 'Sit down and I'll serve you. There's coffee in the jug.'

Agatha saw the morning newspapers lying at the side of the table and looked hurriedly through them all. But there was no news of the rambler murder.

James served her and himself, ate hurriedly and then settled down to read a newspaper, allowing Agatha to reflect that this was probably more like real married life than any of her wild imaginings.

She finished eating and cleared away the dirty plates into the dishwasher. The flat, although expensively furnished, depressed her. It was the sort of place that reminded her of her London days, when she had allowed decorators to do the job for her and never revealed any of her own personality in the furnishings. She wished suddenly she had brought her cats with her. They were back in the care of Doris Simpson. Perhaps she would take a run home and collect them. She was sure James would not mind.

'So what are you going to do today?' asked James finally.

'I'm going to where Deborah lives,' said Agatha. 'I'll take a clipboard and say I'm a market researcher.'

'That's a good idea. But don't you think it might be easier just to question Mrs Mason?'

'I want to find out Deborah's movements before the murder. Mrs Mason won't know that.'

'But won't people think it odd that a market researcher would want to know about Deborah Camden?'

'Not the way I go about it. Look, you represent some product and suggest there's going to be a prize. They invite you in for a cup of tea. Once in, you start talking about the murder.'

James looked thoughtfully at Agatha, as if debating whether she was the type of woman that people asked in for a cup of tea, but he said, 'I'll see what I can find out about Kelvin. We'll meet up back here early evening, swap notes, and then go to that restaurant where Peter and Terry work.' He retreated back into his newspaper while Agatha's feverish mind planned what to wear to dinner.

Seeing she was going to get no more conversation out of James, Agatha found a clipboard among her belongings, attached several sheets of paper to

it, and set out.

When she arrived at the doorway between the shops which led to the flats above, one of which was Deborah's, Agatha longed for the pre-security days when one just opened the street door and walked in. She studied the names on the bells: D. Camden, Wotherspoon, Sprott – her eyes narrowed – and Comfrey.

After a little hesitation, she rang the bell marked 'Wotherspoon'. No intercom. The buzzer went and Agatha quickly pushed open the street door and walked in and up a shabby flight of uncarpeted wooden stairs. An elderly man leaning on a stick was standing on the landing peering down at her as she made her ascent.

'I don't know you,' he said. 'If you're selling something, I'm not interested.'

Agatha pinned a bright smile on her face and went resolutely on up. 'I am doing some market research about the tea-drinking habits of the English. It will only take a moment of your time.'

He had a grey, very open-pored face, loose dentures, and thin hair greased in streaks across a narrow head. He was wearing a grey shirt and grey trousers and carpet slippers of a furry plum-coloured fabric, very new, probably a present from some grandchild, thought Agatha.

'Questions, questions,' he grumbled. 'I don't want to answer damn-fool questions.'

'We are paying ten pounds to each person who helps us,' said Agatha, all bright efficiency.

'Oh!' His truculence melted. 'Come in. As a matter of fact, I was just about to have a cup of tea.'

Agatha followed him into a sparsely furnished living-room. There was a photograph of him in an army uniform taken during World War II, when he was a young man. He had been very handsome. Age, it comes to all of us, thought Agatha, repressing a shudder. There was another photograph, a wedding one.

'That your wife?' asked Agatha, pointing to it.

'Yes, she passed on fifteen years ago. Cancer. Odd, that,' remarked Mr Wotherspoon, peering blearily at the photograph. 'I always thought Madge would see me out.'

'You must miss her.'

'What's that? Oh, no, she was an old bitch.'

Agatha blinked but tactfully said nothing. He poured two dark cups of tea into chipped mugs. He added tinned sweetened condensed milk to his own and held the tin over Agatha's cup. 'No, no,' she said hurriedly. 'Now just a few questions.'

'Where's the money?' he asked.



Agatha fished out a ten-pound note and gave it to him. She was sitting down at a scarred living-room table as he bent over her to take it. It was then she smelt him. He smelt very strongly of rum.

He sat down next to her and put a gnarled hand on her knee. Agatha picked it up and said roguishly, 'Naughty, naughty.' He leered at her and put his hand back again.

'I'll take that money back if you don't behave yourself,' said Agatha sharply. The hand was removed.

Agatha asked a few questions – age, job, taste in tea, how many cups, where did he buy it, and so on. At last she felt she had put on a good-enough act and said, 'I would love another cup of tea, if you can spare the time. I don't get to meet very many interesting people.'

'No, there's not many good uns left,' he said. He poured her another cup of tea and then sank into an old man's reminiscences, his voice droning on in the stuffy room like a fly trapped against the glass of a window.

When he said, 'Ah, young people these days . . . ' Agatha interrupted with, 'That rambling murder, talking about young people these days. You've got one of them living next door.'

'That skinny little thing! At least she didn't murder anyone. Couldn't say boo to a goose, that one couldn't.'

'Many boyfriends?'

He leaned forward and winked. 'Not her. She's one of them homosapens.'

Agatha digested this and translated it quickly in her brain.

'Do you mean she's homosexual . . . I mean, a lesbian?'

'I caught the pair of them in each other's arms. I'm telling you. I've seen a thing or two. I 'member when we was in Tunis –'

'Never mind Tunis,' interrupted Agatha. 'What pair?'

'Her, Deborah, and that one wot was killed, arms round each other, they had.'

'Where was this?'

'Out on the stairs.'

'But a lot of women hug each other.'

'But they was kissing and groaning.'

'Did you tell the police this?'

'Not me. Hadn't the time to spend with me even though I told them I was an old soldier. No, all they wants to know is if I'd heard her or seen her having a row with that Jessica and I hadn't seen a blind thing. I mostly keeps meself to meself.'

'So when did you see them hugging and kissing?'

'Reckon about a month ago. I tell you, what the world is coming to these days, I don't know.'

Agatha stood up. 'You've been most helpful, Mr Wotherspoon.'

‘Won’t you stay?’ Loneliness peered out from old eyes. ‘We could have a natter.’

Much as she thought him horrible, Agatha nonetheless felt guilty as she made her way to the door, said goodbye firmly and went down the stairs and out into the freedom of the sunny street. She wondered how James was getting on.

James privately would have liked to think up some idea for interviewing people that was different from Agatha’s. But at last he decided that a market researcher was as good as anything. He had no fear of being seen by Kelvin. Like the others, he would be at work.

Kelvin lived in a tower block near the school, a depressing place surrounded by scrubby grass and litter. What trees there were stood semi-shattered, raising their few remaining branches up to the sky. There were other signs of vandalism everywhere, and he found that the lift was out of order and had probably been out of order for some time, for the sign saying so was covered with old graffiti.

Kelvin lived on the tenth floor. James decided that the police would have interrogated the neighbours on either side of his flat and wondered if he might have better luck questioning the people underneath, as sounds carried down the way.

At the first flat he met with no success at all, perhaps because he never thought of Agatha’s idea of offering money. He said he was doing a survey about which kind of washing detergent was most used in Dembley. A sour-faced woman simply slammed the door in his face. He tried the next door after squinting upwards and deciding it must be the one directly under Kelvin’s.

The door was opened by a tired-looking woman in her thirties. Her dyed blonde hair was showing an inch of dark roots and her heavy make-up looked like yesterday’s.

‘It’s not the rent arrears again, is it?’ she asked nervously.

‘No,’ said James. ‘I would like to ask you some questions about which soap powder you use.’

To his relief, she gave a little jerk of her head. ‘Come in.’

He walked through a minuscule hall and into a living-room full of cheap furniture, all of which seemed to be falling apart. The sofa had been slashed, an arm was off one chair, and the table looked as if someone had recently tried to cleave it with an axe.

‘My husband,’ she said, following his eyes. ‘He do go on something awful when he has the drink in him.’

‘Where is he now?’ asked James nervously.

‘Out on the building site. Come into the kitchen, will you? I’m not much use. I just buy the first packet I see in the supermarket.’

He followed her into a small kitchen, averting his eyes from the smashed cupboards, no doubt signs of the absent husband’s drunken wrath. She pulled a packet of soap powder from a cupboard under the sink and held it up. ‘This any good?’

He proceeded to ask questions – number in family, how often clothes were washed, and so on – automatically writing down the answers, wondering how to introduce the subject of the tenant upstairs. ‘I’m sorry to take up so much of your time,’ he ventured politely.

She gave him a flirtatious smile. ‘I don’t mind. Don’t get to see much people. Like a cup of tea?’

‘Yes, please,’ said James, smiling back.

He leaned against the kitchen counter while she plugged in an electric kettle. He looked down from the window. From down below came the harsh cries of little children trying to catch a cat to torture it. The cat escaped. The children hunched together as if plotting further horrors and then they ran off, screaming at nothing.

‘Been doing this job long?’ he realized she was asking.

‘I’m retired. I do bits for the company a few times a year. Freelance. I’m not on the payroll.’

The kettle boiled. She filled a small teapot after putting in six tea-bags, arranged a bottle of milk, a bag of sugar, and two mugs on a tin tray with the teapot, and carried them into the living-room.

The tea was very strong indeed. She leaned back on the battered sofa and crossed her legs. She had very good legs. In fact, thought James, she had probably been a pretty girl before marriage knocked the stuffing out of her, much as the stuffing was spilling out of the sofa on which she sat.

‘You’ve had a bit of excitement around here,’ said James, sipping his tea and trying not to shudder.

‘How come?’

‘Isn’t one of your neighbours one of those ramblers, a Scotsman?’

‘Oh, him.’ She jerked a thumb at the ceiling. ‘Lives up above.’

‘Look like a murderer?’

‘Too soft, I’d say. Once tried to come on to me.’ She recrossed her legs and adjusted her skirt so that a bit of grimy lace showed underneath. ‘But I wasn’t interested. He’s that kind, you know. Fancies himself a ladies’ man. I don’t think he can get it up.’

‘That’s a bit harsh, surely,’ said James. ‘You can’t tell that by looking at him.’

She giggled. ‘I can tell by listening. Should have heard her going at it.’

‘Who?’

‘Some woman he had with him.’

‘When was this?’ asked James sharply.

‘I dunno. Oh, yeah, it was before that murder, a few days before. Round about midnight. My old man was passed out, and I was thinking, what a life, listening to the bed creaking upstairs. I mean, you can hear everything in these flats. Then I heard them shouting. Then I heard someone thumping about. Then going towards the door. Curiosity was killing me, so I went to our front door and opened it a crack. I heard her outside, shouting, “You can’t even make it and you know why? You’re probably a closet faggot.”’

‘Did you get a look at her?’

‘Naw.’

‘Pity.’

‘Why?’

‘It would be interesting to know if she was that woman that got murdered.’

She looked at him round-eyed and then, to his horror, she darted over to where he was sitting and sank down on his lap, ‘Oh, I’m so frightened,’ she murmured into his hair.

Oh, Agatha, Agatha, thought James. I wish you were here. And then a key grated in the lock. She was off his lap and back on the sofa with her skirt demurely pulled down about her knees as a huge burly man lurched into the room. ‘Who’s this?’ he roared.

‘One of those men doing market research,’ she said.

He jerked his thumb at the door. ‘Out!’ he shouted. And James was up and out the door and down the stairs as fast as he could.

Agatha was beginning to feel a bit sulky. She and James were seated that evening in the Copper Kettle being served by Terry Brice. The initial excitement of sharing their discoveries was over. James kept talking about the case when Terry was out of earshot, and Agatha, who had been writing romantic scripts for him all day, could not understand why he wasn’t speaking any of the lines. She wrenched herself into reality with an effort when he said, ‘We should tell Bill Wong about this.’

‘Couldn’t we wait just a little?’ said Agatha. ‘I mean, he might order us to keep clear.’

‘I don’t know about that. We’re private citizens. He can’t stop us living in Dembley or going out with the ramblers. I sympathize with you, because we’re certainly suffering in the cause, having to pretend to be man and wife’ – Agatha winced – ‘and eating this quite dreadful food. Leave it, Agatha. I’ll make us an omelette when we get home. What is that you’re poking your fork in?’

‘It said on the menu it was old-fashioned Irish stew. How’s your steak?’

‘Like army boots.’ He signalled to Terry. ‘Take this away. We can’t eat any more of it.’

‘Why?’ he asked plaintively.

‘For a start,’ said Agatha, ‘this Irish stew is disgusting. The gravy’s lukewarm and there doesn’t seem to be much meat and there’s too much salt.’

‘We *are* fussy, aren’t we, sweetie. That’s Jeffrey’s favourite dish.’ Terry’s eyes glinted maliciously. ‘But then, he likes all things Irish.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ asked James.

Terry leaned one slim hip on the edge of the table. ‘Haven’t you heard our Jeffrey on the subject of Free Ireland? Quite fiery, he is.’

Peter Hatfield sailed up. ‘What are you lot gossiping about?’

‘They don’t like the food,’ said Terry.

‘Fussy, fussy,’ chided Peter. ‘You going on this walk on Saturday?’

‘Yes,’ said James. ‘How can the pair of you get the time off on Saturday? I mean, that must be your busy day.’

‘We don’t work Saturdays. I know it’s odd, but they were so keen to have a couple of waiters who would do Sundays that they let us off.’

‘So how come you were both here on the day of the murder?’ asked James and then cursed himself as Terry’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

‘How did you know that?’ he asked.

‘Someone said something about it at your meeting,’ said Agatha quickly.

‘That fair girl, Deborah what’s-her-name.’

‘Considering she’s prime suspect number one, she should watch her mouth,’ said Terry waspishly.

‘Why is she prime suspect?’

‘Because,’ said Terry patiently, as if speaking to an idiot, ‘she was the last one to see Jessica alive.’

‘What?’ Agatha stared at him. ‘But she said she was window-shopping.’

‘Well, one of our customers, a Mrs Hardy, she said as how she saw Deborah’s car heading out of Dembley to the Barfield estate on that Saturday, and if she wasn’t going to see Jessica, where was she going?’

## Chapter Six

The following morning, James finally agreed to Agatha's suggestion that she should talk directly to Alice and Gemma and see what she could find out and he should talk to Jeffrey, and after that, they would tell Bill Wong what they knew. As none of the people they wanted to interview was likely to be free before early evening, they decided to spend the day in Carsely, attending to household chores.

Neither had realized what an amount of gossip their taking off together for parts unknown would cause in the village, Mrs Mason having kept discreetly quiet.

Agatha's first caller after she had fed her cats was the vicar's wife, Mrs Bloxby.

'And where have you been?' asked Mrs Bloxby.

'We just went off on a little trip,' said Agatha, rather proud of the fact that the vicar's wife obviously thought she and James were now 'a number'.

Mrs Bloxby's kind eyes surveyed Agatha's flushed and happy face. 'You like Mr Lacey, do you not?'

'Oh, yes, we're great friends.'

They were sitting in Agatha's garden. The cats rolled on the lawn in the sunlight. Great fleecy clouds ambled across the sky overhead. It was an idyllic day.

'I sometimes think,' said the vicar's wife, leaning back in her chair and addressing a cloud, 'that we are very quick to counsel young people while neglecting our contemporaries.'

'Meaning?' asked Agatha.

Mrs Bloxby's mild eyes descended again to rest on Agatha's face. 'Meaning that a lot of the old advice is still relevant in this wicked age, even for women such as ourselves. I have observed that men who get what they want outside marriage, particularly confirmed bachelors like James Lacey, are therefore content to stay unmarried.'

'I am not having an affair with James,' snapped Agatha.

'Oh, my dear, I thought . . . You must forgive me for jumping to the wrong conclusion.' Mrs Bloxby gave a little laugh. 'I should have realized – you are probably both investigating something. Do forgive me.'

‘That’s all right,’ mumbled Agatha, ‘but don’t tell anyone in the village we’re on a case. It’s supposed to be a secret.’

‘I should have known better. Do not think me impertinent. Mr Lacey is a very charming man. But he did have an affair with poor Mary, that woman who was murdered, and in that case I always thought it was a matter of casual sex.’

No, thought Agatha, he was briefly in love with her, and remembered sharply all the pain she had felt.

As Mrs Bloxby began to talk of village matters, Agatha suddenly wished she herself had not been so honest. She wanted every woman in the village to think that she was having an affair with James. But now Mrs Bloxby, without revealing anything about the investigation, would contrive to let everyone know the friendship was innocent.

After the vicar’s wife had left, Agatha decided to take herself down to Moreton-in-Marsh for a quiet lunch. She wanted to be alone and think about James and turn over everything he had said in her mind, always searching for some hint that his feelings might be warming towards her.

Moreton-in-Marsh is a busy Cotswold market town with a wide tree-lined main street on the Fosse Way, an old Roman military road. Ever since the Abbot of Westminster, who owned the land, decided to make use of the transport on the Fosse Way and a new Moreton was built in 1222, it has always been a favourite stopping place for travellers, the wool merchants of medieval times being replaced with tourists.

Agatha found a parking place after some difficulty. Even in the depths of winter, it is hard to find a parking place in Moreton, where the number of cars and the absence of people often puzzled Agatha. Where did so many car owners go? There wasn’t enough work or enough shops to draw them all. Agatha went into the tourist information centre to see if she could pick up some pamphlets about rambling walks to take along on Saturday in order to show the Dembley Walkers she was a dedicated member. She read a tourist pamphlet on Moreton-in-Marsh to see if there was something about the old town she did not know. And there was. One pamphlet explained that the charter for the market had been granted by King Charles I in 1638. ‘Some years later,’ she read, ‘he stayed at the White Hart Royal, which was a well-known Coaching Inn, and was part of the Trust House Forte Hotel Group.’ Agatha had a brief and vivid picture of King Charles and his Cavaliers with their booted feet up on the hotel tables listening to the piped Muzak which was a feature of Trust House Forte Hotels.

After a look in a thrift shop, she went to the White Hart and ate a massive plate of lamb stew. She emerged later blinking into the sunlight, drugged with food, feeling the waistline of her skirt uncomfortably tight.

Was there something about women of a certain age, she wondered, that,

when they wanted to attract a man, instead of getting on the exercise bicycle, they stuffed themselves with food?

For his part, James had had a bar lunch at the Red Lion and had endured a lot of sly teasing of the what-have-you-been-doing-with-our-Agatha variety. As he walked home, he wondered whether Agatha's reputation was being damaged and then decided it was not. Provided there was no truth in the rumours, they would soon die out.

He found he was anxious to get on with the investigation, and as he walked down Lilac Lane, he saw Agatha getting out of her car and hailed her.

'I think we'd better get going,' he said. 'I want to bump into Jeffrey as he comes out of the school as if by accident and take him for a drink. What about you?'

'I'll just knock on Alice's front door and say I've come to ask her advice about boots,' said Agatha, feeling lethargic and heavy and wishing she had not eaten so much.

She fell asleep in the car – they had used her car for the journey back to Carsely and James was driving it – and awoke to hear James saying in an amused voice, 'I didn't know you snored, Agatha.'

'Sorry,' she said. 'Had too much to eat at lunch.'

She wished she could always look and feel bandbox-fresh for him. She felt old and began to worry about those wrinkles on her upper lip. Surely they hadn't been there before she went to London. That's what PR did for you, she thought sadly. James had very good eyesight. When he looked at her, she could feel his blue eyes fastening on those wrinkles. How could a man want to kiss any woman with those nasty little wrinkles above her mouth?

Agatha did not know that James felt most at ease with her when she was quiet and crushed. She felt she had to be always 'on stage' for him.

He dropped her off near Alice's and went on to their own flat, leaving the car outside and setting out on foot for the school.

Children of all shades were tumbling out of the school gates. He still found it strange to hear Indian and Pakistani children calling to each other in broad Midlands accents. Although their faces did not have the pinched, white, unhealthy appearance of the native British, they held that flat, discontented look of the underprivileged.

He saw Jeffrey strolling out and drew back a little and then began to follow him. Finally James speeded up and crossed a busy street to the other side, crossed back again, and came face to face with Jeffrey and hailed him. 'Hot day,' said James. 'Care for a drink?'

'All right,' said Jeffrey.

James noticed Jeffrey no longer eyed him with suspicion. The reason for



that soon came out when they were seated in a pub called the Fleece, Jeffrey saying he was tired of the crowd at the Grapes.

‘You shouldn’t let that wife of yours wear the trousers,’ said Jeffrey, raising a pint of bitter. ‘Cheers.’

James was about to protest but then decided that the role of hen-pecked husband was putting him in a sympathetic light. ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he said easily. ‘I suppose when you’ve been married as long as we have, you get so you don’t notice it. But I would have judged you to favour equal rights for women.’

‘Equal rights, yes,’ said Jeffrey moodily, ‘but not domination.’

‘Was Jessica like that, the dead woman?’ asked James. And then added quickly, ‘Sorry, I forgot you were close to her.’

Jeffrey shrugged. ‘She was a convenient lay,’ he said. ‘But then, you never can tell with women. They say they’re liberated, they say they only want sex, and the next thing they’re pushing you around. What that wife of yours needs is a good punch in the mouth.’

‘But if you advocate rights for women, then you shouldn’t be advocating punches in the mouth,’ said James.

‘Why not? They consider themselves equal to men, then treat them like men. If a man gives you any lip, you sock him one. Why not sock a woman?’

‘Apt to end up in prison,’ said James.

‘Then just walk away from it. I’ll never get married.’ Jeffrey flexed his muscles. ‘Plenty of crumpet out there.’

James suddenly found himself disliking Jeffrey intensely. He had heard of such men but had never met one before, the type who claim to hold liberal views and underneath hold the same views as any American redneck. Liberal views on women as held by the Jeffreys of this world were simply a convenient way of talking some woman into bed and having sex without responsibility.

With a conscious effort, he forced himself to laugh, man to man.

‘Who do you think murdered Jessica?’ he asked.

‘I think it was one of the women,’ said Jeffrey. ‘Our Jessica was bisexual. Alice was jealous of her because she was after Gemma. Then she messed about a bit with our Deborah, and God knows what she got up to with Mary. I mean, think about Mary. She was probably the last one to see Jessica alive. That business about having food poisoning! She could have made that up to give herself an alibi.’

‘And do the police suspect you?’ asked James. ‘I mean, you being her lover and all that.’

‘They probably still do. But I didn’t do it, so they can ask all the questions they like. Do you know the filth even searched my flat? “What are you looking for?” I asked them. “A spade?”’

‘I’m surprised,’ ventured James, ‘that you don’t think Sir Charles did it.’

A sneer marred Jeffrey’s face. ‘That sort don’t even fart without asking permission from the police. Besides, he’s got lots of people there to do the dirty for him. But I think it was a woman. Women are vicious.’ He looked pointedly at his empty tankard, and James quickly ordered another.

‘Oh, well, let’s talk about something else,’ said James. ‘I’m thinking of settling in Ireland.’

‘Which part?’ asked Jeffrey sharply.

‘The south, of course. I write books, or try to write books, anyway. My mother’s Irish,’ lied James. ‘Do you know, if you’re a writer you don’t have to pay taxes?’

‘Yes, grand country, so it is.’ Jeffrey’s Midlands accent had faded, to be replaced by a slightly Irish one.

‘The only trouble,’ said James, handing money over the bar for the drinks, ‘is that writer friends tell me that the IRA come calling and tell the writer that since he’s not paying taxes, he can jolly well pay towards the Cause.’

‘And why not?’ demanded Jeffrey truculently. ‘Why should they live off the fat of the land and not pay for it?’

‘I suppose you have a point,’ said James, wondering what it would be like to punch Jeffrey in the mouth.

Agatha took a quick look around Alice’s flat while Alice was in the kitchen making coffee. There was distinct evidence of two contrasting personalities. The bookshelves were divided between heavy political tomes and paperback romances. On the low coffee-table was stacked *Marxism Today* alongside *Woman’s Weekly*. There was a pottery wheel over by the window and a large stuffed pink teddy bear sat on the sofa.

Alice came back in carrying two cups of coffee. She smiled at Agatha. ‘I’m glad you’ve come to me for advice about boots, but I’ve got a surprise for you. Not boots – trainers, or sneakers, as our American cousins call them. Like these.’ She stuck out a foot. Agatha wondered why great white trainers on female feet should look so threatening. ‘They’ll set you back about forty pounds,’ boomed Alice. ‘But worth every penny. I can walk for miles and never get sore feet. Why did you want to join us?’

‘Why do you think?’ Agatha ruefully patted her waistline. ‘I find jogging too energetic, and a walk in the country is just the thing for getting my weight down and seeing a bit of the scenery. The trouble with driving everywhere is that one might as well be in London. It’s hard to appreciate the countryside when all you ever see of it is trees and fields whizzing past the car windows.’

‘Not to mention adding to the pollution problem,’ said Alice. ‘Jessica always said . . .’ Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned her head away and

said gruffly, 'Sorry, I still miss her.'

'It must have been a great blow to you,' murmured Agatha.

'It's the guilt, you see.' Alice took out a man's handkerchief and gave her nose a vigorous blow. 'She came here looking for a bed and I threw her out. I thought she was after my Gemma. If only we had all stayed friends, we would have gone with her and this terrible murder would never have happened.'

'Who do you think did it?' asked Agatha.

'Oh, Sir Charles Fraith. But being who he is, we'll never see justice done. There's one law for the rich and another for the poor. He lied about being in London when she was killed. He was seen threatening her, but he'll pull all sorts of strings and we'll never hear another word about it.'

'Don't you think it might have been Jeffrey Benson?' ventured Agatha. 'He seems to have been her lover.'

'How did you know that?'

'Gossip at the walkers' meeting,' said Agatha.

'Humph. The bourgeois lack of loyalty among that lot sometimes amazes me. No, I don't think Jeffrey did it, but the police will want to pin it on him so that their dear Sir Charles will escape scot-free. Oh, here's Gemma.'

Gemma walked in. She gave Agatha a side-long smile.

'What have you got there?' asked Agatha, looking at a couple of videos that Gemma was carrying.

'I thought we might watch these tonight,' said Gemma. 'I've got *Mad Maniac* and *Serial Passion*.'

Alice sighed. 'I'm not going to watch that American rubbish.'

'Suit yourself,' said Gemma. 'Any chocky biccies?'

'In the tin over there,' said Alice with a weak, indulgent smile. 'Such a child,' she whispered to Agatha.

Gemma caught Agatha's eye and winked. Agatha began to wonder about Gemma. Who exactly was this little shop-girl who went in for a lesbian affair and liked watching videos about serial killers? She remembered from the reviews that the two films Gemma had chosen to watch were particularly nasty.

But Alice had caught that wink and she suddenly stood up and loomed over Agatha. 'I don't want to hurry you off,' she said, 'but I've got a lot to do.'

'Of course.' Agatha got to her feet as well. 'See you Saturday.'

Agatha was glad to get out of there. On reflection, she decided that there was something quite frightening about Alice and Gemma.

Agatha and James were just having a cup of coffee and sharing notes when there was a ring at the doorbell. James went to open the door and found Bill Wong standing there. He came in and looked thoughtfully about him.

‘What are you two up to?’ he demanded. ‘And don’t tell me it’s because you’ve decided to shack up together. You could have done that in Carsely.’

‘Sit down, Bill,’ said Agatha. ‘We were going to phone you. I told you Deborah Camden had asked me to investigate the case on behalf of Sir Charles. Wait till you hear what we found out.’

He listened, his face growing grim as they reeled off the new evidence they had found: Kelvin had had a row with Jessica; Deborah had been seen driving out of Dembley on the Saturday afternoon in the direction of the Barfield estate; Peter and Terry never usually worked on Saturday afternoons and yet had opted to work the Saturday of the murder; and Jeffrey Benson appeared to be an IRA sympathizer.

‘And how long were you going to sit on this evidence if I hadn’t called round?’ demanded Bill furiously. ‘We’ll need to pull Deborah and Kelvin in again. And what of this Irish business? There was a bomb went off in the High Street here two years ago and a child was killed. I thought I had heard Jeffrey’s name before. Two Irishmen were reported to have been staying in his flat the night before the bombing. He denied the whole thing and we had no evidence to hold him. But this time he’s really going to sweat.’

‘We were going to phone you this evening,’ said James. ‘It’s no use being angry with us, Bill, and telling us to keep out of it. You’d never have found all this out without our help. How did you find us?’

‘Sir Charles told me where you were. He appeared to think that the hiring of you showed him to be innocent. I’d better get down to police headquarters right away, and you two are coming with me!’

Later that evening Jeffrey Benson was returning from the Grapes. As he turned the corner of the street where he lived, he saw two men standing and looking up at his block of flats. There was something familiar about them, about the grey suits and grey faces. He recognized one of them. It was the man who had questioned him after the bombing. The man from MI5. He walked quickly away and went to a phone box. He took a small notebook out of his pocket and found a number and dialled. When a voice answered, he said, ‘Benson here, Dembley. They’re waiting to question me again about that business two years ago.’

‘Then do what you did two years ago and keep your mouth shut,’ said the voice.

‘But they’ll keep me in for days and grill me,’ said Jeffrey, his voice sounding weak and frightened and not at all like his usual robust tones.

‘You know what to do.’ The voice was cold. ‘Keep your mouth shut or we’ll shut it for you.’

‘If that’s all the help you are,’ shouted Jeffrey, ‘I’ve a good mind to tell

them the lot and ask for protection.'

'Just remember, there's no protection from us,' said the voice.

Jeffrey walked out into a shifting world full of death and violence. For the first time in years, he thought of his mother. Like a lost child, he walked back to his street and approached the two men.

'Looking for me?' he said.

Deborah had all her clothes spread out on the bed when the police came for her. She had been trying to think what to wear on Saturday. She had studied society magazines, but all they showed were pictures of people at balls and parties. They did not show any pictures of people at a country-house dinner.

And when they started to question her about that Saturday, she was terrified that they might arrest her and that she might never get to Barfield House for dinner.

Bill Wong called on Agatha and James the following morning. He looked weary.

'We can't hold Deborah,' he said. 'She said she had started to drive out in the hope of stopping Jessica making a scene, but then had turned back to Dembley before she got to the estate. She's stuck to her story, although we questioned her over and over again. She said she turned back because she was frightened of Jessica, then she said she had lied to us because she was frightened of being accused of the murder.'

'Kelvin has admitted to the row with Jessica. After intensive questioning it appears that he was so ashamed of his inability to lay her that he lied to us. Believe that if you want. Peter and Terry said they had volunteered for the extra work at the restaurant and changed shifts with two of the other waiters because no one was going out on that Saturday walk but Jessica. Now we get to Benson.'

'He did house two Irishmen the night before the bombing. He swears blind he didn't know what they were going to do, that is if they did it. He's so terrified, he's told us all he knows and it's not much. We traced a phone number he gave us, but when we got there the four men who had been living in this house in Stratford had packed up and disappeared. They must have known he would sing. False names, rent paid cash, no contact with the neighbours. The usual dead end.'

'I suppose he's under protective custody,' said James.

'Not worth it. He's just one of those naïve liberals who get sucked in. He'll never hear from them again, and more's the pity. But that's all MI5's pigeon. We're still working on the murder.'

‘I suppose the walk on Saturday is off,’ said Agatha.

‘Oh, no, you may as well go along and keep your ears open. I can’t stop you. But go carefully. Sir Charles is still under suspicion, but it could well be one of your rambling companions. Make sure they don’t suspect you. Jeffrey talks to you about Ireland in a pub, James, and the next day MI5 comes calling. He might put two and two together.’

When he had left, James and Agatha looked at each other for a long moment.

‘I think you had better go home, Agatha,’ said James finally. ‘I don’t like this.’

But all in that moment the idea of giving up her precious role of Mrs Lacey was more frightening to Agatha than the idea of being murdered.

‘I’ve got you to protect me,’ she said. ‘We haven’t even had any breakfast. I’ll make it.’

She hummed to herself in the kitchen as she prepared a cheese omelette for both of them, so engrossed in her wifely role that she quite forgot that she had never really made an omelette.

James came into the kitchen in time to smell burning cheese and swipe the pan off the stove. ‘Go and sit down, Agatha,’ he said in a kindly voice. ‘You’re obviously too worried to cook.’

And so Agatha had all the humiliation of sitting there feeling useless while James whipped up two light cheese omelettes. He doesn’t need a wife, mourned Agatha. If the road to a man’s heart is through his stomach, then I haven’t got a hope in hell.

‘What about Mary Trapp?’ asked James.

‘Oh, her? Maybe we’ll talk to her on the walk,’ said Agatha. ‘I mean, it’ll begin to look odd if we call on another one of them.’

‘We didn’t exactly call on Deborah or Kelvin,’ James pointed out. ‘Still, maybe you’re right. We’ll have a day off. Tell you what, we’ll go to the movies and forget about the whole thing.’

Agatha had quite decided the pursuit of James was hopeless and was so quiet and subdued for the rest of that day and evening that James enjoyed her company immensely. And that night he didn’t even bother to put a chair under the handle of his bedroom door.

It was a subdued group of ramblers who set out from the Grapes that Saturday. Agatha was still without any romantic hopes and was wearing the trainers recommended by Alice. She felt they made her feet look enormous, but what did it all matter anyway? There was nothing to look forward to now at her age but an early grave.

Jeffrey Benson was suffering from total loss of ego. When he remembered

the way he had cringed before his interrogators, he felt like bursting into tears. Then, when he had begged them for protection and they had told him in an almost fatherly way that he was of no account to anyone, he was just one of the saps the IRA had used, he had felt totally demoralized.

It was obvious that Alice and Gemma had had some sort of row because Gemma, wearing a brief pair of shorts and unsuitable, thin sandals, was talking animatedly to Mary Trapp while Alice lumbered behind, scowling. Peter and Terry were whispering together. James wondered how soon it would be before the ramblers connected him and Agatha with the sudden renewal of police interest and how the police had come by the new information. The one thing, he thought, that might save himself and Agatha from discovery was the walkers' lack of interest in anything other than their own immediate affairs. He looked down at Agatha, who was glooming along beside him, and decided it was time they reinforced the marital couple bit and said sharply to her, 'What's the matter with you, dear? You look as if you've lost your last penny.'

'Oh, shut up, pillock,' snapped Agatha, correctly guessing what he was up to and glad of a way to release her pent-up frustrations. 'It's a wonder you didn't ask that little tart from the library along.'

'How dare you speak to me like that,' said James. 'Jeffrey's right. You need a punch in the mouth.'

'What's that?' Mary Trapp swung around. 'How dare you advocate violence against women, Jeffrey!'

'Ah'm sick o' this bickering,' said Kelvin. He looked stonily at Agatha and James. 'You two should keep your quarrels out o' public. There's nothing mair sickening than a marital row.'

'How would *you* know, Kelvin?' jeered Alice. 'You can't even get a girlfriend.'

Kelvin stood stock-still, his face flaming. 'Ah'm sick o' the lot of ye. Ah'm going home.'

'Now, then,' said Peter. 'Birds in their little nests agree. Are we out for a nice walk, or aren't we?'

They all walked on in silence. But as they reached the outskirts of Dembley, rusting recession-hit factories on either side of them, the grey clouds above parted and the sun shone down. Spirits began to lift. Gemma began to sing 'One Man Went to Mow', and they all joined in.

By the time they reached the edge of the land across which they were to walk, they were all in a fairly good mood.

They consulted the map and the old book Jeffrey had found. 'There should be signs,' said Jeffrey. 'But this is the way. Let's go.'

They all climbed over a stile and along the edge of one field, but then they came up against a padlocked gate. Leaning on the other side of the gate was a

large, brutal-looking man with a shotgun.

‘Get off my land,’ he shouted. ‘Poxy ramblers. I’d shoot the lot of you.’

‘Who are you?’ demanded Jeffrey, moving to the front of the group.

‘My name is Harry Ratcliffe,’ said the farmer, ‘and you’re on my land.’

‘You’ve got no right to order us off,’ said Jeffrey wrathfully. He brandished the map. ‘This is a legitimate right of way.’

‘Ah, to hell with you,’ said Ratcliffe. ‘Leftwing buggers. Why don’t you go and get a job and cut your hair?’

Jeffrey could not bear one more humiliation. He thrust the map into Agatha’s hands, vaulted over the gate, and aimed a punch at the farmer. The farmer blocked his arm and swung his fist, which landed with a smack on Jeffrey’s nose.

‘Let that be a lesson to you,’ shouted Ratcliffe. ‘I’m going for my dogs.’

He strode off. James climbed over the gate and knelt beside Jeffrey. He mopped at the blood with his handkerchief and felt gingerly along the bridge of Jeffrey’s nose. ‘You’re lucky,’ he said. ‘Nothing broken. We’d best get you back before he turns the dogs on us. You’ll feel better after a drink and then we’ll go to the police.’ The injured Jeffrey was tenderly helped back over the gate. Fussing over him, they led their injured leader from the field.

They have a point, thought Agatha in surprise; some of these landowners are right bastards. She almost forgot about the murder. The attack on Jeffrey had drawn them all together wonderfully. By the time they were seated in the Grapes, the old Agatha had surfaced and was explaining how she would consult a lawyer and make sure the right of way was opened up.

Jeffrey, recovered after James had bought him two double brandies, said he did not want to go to the police, but he was grateful to Agatha for volunteering to make life hot for Ratcliffe. They all proceeded to drink quite a lot and everything was going merrily until Deborah was overheard asking Agatha what she should wear to dinner at Barfield House.

Mary Trapp rounded on her. ‘Never tell me you’re going there! That’s the enemy.’

Deborah blushed painfully. ‘Sir Charles is all right,’ she said defensively. ‘He’s not like Ratcliffe!’

‘You are betraying your class,’ said Alice ponderously.

‘Wear a pretty blouse and skirt,’ said James, addressing Deborah.

She looked at him in surprise. ‘But I bought a black velvet dinner gown from the thrift shop.’

‘Too overdressed,’ said James. ‘When in doubt, dress down, not up.’

‘You never were one of us, Deborah,’ said Jeffrey. ‘Trust you to go over to the other side.’

Deborah did not say anything. She simply walked out of the pub. She was not going to let anything take the gloss off the forthcoming evening.



They watched her go and then fell to berating Ratcliffe over again until cheerfulness was restored.

James and Agatha walked companionably home. 'We'll get changed and go out for dinner,' said James, and all Agatha's hopes flooded back into her tipsy brain and she startled James by accompanying him out to the hotel dining-room in a short black dress with a very low neckline indeed, very high heels, and very much make-up.

It was a good thing, thought James, that he had not advised Agatha to dress down. Dressing down for the evening was obviously a foreign idea to Agatha Raisin!

## Chapter Seven

Deborah drove out to Barfield House wearing the black velvet dinner gown. She had consulted the buyer in Dembley's most expensive dress shop and the buyer had said a dinner gown was *de rigueur*. The stultifying gentility of the buyer had impressed Deborah no end.

She was also clutching a silver sequined evening bag.

Deborah was unlucky. It could easily have been formal dress and then her dinner gown, although a bit over the top for a young woman and more suitable for a dowager, would have fitted in with the scenery, but as the guests were simply some old friends Sir Charles had staying for the weekend, the dress was informal. She found that out as soon as she entered the drawing-room. Certainly the men were wearing collar and tie, but the women were in summer dresses. Deborah stood awkwardly in the doorway, feeling like a child widow.

Sir Charles sailed up and greeted her with a kiss on the cheek. 'You're looking very slinky,' he said, and just when Deborah was beginning to feel better, he added, 'Like that woman in *The Addams Family*.'

Although his aunt should have introduced Deborah all round, as she acted as hostess for Sir Charles, Mrs Tassy had not even looked up when Deborah entered, so Sir Charles did the honours. There were a Colonel and Mrs Devereaux and their daughter, Sarah. Then a thin young man called Peter Hailey and his friend, small, chubby and noisy, a Henry Barr-Derrington; and a heavy-set, brooding type of girl, Arabella Tierney. They all stared at Deborah when she was introduced. She said to each, 'Pleased to meet you.' Deborah would normally have said, 'Pleased ter meet you,' but she had been refining her accent.

It was not that anyone was precisely rude to her but more slightly surprised and then dismissive. That was it. She felt she had been summed up and dismissed. She thought she heard Henry murmur, 'That must be Charles's latest aberration,' but decided, as she had done in the past, that nervousness was making her hear insults that had never existed.

Mrs Tassy then bore down on Deborah with the weary air of one recollecting her duties. 'My dear child,' she said, 'such a *warm* frock. Aren't you too hot in that?'

‘No, thank you, I’m fine,’ said Deborah, catching a malicious smile on the face of Gustav.

Gustav announced dinner, and Deborah was relieved to learn she was sitting next to Sir Charles.

The table looked pretty with candles and flowers, and as the meal progressed, Deborah could not help noticing that it was a much simpler affair than the heavy lunch that had been inflicted on her when she came with Agatha. But, oh, she wished she had not come. They were all such dreadful snobs . . .

And then conversation turned to the murder and Sir Charles said that Deborah was one of the Dembley Walkers and Deborah immediately found herself the focus of attention. She was asked to tell them all about it. She did so, at first shyly, but then gaining confidence from their rapt attention, and when she finished up with a description of that day’s walk and the confrontation with Farmer Ratcliffe, she had the table’s sympathy.

‘That man is a boor,’ said the colonel roundly. ‘It’s a pity your friend Jeffrey didn’t manage to punch *him*.’ And so the conversation went on about the iniquities of Ratcliffe until Mrs Tassy rose to indicate the ladies should follow her to the drawing-room.

In the drawing-room Mrs Devereaux sat down next to Deborah and asked her what subject she taught, and having learned it was physics asked her advice about helping a young nephew who was deficient in the subject, and that took up the time until the men joined them.

Deborah found that, by ignoring the very presence of Gustav, she was able to relax. Everyone was nice, after all. She became elated and quite pretty and when Peter and Henry began to tease her and flirt with her, she positively glowed.

When the evening finished and Sir Charles kissed her warmly on the cheek, she drove off feeling that no drug in the world could possibly give her the high she was on.

Later, Gustav stacked the glasses in the dishwasher. Mrs Pretty, hired from the village to cook for the evening, was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a glass of port. ‘So who’s this girl Sir Charles has got?’ she asked.

‘How did you hear about her?’ asked Gustav.

‘People talk. They were seen together in Burger King. Is he serious about her? Will he marry her?’

‘Over her dead body,’ said Gustav, and the cook laughed.

\* \* \*

At one in the morning, Jeffrey heard a knock at his door. He had been watching a late movie and so had not gone to bed. At first he wondered whether it might be the police again and if he could pretend to be asleep, but as the knocking increased in force, he decided he had better answer it.

He opened the door. 'Oh, it's you,' he said, his voice light with relief. 'Come in. I thought it was the police.'

Agatha awoke to the sound of police sirens. She ran out of her bedroom and looked down from the kitchen window, which overlooked Sheep Street. Another police car raced past underneath.

James awoke with a start and stared at the white, mask-like face of Agatha Raisin looking down at him. She had forgotten all about the face pack she had put on before going to bed.

'What is it?'

'Police cars, lots of them, tearing out of Dembley,' said Agatha. 'Something's happened.'

'May have nothing to do with our ramblers,' said James sleepily.

Agatha tugged impatiently at his pyjama jacket. 'Oh, come on, James. I feel it's something to do with our lot. Hurry!'

James grumbled but nonetheless got ready with such speed that he was down in the car and waiting for Agatha when she ran down to the street. 'You've got little bits of face mask still about your ears,' he said, and that miserable thought preoccupied Agatha as they drove out of Dembley, with her squinting into a compact mirror and scrubbing at the white clay with a handkerchief.

They were automatically heading for the Barfield estate when, across the fields in the light of the rising sun, they saw in the distance a little cluster of flashing blue lights.

'Ratcliffe's land,' said James. They drove on in silence.

James stopped near the stile they had climbed over the day before, parking behind the police cars. A group of uniformed and plainclothes men were over by the gate where Jeffrey had had his fight with Ratcliffe.

As they walked up to the group, a policeman detached himself and ran towards them, holding up his hand and shouting, 'Stay back!'

But then Bill Wong appeared and waved them forward. 'What are you two doing here?' he demanded sharply.

'We heard the police cars and followed. What's happened?' asked Agatha, all the time praying: Don't let it be Deborah. If it's Deborah, I've failed.

'It's Jeffrey Benson,' said Bill. 'He's dead.'

'Shot?' asked James. 'Did Ratcliffe shoot him?'

'Ratcliffe's over there. What's this about Ratcliffe?'

James told him about the fight the day before. ‘We’ll be questioning Ratcliffe,’ said Bill grimly. ‘He’s the one who found the body. But at the moment it looks like an accident. Jeffrey was cutting the padlock on the gate, or that’s what it looks like, when he fell and struck his head on a rock. But we’ll know more after the pathologist gets a look at the body. We’ll need a full statement from both of you and the other walkers.’

‘Do you think if he was murdered that it might be the IRA?’ asked James.

‘Hardly think so. A bullet in the back of the head is more their style. Or such an insignificant cog as Jeffrey was would get knee-capped at the most.’

‘Can we have a look?’ asked Agatha. ‘We may be able to notice something that’s different to yesterday.’

‘Wait there,’ commanded Bill. He went over and talked to his superiors. Several heads swivelled in their direction and then they were called forward. The crowd of men parted to let them through.

Jeffrey Benson lay sprawled on the ground below the gate. Beside him lay a huge pair of wire-cutters. On the other side of him lay a sharp rock.

‘That rock wasn’t there before,’ said Agatha.

‘Are you sure?’ demanded Bill.

‘I think she’s right,’ said James slowly. ‘It was such a violent scene that everything in the immediate vicinity became etched on our minds.’

One of the forensic men in white overalls was called forward. He put a long steel implement under the rock and raised it gently. ‘Dry underneath,’ he said. ‘It certainly hasn’t been here long.’

‘So,’ said Wilkes, speaking for the first time, ‘although at first sight it looks as if he was climbing over the gate, fell off, and broke his neck, it seems as if actually someone could have struck him a blow on the head with that rock. You two had better get home and leave things to us. We’ll see you later for a statement.’

Agatha was led off by James. When they reached the stile, her teeth began to chatter and she stumbled as she was getting over. He had climbed over first. He reached up strong arms and lifted her down. It was one of the scenes Agatha had played out in her mind when she had dreamt of them rambling together, but now all she could do was wish she had never seen that dead body. She knew that it would haunt her dreams.

James fussed over her when they got home, making her drink a cup of hot sweet tea, take a couple of aspirin, and go back to bed.

She lay for a long time shivering, twisting and turning before she finally fell asleep.

The Dembley Walkers met in the Grapes on Sunday evening at six because Peter and Terry were on duty at the restaurant at seven. Agatha and James

were there, having been telephoned by a frantic Deborah, screaming that they were all going to be murdered, and what was Agatha *doing* about it?

James looked around the quiet and subdued group and said, 'Where's Mary Trapp?'

'Helping the police with their inquiries,' said Kelvin gloomily.

'Why?'

'Her neighbours said they heard her going out during the night. She's got a dotty dog lover living next door,' said Peter. 'Dog decides it wants walkies at two in the morning. Neighbour sees Mary all kitted out in her boots and shorts turning the corner of the street.'

'Mary couldn't have done it, could she?' asked Agatha, thinking uneasily that they had not yet checked up on her.

'We were just talking about that before you came in,' said Deborah. 'None of us really knows anything about Mary. She and Jessica were close. But then Jessica was close to all of us.' She began to cry. 'I can't stand this.'

'I suppose we all had alibis for last night?' said James.

He looked round the group. There was a gloomy shaking of heads. The murder had taken place during the night and all of them claimed to have been in their beds.

'I think they're still questioning Ratcliffe. He was once in prison for beating up a man in a pub,' said Kelvin. 'Mark ma words, this one had naethin' to dae with Jessica's murder. Jeffrey went out during the night wi' thae wire-cutters, Ratcliffe saw him, picked up thon rock and shied it at him and Jeffrey fell down dead.'

'So it wasn't an accident?' asked Agatha.

'No,' said Kelvin. 'They're treating it as murder.'

The door opened and Bill Wong came in, followed by a policeman and policewoman. He came up to their table. 'Alice Dewhurst,' he said, 'we want you to accompany us to the station.'

'Why?' demanded Alice, turning a muddy colour.

'Just a few questions. Come along.'

'What's that all about?' they asked Gemma.

She shrugged. 'I don't know, I'm sure.'

'Was Alice with you all night?' asked Peter.

Again that shrug. 'Don't ask me. I took one of them barbiturates and was dead to the world until she brought my tea in the morning.'

'Don't worry, sweetie,' said Terry. 'You know Alice could never have done it.'

'I dunno,' said Gemma to their surprise. 'Got ever such a nasty temper.'

'But why on earth would she want to biff Jeffrey?' asked Agatha.

'Maybe because she thought he killed Jessica,' said Gemma, scooping up a handful of peanuts from a bowl on the table.

‘Not very loyal, are we, darling?’ commented Terry.

‘Actually I’m a bit tired of Alice,’ said Gemma, looking earnestly round at them. ‘She gets on my tits.’

‘Oh, we all knew *that*, sweetie,’ said Peter and nudged Terry and sniggered.

Peter turned his attention to James and Agatha. ‘And just what were our loving couple doing last night?’

‘What do you think?’ asked James.

‘Oh, don’t pull that one. I should have thought romance went down the plug hole for you two a million years ago.’ Peter sounded suddenly waspish.

‘You’d better watch out, you dismal little twit, or I’ll biff *you*,’ said Agatha. ‘Shouldn’t you and your fairy friend here be off to that slum of a restaurant to serve up another dose of salmonella to your customers?’

‘Nasty, nasty,’ chided Peter, quite unfazed. ‘Come on, Terry. Duty calls.’

The party broke up with their going. James and Agatha went back to their flat.

‘Well,’ said James gloomily, ‘I haven’t a clue. What about you?’

Agatha shook her head. ‘As far as I’m concerned, any of them could have done it. I can’t look at them objectively any more. I’m beginning to dislike the lot of them.’

‘Let’s have a drink and think about dinner. What do you want?’

‘Gin and tonic, please. Oh, there’s someone at the door.’

James put down the gin bottle and went to answer it. He hoped it wasn’t one of the walkers. He felt he had had enough of them for one day.

But it was Bill Wong, who said, ‘May I come in? I have some news that might interest you.’

He refused a drink. ‘Is it about Alice?’ asked Agatha.

He nodded. ‘We’ve been digging into the past life of all the suspects. We got some old newsreel film of the Greenham Common women. One report, trying to prove they were all noisy slags, had interesting footage of Alice and Jessica, a younger Alice and Jessica, having a stand-up fight. Now Alice said in her statement that she did not know Jessica before Jessica came to Dembley, so why did she lie?’

‘And what does she say?’ asked James.

‘She says she had forgotten all about it, that she always thought there was something familiar about Jessica. She’s still lying, but we can’t get her to say anything else. Now if Jeffrey knew anything about her and Alice, Alice might have decided to shut him up. She could have called on him and suggested it would be a great idea to get even with Ratcliffe by cutting the padlock on that gate.’

‘Were the wire-cutters hers?’ asked Agatha.

‘No luck there. Jeffrey had bought them himself six weeks ago to get even with another landowner who had padlocked and chained a gate over a right of

way. You've been with these people. You were on that walk. There must be one of them who struck you as being capable of murder.'

James looked at Agatha, and Agatha looked at James. Both shook their heads.

'These murders have twisted up my mind so much that I look at them and think any of them could have done it,' said James.

Bill sighed. 'Normally I would be telling you both to go home and forget about all this, but I keep hoping that in your amateur way you might hit on something.'

'What about forensic evidence?' asked Agatha. 'Footprints, fingerprints?'

'Can't get anything off that rock, and the ground was bone-dry and hard. Jeffrey's car was found nearby. They're going over that inch by inch. It'll take some time for all the fibres, if there are any, to be analysed and traced. I'm tired. Pray for just one break before anyone else gets murdered!'

When Bill had left, James said, 'What about going back to Carsely and putting everything we've got on the computer and then see if we can hit on something.'

'I may as well see my cats,' said Agatha. 'Should I bring them back with me?'

'If you like,' he said moodily. 'But I don't think there's any point in us staying here much longer.'

Agatha glanced round the flat which had become their home for such a brief period. All her dreams of romance with James had faded away. They somehow seemed to have settled down to living together like two old bachelors.

Once back at Carsely, she fed and petted her cats, although deciding not to take them to Dembley with her, before going next door and joining James at the computer. But before he had started typing out the first list of names, his doorbell went and he soon returned, followed by Mrs Mason.

'I saw your car outside,' she said to Agatha. 'How are things going?'

'Very slowly,' said Agatha.

'I'm worried about poor little Deborah,' said Mrs Mason, heaving her corseted bulk into a chair. 'This other murder – I saw it on the six o'clock news – must be frightening her to death.' She preened lightly. 'Thank goodness she has Sir Charles to look after her. Do you know she went to Barfield House for dinner last night?'

'She said something about that,' remarked Agatha. 'She was asking what to wear. How did that go? I forgot to ask her.'

'Oh, she said it was wonderful and his friends were ever so nice to her.' Mrs Mason patted her grey permed hair. 'I think we might have a Lady in the



family soon.'

'I shouldn't think so,' said James idly, staring at the screen. He wondered what Mrs Mason would say if she ever knew her beloved niece had been having a lesbian affair with Jessica.

Mrs Mason bristled. 'Don't you think my Deborah good enough?'

'What?' James swung round. 'No, no, I was just thinking one invitation to a dinner party does not make a marriage.'

'But Deborah says he's ever so keen on her. She's a bright girl. She was the first in our family ever to go to university. My poor sister, Janice, had ever such a bad time with that husband of hers. Bad lot, he was. Poor little thing. So clever and pretty. Do see if you can find out who's doing these dreadful killings.'

She refused an offer of tea and left. James returned to typing out lists of names, one on each page. Then he and Agatha began to put down what they knew of each one.

'Do you know,' said Agatha, stifling a yawn, 'I still think any of them could have done it. They're not a very nice crowd.'

'You'd better get some sleep.'

'And something to eat,' said Agatha.

'Tell you what, as we're leaving for Dembley in the morning, fetch your case along here. I'll fix us an omelette or something and you can sleep in my spare room.' His eyes were kind, and Agatha knew that he was concerned for her because of her shock over the murder.

'Thank you,' she said quietly.

She went back and collected a suitcaseful of clean clothes, not really bothering much what she put in this time. The idea of having supper with James and sleeping under his roof in Carsely would have sent her into Seventh Heaven only a short time ago. But the last murder had brought her face to face with the brutal realities of life. She was a middle-aged woman with a wrinkled upper lip who should accept that fact and stop being silly.

It was just as well she did not know that James was beginning to enjoy her company as never before. While she was in her own cottage, packing, he put clean sheets on the spare-room bed and went to rummage through the kitchen cupboards to find something for supper. He reflected that having someone around gave structure to his days, and when a weary Agatha returned on his doorstep, he took her suitcase from her and carried it upstairs without feeling in the slightest bit wary of her.

Over a supper of ham omelette and a bottle of chilled white wine, he talked idly about his army days and then, when she had finished eating, went upstairs to the bathroom and ran a bath for her and told her gently to get ready for bed.

'Maybe we'll have a bit of luck if we try again, Agatha,' he said. 'Have a

bath and a good night's sleep and if you have any bad dreams, just wake me up.'

'Thank you, James,' said Agatha humbly. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek and went upstairs.

James whistled to himself as he did the dishes.

'Will that be all?' Gustav asked Sir Charles.

'Yes, thank you,' said Sir Charles vaguely from behind his newspaper. Then, as Gustav was leaving the room, he lowered it and said, 'Wait a bit. There is something. Did Aunt get off to London all right?'

'Yes, I took her to the station. The train was on time for once.'

'Good, good. I want you to take the day off tomorrow, Gustav.'

'Why?'

'Do you have to know? Well, I have invited Miss Camden round for lunch and I don't want you glooming about the place.'

'Meaning you're going to screw her.'

'Who I screw or don't screw is entirely my business, Gustav. Just leave out something for a simple lunch and bugger off. And don't try to intimidate her this time with forty courses and twenty canteens of cutlery. Cold pie, potato salad, something like that. Decent bottle of wine. We'll eat in the kitchen. Now go away.'

Gustav stood his ground. 'You should stick to your own type.'

'You're a dreadful snob.'

'Not me. Some farmer's daughter would be suitable, even some farm labourer's daughter. And talking of farm labourers, did you sack Noakes yet?'

'Can't see any reason to. He told the police what he saw. Help's hard to come by these days. Can't do it all by machine.'

'Wish you could do Deborah Camden by machine, sir. You might catch something.'

'Oh, get out, you dirty-minded bugger.'

'Don't say I didn't warn you,' was Gustav's parting shot. 'That one's creepy.'

\* \* \*

James and Agatha decided next day, after unpacking their bags, to go to the Copper Kettle for lunch, for, as James pointed out, that gossipy pair, Peter and Terry, might let another few gems of information fall.

They both ordered fish and chips, thinking that the chef at the Copper Kettle might be able to cook something so undemanding, but the fish proved to be of the breaded kind, frozen in bulk and sold to such restaurants. It was

amazingly tasteless, as were the chips; even the tartar sauce had no taste at all.

‘Thought the others might be in,’ said Peter, stopping by their table.

‘Founder’s day at the school, so they’re on holiday.’

‘I didn’t think comprehensive schools had founders,’ commented Agatha. ‘I thought they were founded by the local council.’

‘Well, this one has. So what are the leisured classes doing today?’

James thought quickly. He could hardly say, ‘Investigating this case to find out if one of you did it.’

Instead he said, ‘We might run over to Stratford and see if we can get tickets for this evening. Ages since I’ve seen a Shakespeare play.’

‘Oh, you could run a little errand for me, then,’ said Peter. ‘Deborah’s over at her mother’s. I borrowed a kettle from her, she had a spare, and she keeps nagging me and I always forget to give it back. I’ve got it here.’

‘Can’t you just give it to her next time you see her?’ asked James.

‘I *could*, sweetie, but then I’d forget again. Now, if you took it, it would be your responsibility.’

‘All right,’ said James. ‘Give us the mother’s address.’

Peter went off and returned with an electric kettle and a slip of paper with Mrs Camden’s address. ‘It’s a council estate,’ said Peter. ‘Far side of Stratford from here.’ James made a neat note of the directions.

‘Do we really want to go to Stratford? Dreary dump,’ said Agatha, as they got in the car.

‘We’re supposed to be investigating. If Deborah’s there, she might be able to tell us something more.’

As they drove off in the direction of Stratford, Agatha felt relief that she no longer seemed to be obsessed with James, that in a way she had grown up and was content with friendship.

She remembered a typist called Fran she had once employed at her PR agency. Fran had mooned and talked and mooned and talked about a man she fancied who worked for another PR firm. At last Agatha and the rest had pointed out that it was the twentieth century and there was nothing to stop her phoning the man up and asking him out for a drink. They had all stood over her until she had picked up the phone and done just that. He said he would meet her for a drink on the Friday evening after work.

They told her what to wear right down to the underwear and scent. They told her what to talk about and how to behave and then sent her off on Friday.

On Monday morning Agatha stopped by Fran’s desk and asked, ‘How did it go?’

‘I didn’t meet him,’ said Fran.

‘What!’ exclaimed Agatha. ‘Didn’t he show?’

She remembered Fran’s little resigned sigh and how she had said, ‘I went right up to the door of the pub and looked in and he was there at the bar,

waiting. So I turned and walked away. You see, I'd dreamt and dreamt about him for so long that I realized he could not possibly live up to my dreams and expectations. I'm not into reality.'

But I am . . . now, thought Agatha, and it feels good.

After several mistakes, they found Mrs Camden's address. It was a terraced council house. The garden was weedy, scraggly flowerbeds surrounding a balding lawn. The gate sagged on its hinges.

The house had a neglected, deserted air, and they were almost surprised when they heard someone approaching on the other side of the door to answer their knock.

The woman who opened the door was somehow recognizable as Deborah's mother. She had the same skinny bleached look, but her shoulders were stooped and the only colour about her was in her work-reddened hands.

'We are friends of Deborah's,' said Agatha. 'Is she here? It is Mrs Camden?'

'Yes, come in. Deborah's not here, but I was just about to put the kettle on.'

'We've got a kettle of Deborah's here,' said James, brandishing it. 'Should we leave it with you?'

'I'll take it. She might be over this evening.' A smile transformed Mrs Camden's thin white face. 'She'll be anxious to tell me the news.'

'Oh, about the murder,' remarked Agatha.

Mrs Camden led them into a small living-room. It contained a few battered chairs, a sofa and a chipped table. There were no books or pictures, only a television set in the corner flickering away. Mrs Camden switched it off.

'Make yourselves comfortable,' she said. 'I'll get the tea.'

Agatha introduced them both to her as Mr and Mrs Lacey, getting the usual little thrill when she mentioned the names. Then she and James sat down side by side on the sofa.

'It's bleak,' muttered James.

'She doesn't seem to be working,' whispered Agatha. 'I wonder if Deborah gives her any money.'

The miserable room silenced them. The wind had risen outside. A piece of newspaper blew against the window panes, staring at them like a face, and then blew away.

Mrs Camden returned with a tray on which were china cups decorated with roses, a teapot, milk, sugar and a plate of biscuits.

After tea was poured, Agatha said sympathetically, 'You must be very worried about your daughter.'

'Oh, because of these dreadful murders? But Deborah has always been the strong one. Thank goodness. And now she's going to be Lady Fraith.'

They both stared at her.

'Are you sure?' asked James.

‘Yes, she’s gone over there today and she knows he’s going to pop the question.’

‘Are you sure she isn’t imagining things?’ asked James cautiously.

‘Oh, no,’ said Mrs Camden with supreme confidence. ‘Deborah always knows what’s what. Mind you, it was a bit of a blow when she said that me and Mark and Bill – that’s her brothers – couldn’t come to the wedding.’

Agatha looked at her in a dazed way. ‘Why not?’

‘It wouldn’t be fitting. I mean, we’re not of Sir Charles’s class.’

‘Neither is Deborah,’ pointed out James.

‘But she’s made herself that way,’ said Mrs Camden. ‘I’m that proud of her. She was always the hope of the family.’

‘Are you working?’ asked Agatha. It seemed later an odd thing to ask, but there was something about Mrs Camden’s stooped figure which seemed to suggest years of drudgery.

‘I have my cleaning jobs,’ she said. ‘And then I work in the supermarket at weekends.’

‘Deborah must be able to help you out a bit,’ said James.

‘She can’t.’

‘Why not?’ asked Agatha.

‘She needs all her money to keep up the right appearance. She’s amazing. Even when she was little, she would say, “Mum, I’m going to the university and I’m going to be a teacher.” And so she did. So when she said to me, “I’m going to marry Sir Charles Fraith and live in that big house,” I knew she meant it.’

‘And what of your sons?’ asked Agatha.

She sighed. ‘They take after their father. They’re both in a council flat in Stratford, on the dole, but at least they’re not under my feet.’

‘Do you know where your husband is?’ asked Agatha.

She shook her head. ‘Don’t want to know, either. He was a violent man. I’m not complaining. Deborah’s my whole life. Let me show you something.’ She stood up and walked from the room and they followed her.

She pushed open a door. ‘This was Deborah’s room.’ She stood aside to let them pass.

James and Agatha stood shoulder to shoulder and looked in awe at the bedroom. It was a sort of shrine. The bed had a pretty coverlet and was covered with dolls and stuffed animals. The walls were covered with photographs of Deborah. Deborah as a baby, as a toddler, at school, at university. There were long low bookshelves containing books, the shells of Deborah’s life, from the brightly coloured children’s books right through to the works of Marx.

The wind moaned louder and the branches of a dead tree tapped against the window.

‘Very impressive,’ said Agatha in a weak voice.

They returned to the living-room which, after the bright bedroom, hit them afresh with its sad, shabby dullness.

Mrs Camden sat down again with a sigh. ‘It was something to work for,’ she said. ‘You know, seeing Deborah had the best of everything.’

‘Surely you don’t need to work so hard now?’ suggested James.

‘Well, girls always need something extra these days. She needed help getting her little car, and things like that. How did you come to meet my girl?’

‘We are both retired,’ said James, ‘and we joined the Dembley Walkers, just after the murder.’

‘Good exercise,’ commented Mrs Camden.

James looked at her in surprise. ‘You do not seem very frightened for the welfare of your daughter, considering there have now been two murders.’

‘Sir Charles will look after her,’ she said comfortably. ‘She says the first thing she’s going to do as soon as they are married is get rid of that servant, Gustav. Is that his name?’

‘She seems very sure of herself,’ was all Agatha could think of saying.

‘Mmm.’ Mrs Camden’s face was again illuminated with that smile.

‘Although I won’t be at the wedding, I’ll read about it in the society magazines. Just think of that!’

‘Deborah must have been upset at Jessica Tartinck’s death,’ said James.

‘What?’ Mrs Camden came out of her rosy dream. ‘Oh, that strapping big woman. But Deborah told me she was always getting people’s backs up. I mean, it was bound to happen sooner or later.’

Agatha stood up. She suddenly wanted to get away. She had never considered herself a particularly sensitive person, but she was now assailed with such a feeling of impending doom that she was desperate to get out of that shabby living-room.

‘We must go,’ she said abruptly.

As if suffering from the same feelings, James leaped to his feet and held open the door for Agatha.

Once they were in the car, Agatha, who was driving, said, ‘Let’s find somewhere quiet. I need to think.’

She drove out of Stratford and parked in a lay-by and switched off the engine and looked blankly at the wind whipping through the trees at the side of the road.

‘Why is it,’ she said in a thin voice, ‘that I feel I’ve just escaped from a madhouse?’

‘Deborah appears to have been selfish from the day she was born, but the thing that frightens me is this wedding business. There’s something else,’ said James. ‘It just occurred to me. There was something very hush-hush about Sir Charles’s father’s death. I remember someone telling me he died mad.’

‘What kind of mad?’ asked Agatha. ‘I mean, no one ever says *mad* these days.’

‘Does it matter? For some reason Sir Charles has been leading Deborah into thinking he’s going to marry her. I don’t believe he means to for a moment.’

Agatha stared at him. ‘And Deborah’s there. Now. At Barfield House.’

‘Fast as you can, Agatha,’ said James. ‘I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all.’

## Chapter Eight

Deborah sailed up the drive to Barfield House in her little car. Her heart was light. Sir Charles had told her that Gustav had been given the day off and that his aunt was in London.

Sir Charles answered the door. He was wearing an old open-necked shirt and jeans, making her glad that she wasn't too 'dressy'. She was wearing a pink silk blouse from Marks & Spencer and a short navy acrylic skirt with a slit at the back and white sandals.

She approved of the kitchen, which was large and modern. So much more cheerful than the dark-panelled rooms of the rest of the house.

Sir Charles, as he opened a bottle of wine and listened to her prattling away about her teaching job, eyed her thoughtfully. He intended getting her into bed after lunch but was beginning to wonder how she would react. Her thinness and whiteness still excited him. He liked her shy little voice, so different from the robust tones of the girls he usually dated. Her neck was thin and fragile-looking. It looked as if it could almost be snapped like a flower stalk, he thought. He said, 'Any news about Jeffrey's murder?'

Deborah shook her head. 'They've been questioning and questioning all of us. They've still got Alice.'

'The big one? Why her?'

'She knew Jessica ages ago and lied about it.'

Sir Charles looked at her shrewdly. 'If the police still have her in for questioning, how do you know that?'

'There's one of the teachers at the school whose sister works at police headquarters. She told me.'

'Do you think Alice did it, then?'

'She could have done,' said Deborah. 'She's got ever such a bad temper.'

As they ate, Sir Charles wondered how he was going to get around to proposing that they go upstairs to bed. Perhaps he should suggest they have coffee in the drawing-room and get down to work on the sofa first.

He really loves me, thought Deborah with a fast-beating heart. I can tell by the look in his eyes.

Conversation was flagging toward the end of the meal and then Deborah said, 'Can I go and powder my nose?'



He saw his chance. ‘Come upstairs and use my bathroom.’

He led the way upstairs and along a corridor and opened a door. Deborah glanced quickly about his bedroom. She was disappointed that there wasn’t a four-poster bed but a modern one. The room, like the rest of the rooms in the house, was dark because of the tiny panes of the mullioned windows.

‘In here,’ said Sir Charles, opening a door off the bedroom.

Deborah went in and closed the door behind her. Sir Charles jerked open the drawer of a bedside table to check that the packet of condoms he had bought was still there and that Gustav had not found them and taken them away, an act which would have been perfectly in keeping with Gustav’s character.

There were shuffling noises from the bathroom. Deborah was taking a long time. The rising wind outside gave a cheerless moan. Sir Charles shivered. His lust was ebbing fast. It all began to seem silly.

And then the bathroom door opened and Deborah stood there. She was wearing nothing more than a brief bra, a suspender belt and black stockings.

Sir Charles walked towards her, saying huskily, ‘Come to bed, Deborah.’

\* \* \*

‘Is this as fast as you can go?’ asked James.

‘I’m going as fast as I can,’ wailed Agatha. ‘But that poxy tractor won’t move, and I can’t get past it.’ She pressed the horn and flashed her lights. The tractor driver raised two fingers. Just when Agatha was thinking she might drive straight into the back of him in a sheer fury, he turned off into a farm gate and Agatha roared past, relieving her feelings with another blast on the horn.

‘But why would he kill Jeffrey?’ she asked.

‘He might have a thing about ramblers. If he’s crazy like his father, he might not need a motive.’

Agatha raced round a bend and screeched to a halt. A line of cars stretched out in front of her. She got out of the car and peered ahead. Some distance in front of the line of cars a truck was slewed across the road. A small Mini was crushed in a ditch.

‘Bugger, an accident,’ said Agatha, getting back into the car. She beat the steering wheel with her hands in sheer frustration. Then she saw to her right an open farm gate. She set off, swinging the wheel. The car lurched crazily over a field of wheat.

‘What are you doing?’ shouted James. ‘The farmer will kill us.’

‘I’ll compensate him,’ yelled Agatha. ‘Barfield is over this way. I’m going as the crow flies.’ And with that the car plunged headlong into a ditch at the end of the field.

Agatha felt like bursting into tears. ‘Now what do we do?’ she wailed. James’s face was grim and set. ‘We get out and ramble!’

Sir Charles and Deborah lay on their backs, immersed in their different thoughts. What a mistake, Sir Charles was thinking gloomily. That had been like making love to a corpse. Besides, she smelt like something off the burning-ghats of India. In the bathroom, Deborah had anointed her body with an aromatic oil from a new shop in Dembley called Planet Earth, which specialized in aromatherapy.

And then he was aware Deborah was speaking. ‘When we’re married – and I hope you don’t mind this, Charles dear – I would like to paint all that wood panelling white.’

‘Married?’ croaked Sir Charles.

‘Of course your aunt will need to find somewhere else to live. Can’t have two women in one house. My mother says . . . my mother used to say, it never works. Isn’t there a dower house or something?’ asked Deborah with vague memories of Georgette Heyer novels.

Sir Charles swung his legs out of bed and began to struggle into his clothes.

‘You should have a bath, darling,’ chided Deborah. She stretched and yawned. ‘Run one for me.’

‘Okay,’ said Sir Charles gloomily. He zipped up his trousers and padded on his bare feet into the bathroom and turned on the taps.

He turned round and let out a squawk of dismay. Deborah must have moved like lightning. She was standing behind him wearing his dressing-gown.

He turned away and stared down at the rushing water. ‘Look, Deborah,’ he said, ‘we’ve had a bit of a fling, that’s all. I never said anything about marriage.’ He tried to laugh. ‘Not the marrying kind, me.’

‘But you’ve got to marry me!’ Deborah sounded more surprised than angry.

‘No, Deborah,’ he said firmly. ‘I am not marrying you or anyone. I said absolutely nothing to give you that impression. I would never have had sex with you if I thought you were going to jump to this mad conclusion.’

‘Mad?’ Her voice was thin and brittle. ‘Mad?’

‘We had a bit of fun, dear, let’s leave it at that.’ He turned back to the bath. ‘Would you like some old-fashioned bath salts? Now, where did I put them?’

‘Here, *dear!*’ Deborah brought a glassy jar of rose-scented bath salts down on his head.

\* \* \*

Agatha’s tights were ripped and she had pulled off the sweater she had been

wearing over a blouse and thrown it away because she was sweating so much. She had a blister on one heel and a stitch in her side. James had taken her hand as they raced together through crops of golden oil-seed rape and fields of blue flax flowers, wheat and turnips.

‘Are you sure we’re going the right way?’ shouted James.

‘Yes,’ shouted back Agatha, who enjoyed studying Ordnance Survey maps as a pastime. But one bit of the countryside was beginning to look so much like another that she could hardly believe it when at last at some distance across the fields she saw the bulk of Barfield House.

She plunged gamely on, forgetting about the blister on her heel and the stitch in her side. Deborah was in danger. She, Agatha, the great detective, had been called in to help Deborah, and help Deborah she must.

Deborah turned off the bath taps and looked down at the unconscious Sir Charles Fraith as he lay on his own bathroom floor. The air around smelt of roses.

She sat down on a bathroom chair and stared bleakly in front of her. It had all been for nothing. All of it. And yet her mind felt quite cold and set. She knew what she had to do.

She dressed neatly and carefully and then went around and wiped every surface she might have touched, scrubbing and polishing, cocking her head occasionally in case there was the sound of an approaching car. Then she seized Sir Charles by the ankles and began to drag him out of the bathroom, out of the bedroom, slowly along the corridor and then, bump, bump, bump, down the stairs and then slid him easily across the polished floor of the hall, along the corridor at the end and, bump, bump, down the two steps to the kitchen.

She then set about cleaning up the kitchen, clearing and washing the remains of the meal, her mind carefully sorting things out. Gustav would tell the police she had been invited. But she had been incredibly lucky so far. It was Gustav’s word against her own. All she had to do was to stick to her story. She pulled Sir Charles over to the oven and turned on the gas. She frowned. Wasn’t there something about North Sea gas not doing the job the way the old coal gas used to? Perhaps she was worrying over too much. She heaved his head into the oven, then looked around. She picked up two dishcloths and got out various cleaning rags. She went out and shut the kitchen door behind her and stuffed the cloths and rags under the space at the bottom of the door.

She went into Sir Charles’s study, where she remembered seeing a typewriter. All she had to do was find some documents with his signature on them, and forge his signature to a typed suicide note, in which he also

confessed to the murders of Jeffrey and Jessica. But a handwriting expert would no doubt find the signature to be a forgery. Oh, well, she thought on a sigh, she would just need to leave an unsigned note. It was such a pity about handwriting experts; without their interference it might have been possible to make out a will supposed to be from Sir Charles, leaving everything to her. Everything.

For one moment, her eyes filled with weak tears. All her dreams. Everything. She had imagined holding fêtes and garden parties at Barfield, with her in a wide shady straw hat greeting the guests, maybe making the opening speech. She blinked her tears away. She sat down at Sir Charles's desk and began to type.

Agatha and James ran up the drive of Barfield House. Behind them in the distance they could hear the wail of police sirens. 'Something must have happened,' panted Agatha.

'I think *we* might be what's happened,' said James. 'Angry farmers phoning in with reports about trespassers. God, this is beginning to seem ridiculous.' He grabbed Agatha's arm, forcing her to stop. 'We can't go bursting into Barfield House, shouting, "We know you did it because your father was mad."'

'Deborah's car's there,' said Agatha stubbornly. 'You can do what you like, but I'm just going to walk in and say I knocked and no one answered.'

She heaved the handle of the massive door and let out a sigh of relief when it swung open. James followed her into the hall. He was beginning to think the only person who was mad was Agatha. How on earth were they going to explain themselves?

And then Agatha said, 'Gas. There's a smell of gas. Where's the kitchen?'

'The smell seems to be coming from there,' said James pointing off the hall and down the corridor. They ran along and immediately saw the rags under the door. They pulled open the door. Agatha rushed across to the oven, turned off the gas, and flung open the kitchen windows.

'I'll call the police,' said James.

Approaching sirens wailed from outside.

'They're here,' said James. 'I'll go and meet them. Oh, God, it was Deborah all the time, unless Gustav has murdered both of them.'

He went back out, but as he was approaching the door, he heard the sound of a typewriter coming from the study. He pushed open the study door. Deborah was sitting typing, her back to him. He took off his belt and crept up behind her, then whipped it round her to pin her arms to her side.

The loud screams of invective that burst from Deborah's lips drowned out the sound of the sirens.

James and Agatha sat in the flat in Sheep Street that evening, sharing a bottle of wine and waiting for Bill Wong to call on them as he had promised. Both felt that it was unfair that the reason for the convenient police presence at Barfield House had been because both of them had been charged with trespass, some irate farmer reporting how two hooligans had driven their car right through his crop, dumped their car in the ditch, and taken off across the fields to trample down more crops on foot.

‘Deborah! I just don’t understand it,’ said Agatha, for seemingly the umpteenth time. ‘Oh, there’s the doorbell. That must be Bill.’

James rose and went to let him in. Bill looked weary. He accepted James’s offer of a glass of wine, saying he was off duty, and then turned to Agatha. ‘How did you suss out it was Deborah?’

Agatha flashed James a little warning look and said airily, ‘Woman’s intuition. But we’d rather hear all about it from you, Bill.’ She did not want to lose face by admitting to Bill Wong that they had thought the murderer was Sir Charles.

Bill shook his head in bewilderment. ‘She must be crazy. She told us the whole thing in this little-girl voice, on and on and on. She had always driven herself on to get away from her background, aided and abetted by her doting mother. The reason she had an affair with Jessica was not because Deborah is lesbian but, would you believe it, because she thought Jessica was “good class”. Jessica had been to Oxford, you see. Deborah had adopted the politics of Jessica and her friends as a passport to a better society. I think it was on the fatal day Sir Charles invited her for tea that something in her snapped. Even over the first cup of tea, she saw a chance of becoming Lady Fraith. “Jessica was in my way,” she kept saying over and over again. She was terrified Jessica might tell Sir Charles about that lesbian affair, terrified that Jessica would spoil her chances by creating a scene. Can I have some more wine?’

James filled his glass. Bill took a sip of wine and went on. ‘She was amazingly lucky. She drove to the Barfield estate. She said she wanted to catch up with Jessica before she did any damage. She found Jessica at the edge of that field. When she let out that she was keen on Sir Charles, how Jessica had laughed! It seems Jessica, once the gloves were off, was a middle-class snob of the worst kind. She sneered at Deborah for her accent, background and clothes, said she hadn’t a hope in hell, said she would let Sir Charles know about Deborah’s lesbianism. Then Jessica started stamping her way across that field. Deborah saw the spade and saw red at the same time. She ran up behind Jessica, keeping in her tracks, and brought the spade down on her head. When she found Jessica was dead, she scraped and dug that shallow grave – when you think of all those plant roots, it must have taken manic strength – buried the body, wiped the shovel and took off.’

‘But she asked Mrs Mason for my help,’ cried Agatha. ‘Why would she do

that?’

Bill looked rueful. ‘You’re not going to like this. Evidently Mrs Mason had given Deborah the impression that you were an inept amateur, taking credit for police work, and so she thought that by hiring you, she would look innocent and yet be in no danger of being found out.’

‘I will never speak to Mrs Mason again,’ said Agatha wrathfully. ‘Old toad. I never liked her anyway.’

Bill smiled at her and took up his story. ‘As I say, she was amazingly lucky. Her car had been seen on the road out of Dembley, but no one had actually seen her going into the estate. Then the waters were muddied by Sir Charles’s lying about what he had been doing and by the others’ lying as well.’

‘But why Jeffrey?’ asked James.

‘Ah, well, she had let slip in the pub that she was going to dinner at Barfield House. Jeffrey, who had got a bit tipsy after his confrontation with Ratcliffe, phoned her up just as she was leaving for Barfield House and asked her to come round, saying he was a better bet any day than Sir Charles. Deborah told him to get lost. He then told her, maliciously, that he had a good mind to tell Sir Charles about her affair with Jessica. Deborah said, still in that awful little voice, that she didn’t take it really seriously until she was on her way back from the dinner at Barfield House. She decided to “silence” him. So she changed and went round to his flat. She suggested they should get even with Ratcliffe. She and Jeffrey should drive out and cut the chain that held that padlocked gate and then both return to Jeffrey’s flat for a bit of whoopee. So Jeffrey went like a lamb, cut the chain, and got struck on the head by Deborah, who had searched around while he was doing it and found that rock.

‘She had somehow persuaded herself when Sir Charles asked her for that lunch he was all set for marriage. When he told her he had no intention of marrying her, she went right round the twist. That was why she was still working on that fake suicide note when you found her, James, even though she heard the police sirens outside. She was bewildered. All her life, she said, she had been driving towards the top. Do you know, in the beginning, getting to be a schoolteacher, for Deborah, was like an actor winning an Oscar. For a while, I think that was enough.’

‘It was the mad father who set us off to Barfield House,’ said James, and then stifled a yelp as Agatha kicked him. Agatha was determined that Bill should think they had guessed that Deborah was the one who had committed the murders.

‘Oh, yes, Deborah’s father,’ said Bill to Agatha’s surprise. ‘Yes, we found he’s in that prison for the criminally insane, Tadmartin. He’d murdered a woman he was living with, the one he left Mrs Camden for.’

‘Did either Mrs Camden or Deborah know this?’ asked James.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Bill.

‘Lots of madness in this,’ said James, drawing his legs out of Agatha’s reach. ‘There was something in the back of my mind that Sir Charles’s father died mad.’

‘No, he died drunk,’ said Bill. ‘Terrible old sot, he was. It’s a pity you two are going to have to appear in court yourselves for trespass and damage to crops after all your hard work.’

‘Yes, I think you might have overlooked that,’ commented Agatha.

‘Can’t,’ said Bill. ‘The irate farmer won’t let us.’

‘How’s Sir Charles?’ asked James.

‘Lucky to be alive,’ said Bill. ‘He’s in Dembley Central Hospital suffering from a bad concussion and cracked ribs. He got his ribs cracked when she dragged him down the stairs. She hit him on the head with a bottle of bath salts and then dragged him down the stairs to the kitchen. Well, I’d best be off. Thanks a lot, you two. We’d have got Deborah all right in the end. There was no way she could really cover up the murder of Sir Charles. We wouldn’t have believed that suicide note for a moment. But it’s thanks to you two that Sir Charles is alive. I suppose you’ll be heading back to Carsely?’

‘There’s nothing to keep us here,’ said James. ‘I never want to see any of those walkers again.’

When Bill had gone, Agatha said, ‘I suppose we ought to have something to eat. I don’t feel like going out, do you?’

The doorbell sounded again. ‘Now, who can that be?’ asked James. ‘I wish this door had a spyhole. If it’s one of those rambler, I swear I’ll slam the door in their face.’

He stepped back in surprise when he saw Gustav. The manservant entered. He handed James two bottles of old port. ‘The best in the cellars,’ he said. ‘Sir Charles has just recovered consciousness.’

Gustav smiled directly at Agatha for the first time. ‘I understand from the police that Sir Charles would not be alive were it not for the pair of you. I am deeply grateful.’

A gratified Agatha promptly forgot all her dislike of Gustav and begged him to sit down, but he shook his head. ‘My place is with Sir Charles. Do call and see him tomorrow. He will wish to thank you himself.’

‘He’s quite human after all,’ said Agatha in surprise when Gustav had left. ‘Do we sample that port or do we save it for a special occasion?’

‘I think this is a special occasion,’ said James with a smile. ‘I’ll look out some biscuits and cheese and perhaps that will do instead of dinner.’

Agatha had, in the past, in the PR days, been offered and had drunk what had merely passed for vintage port. After James had decanted a bottle, she accepted a glass, amazed that with her depraved palate, educated through the years with gin and tonics and microwave meals, she should appreciate it so much. It went down like silk. It was also very heady and somehow it seemed

to disappear very quickly, and it seemed only right to decant and sample the second bottle.

And then, as they mulled over the case, in increasingly tipsy accents, it suddenly struck James as terribly funny that Agatha had driven across that farmer's field. He began to laugh and soon Agatha was giggling helplessly and that was when James suddenly stopped laughing and took her face between his hands and kissed her on the lips. All the pent-up passion in Agatha rose to meet his lips and then his wandering hands, and soon there was a trail of discarded clothing lying on the floor reaching all the way to Agatha's bed.

Agatha awoke in the grey light of dawn. Memory came flooding back immediately. Her mouth was dry with a raging thirst and her head ached.

She felt lax and immeasurably sad. She had achieved her ambition, her dreams, and got James to take her to bed, but she had not wanted it to be like this, when they were both drunk and hardly knew what they were doing. A tear rolled down one cheek and plopped on the sheet. She twisted round and looked at him. He was sleeping neatly and quietly, his face looking younger in repose.

The worst thing she could now do, she reflected, was to make anything of what had happened. She was old enough and experienced enough to know that James would never even have dreamt of kissing her had he not been extremely drunk. She would need to treat it as everyday, as lightly as she could.

If only she could reach out to him and continue the love-making of the night before. But he might reject her and she could not bear that. She got up, feeling stiff and sore after so much unaccustomed sexual exercise, and went and ran a bath and stayed soaking in it for a long time.

When she returned at last to the bedroom, the bed was empty. James put his head round the door and said, 'Just going to have a bath, darling,' and went off whistling. He's taking it lightly, thought Agatha, and I must do the same.

She dressed in a blouse and skirt and made her face up carefully, her own face looking strange to her in the mirror.

She then went through to the kitchen and made a cup of coffee and lit a cigarette.

The newspapers plopped through the letterbox and she went to get them. Must cancel these, she thought, and the milk.

James came in as she was reading them. He stooped and kissed her cheek. 'Anything about the murder?' he asked.

'Just a bit about Deborah being charged but not much more yet,' said Agatha, suddenly shy, not able to look directly at him.



‘We’ll take the papers along with us and have breakfast outside,’ he said, ‘and then we’ll get some grapes or something and go and visit Charles. Do you think he’ll pay us?’

‘I didn’t think of that,’ said Agatha. ‘Should he?’

‘Oh, I think so. I mean, we’re going to have to pay that farmer for the damage, along with a fine and court costs. If Fraith doesn’t offer anything, I’ll bill him on behalf of both of us. Coming? You’d better put on a sweater or a jacket or something. It looks a bit chilly.’

Agatha went to get a sweater, glad all at once that they were going to have breakfast outside, among people.

As they tucked into bacon and eggs in a hotel dining-room, James eyed Agatha across the table. She looked smaller, vulnerable and very withdrawn. She would not meet his eyes. They had been very drunk the night before, admittedly, and he should do the gentlemanly thing and not refer to it, but her passion and generosity had been amazing. Quite amazing. Who would have thought that Agatha, of all people . . .

The thought broke off as Agatha said, ‘Do you think there’ll be anything in the newspapers about us?’

‘Not unless the police tell them. We’ll be present at the trial as witnesses, so our part in it will come out then.’

‘Should we phone the papers ourselves?’

He laughed. ‘Maybe not. Better to keep a low profile. Perhaps we’ll make a career of it – Raisin and Lacey, detectives, set up our own bureau of investigation.’

Agatha’s face lit up. ‘Why not?’

‘Are you serious? I was only joking.’

‘I don’t see why not. We make a good team.’

‘We’ll think about it. Now, if you’re finished, let’s go and see Charles.’

Sir Charles was sitting up in bed at the end of a long ward. His head was bandaged and he looked very white. But he gave a wan smile when he saw them. ‘Nice to see my saviours,’ he said. ‘Isn’t it odd that if Deborah hadn’t called you in, I’d probably be dead?’

‘Very odd,’ said James, depositing a bag of grapes on the bedside table. ‘Why aren’t you in a private room?’

‘Why pay out money when I’ve been paying taxes all these years?’

James decided in that moment that Charles would not think of giving them any money at all unless they asked for it, so he said, ‘You’ll be getting our bill. Sorry, but it’s going to be a bit steep. You see, in our race to rescue you, we damaged some of your neighbour’s crops.’

‘It’s all right,’ said Sir Charles. ‘Just send it in. The land agent will see to

settling it.'

'How are you feeling?' asked Agatha.

'I'm feeling more silly and stupid than anything,' said Sir Charles.

'Absolutely shitters, in fact. Gustav told me Deborah was creepy. She must have been totally deranged and I never even guessed it. Then my aunt said she was common and that put my back up. I don't like snobbery.'

'And yet in a way, it was Deborah's snobbery and ambition that drove her to murder,' said James.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Sir Charles peered in the bag and plucked off a grape from the bunch and began to eat it.

'Only that Deborah was determined to be Lady Fraith and run Barfield House,' explained James.

Sir Charles looked puzzled. 'But it's a nasty building, hardly an architectural gem, more like a glorified farm in a way. Still, it's rather lowering to think it wasn't my delicious body she was after. God, I was stupid. Took her to bed, you know. Awful. Like necrophilia.'

James had a sudden vivid memory of a fiery and passionate Agatha and blushed dark red.

'Sorry,' said Sir Charles, mistaking the reason for the blush. 'Always was a bit coarse.' He leaned back and closed his eyes.

'Get better soon,' said James.

'I will,' he said faintly. 'As soon as I can get up, I'm off to the south of France for a holiday.'

Agatha and James packed up and returned to Carsely that evening, James to his cottage, Agatha to hers. Agatha busied herself with household chores, fed the cats, watered the garden, and then went to the Red Lion, trying not to hope that James would be there. But there were only the locals, who talked to her with the sort of half-smiles which told Agatha that she and James going off together had been much discussed and that whatever Mrs Bloxby had said about them had fallen on deaf ears.

So I've got the reputation of being a fallen woman with none of the pleasure, thought Agatha, and was relieved to escape after a pub meal and get home and go to bed. Before she slipped her nightgown over her head, she stared in the mirror at a naked body which seemed to be slipping back into a sort of spinsterhood, which looked already to her jaundiced eyes as if it had never, ever been made love to.

She took a long time to get to sleep and awoke to find the sun high in the sky and the sound of her doorbell jangling through the house.

She put on her housecoat and ran to answer it, blinking up at the tall figure of James.

‘I’ve got something I want to ask you, Agatha,’ he said seriously. And then a voice from a car in the road called, ‘Coo-ee!’

Agatha peered round him and saw getting out of a little red car her former secretary, Bunty.

‘Hi!’ said Bunty, walking up to join them. ‘I was in the area and thought I’d pop in to say hello.’

‘Come in,’ said Agatha wearily to both James and Bunty. She led them into her sitting-room. ‘I’ll go and get coffee,’ she said.

When she carried in a tray of coffee mugs, Bunty and James were laughing about something, Bunty’s fresh young face glowing with health.

All at once Agatha felt so depressed, she thought she would be sick.

She could not bear to sit and watch James being charmed by this young girl, could not bear to have any more evidence that what she had experienced with him was simply a drunken one-night stand.

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ said Agatha, putting down the tray of coffee very carefully on the table, ‘but I am feeling unwell. I’m sorry, Bunty, but I have got to go and lie down.’

‘Can I get the doctor?’ asked James, alarmed.

‘No,’ said Agatha. ‘Entertain Bunty for me, would you, James?’

Agatha trailed back to her bedroom, threw her housecoat across the room and crawled back into bed and drew the duvet up over her ears. She was so depressed, she felt she hurt all over. She was nothing but a silly, middle-aged woman.

She dimly heard the door downstairs slam and a car driving off. They had gone. Maybe they had gone off together for a happy lunch in a pub. Maybe Bunty would ask her to their wedding.

A hand shaking her shoulder made her twist round and stare up.

‘Agatha,’ said James gently. ‘What’s the matter?’

With a great effort, Agatha forced herself to say, ‘Just a headache, James. If I lie quietly for a bit, I’ll be all right.’

‘Would you like me to bring you some aspirin?’

‘No, no. I’ll be fine.’

He stroked her forehead. ‘Poor thing. I’ll leave you in peace.’

‘What was it you wanted to talk to me about?’ asked Agatha. ‘The bill for Sir Charles?’

‘Oh, that. No.’ He gave a little laugh. ‘Of all the times to pick. I actually came round to ask you to marry me, but you’d better get over your headache first before you even think about it.’

He turned to walk away.

Agatha sat bolt upright. ‘Are you joking? What was that about marriage? I mean, *marriage!*’

He came back and sat down on the edge of the bed. ‘I know you probably

like your independence. It hit me last night. We get on very well. The fact is, it all seemed a bit lonely without you. Agatha! What are you doing, Agatha?’

She had started to unbutton his shirt.

‘Agatha, what about your headache?’

‘What headache?’ asked Agatha as she pulled him down on top of her.

An hour later, James said dreamily, ‘I don’t know why, but I seem to remember your telling me that you had walked out on your husband but not divorced him.’

Agatha felt a stab of cold fear in her stomach. It had all been so long ago. The last time she had seen Jimmy Raisin had been over thirty years ago, when she left him as he lay in a drunken stupor. He was bound to be dead by now.

She forced herself to laugh. ‘No, you’re mistaken,’ she said. ‘Jimmy died of drink ages ago.’

‘So whose house shall we live in?’ he asked. ‘They’re both the same size.’

‘Yours, I think,’ said Agatha, promptly forgetting about Jimmy. ‘You’re the one with the most possessions. All those books.’

‘Did you hear about Mrs Mason?’

‘Oh, her,’ snorted Agatha. ‘The cheek of it, telling Deborah I was a phony. What about her?’

‘She’s devastated about her niece. She’s moved off to live with her sister, not Mrs Camden, another one in Wales, and she’s putting her house up for sale. It looks as if the Carsely Ladies’ Society will be looking for a new chairwoman. Interested?’

‘No,’ said Agatha lazily. ‘My managing days are over.’

‘So,’ said Mrs Bloxby happily two days later, ‘I am delighted that you and James are getting married in our church. It will be quite an event for the village. But I was saying to Alf the other day that for some reason I thought you were separated from your husband, not divorced.’ Alf Bloxby was the vicar.

Again, that stab of fear in Agatha’s stomach, but she decided to ignore it and said, ‘Jimmy’s been dead for years.’ Then she began to worry. Would the vicar expect to see the death certificate? She would need to try to find out what had happened to Jimmy. The wedding was set in three months’ time. She and James were seeing an estate agent that very afternoon to put Agatha’s cottage on the market. She had come such a long way from the days when she had worked as a waitress to support a drunken and increasingly violent husband. The vicarage sitting-room was calm and quiet, with shadows from the sun-dappled leaves in the old garden outside flitting across the walls.

Carsely belonged to another world. She refused to think about Jimmy. She was marrying James, and no one was going to stop her.

Bill Wong called that evening just as Agatha was getting ready to go out for dinner with James.

‘I saw the announcement of your wedding in the local paper,’ said Bill. ‘Congratulations. Have you had a divorce?’

‘I don’t need a divorce,’ snapped Agatha. ‘My husband’s dead.’

‘Agatha, I’m pretty sure you told me you had left him years ago and you didn’t know whether he was alive or dead.’

‘Just because you’re a policeman doesn’t mean you’ve got total recall,’ said Agatha. ‘You’re going to be invited to the wedding, of course.’

Bill leaned forward, his features solemn. ‘Agatha, I’m your friend and I know you well and I know what you feel for James Lacey. Take my advice and get on to a detective agency and get them to trace your husband and find out where he is.’

‘Are you deaf?’ shouted Agatha. ‘I’ve told you. He’s dead. I’m marrying James Lacey and I’ll kill anyone who tries to stop me!’

The next morning, Roy Silver dropped in for a chat with Bunty.

‘Haven’t you any work to do?’ asked Bunty.

‘Loads,’ said Roy cheerfully. ‘Reluctant to get started, that’s all.’

‘I called on your friend, Agatha Raisin, a few days ago,’ said Bunty.

‘How is the old bat?’

‘She wasn’t very well. But her fiancé entertained me.’

‘Her what? I phoned her last night and she said nothing about the engagement.’

‘Fact. One James Lacey, quite a dish, too. It was in the local paper yesterday. My ma phoned me with the news.’

‘Well, well,’ said Roy thoughtfully and drifted off to his own office.

He sat behind his desk and stared into space. He had phoned Agatha at the urging of Mr Wilson, his boss, who wanted Agatha back. Agatha had been rude and dismissive, had told Roy not to call her again, had told him she was tired of his creepy sycophantic ways, and a few other hard words.

He remembered when he used to work for Agatha’s PR firm, Agatha once telling him over a drink that she had walked out on her husband, that she did not know where he was. Of course, that had been some time ago, and maybe Agatha had either heard of her husband’s death or divorced him. Still . . .

What a lovely way it would be to pay Agatha back if by any chance she had lied to James and intended to commit bigamy. Would do no harm to find

out. He pulled forward the Yellow Pages and began to run his thumb down a list of detective agencies.

The Dembley Walkers trudged out over the countryside. ‘You know, ah’ve been thinkin’,’ said Kelvin, ‘thon Lacey’s were an odd couple. Ah think they were working for the police.’

‘What makes you think that?’ asked Mary Trapp.

‘It was odd the way they surfaced among us shortly after Jessica’s murder and then, when Deborah was arrested, they disappeared.’

‘I thought that,’ said Alice. ‘I’ll tell you another thing: that flat they were in in Sheep Street was the property of Sir Charles.’

‘I could have told you from day one they weren’t one of us,’ said Peter.

‘So why didn’t you?’ jeered Kelvin.

Before Peter could retaliate, a gamekeeper surfaced and told them in no uncertain terms that they were in danger of disturbing the young pheasants. Happily they drew together to meet the challenge. Pheasants were for the rich, the land belonged to all; come the revolution, lackeys like him would be hanging from the nearest lamp-post; and the mysterious Lacey’s were forgotten.