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and a
SPOONFUL OF POISON

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AGATHA RAISIN
and a
SPOONFUL OF POISON

An Agatha Raisin Costworld murder-mystery

M. C. Beaton

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This book is dedicated to my three bookselling
angels at the Cotswold Bookstore,
Moreton-in-Marsh, Gloucestershire – Tony Keats,
David Whitehead and Nina Smith.

AGATHA RAISIN

Agatha Raisin was born in a tower block slum in Birmingham and christened Agatha Styles. No middle names. Agatha had often longed for at least two middle names such as Caroline or Olivia. Her parents, Joseph and Margaret Styles, were both unemployed and both drunks. They lived on benefits and the occasional bout of shoplifting.

Agatha attended the local comprehensive as a rather shy and sensitive child but quickly developed a bullying, aggressive manner so that the other pupils would steer clear of her.

At the age of fifteen, her parents decided it was time she earned her keep and her mother found her work in a biscuit factory, checking packets of biscuits on a conveyer belt for any faults.

As soon as Agatha had squirreled away enough money, she ran off to London and found work as a waitress and studied computing at evening classes. But she fell in love with a customer at the restaurant, Jimmy Raisin. Jimmy had curly black hair and bright blue eyes and a great deal of charm. He seemed to have plenty of money to throw around. He wanted an affair, but besotted as she was, Agatha held out for marriage.

They moved into one room in a lodging house in Finsbury Park where Jimmy's money soon ran out (he would never say where it came from in the first place). And he drank. Agatha found she had escaped the frying pan into the fire.

She was fiercely ambitious. One night, when she came home and found Jimmy stretched out on the bed dead drunk, she packed her things and escaped.

She found work as a secretary at a public relations firm and soon moved into doing public relations herself. Her mixture of bullying and cajoling brought her success. She saved and saved until she could start her own business.

But Agatha had always been a dreamer. Years back when she had been a child her parents had taken her on one glorious holiday. They had rented a cottage in the Cotswolds for a week. Agatha never forgot that golden holiday or the beauty of the countryside.

So as soon as she had amassed a great deal of money, she took early retirement and bought a cottage in the village of Carsely in the Cotswolds.

Her first attempt at detective work came after she cheated at a village quiche baking competition by putting a shop bought quiche in as her own. The judge died of poisoning and shamed Agatha had to find the real killer. Her adventures there are covered in the first Agatha Raisin mystery, *The Quiche of Death*, and in the series of novels that follow. As successful as she is in detecting, she constantly remains unlucky in love. Will she ever find happiness with the man of her dreams? Watch this space

Chapter One

Mrs Bloxby, wife of the vicar of Carsely, looked nervously at her visitor. ‘Yes, Mrs Raisin is a friend of mine, a very dear friend, but she is now very busy running her detective agency and does not have spare time for –’

‘But this is such a good cause,’ interrupted Arthur Chance, vicar of Saint Odo The Severe in the village of Comfrey Magna. ‘The services of an expert public relations officer to bring the crowds to our annual fête would be most welcome. Proceeds will go to restore the church roof and to various charities.’

‘Yes, but –’

‘It would do no harm to just *ask*, now would it? It is your Christian duty.’

‘I hardly need to be reminded of my duty,’ said Mrs Bloxby wearily, thinking of all the parish visits, the mothers’ meetings and the Carsely Ladies’ Society. Really, she thought, surveying the vicar, for such a mild, inoffensive-looking man he is terribly pushy. Arthur Chance was a small man with thick glasses and grey hair which stuck out in tufts like horns on either side of his creased and wrinkled face. He had married a woman twenty years his junior, Mrs Bloxby remembered. He probably bullied her into it, she thought.

‘Look! I will do what I can, but I cannot promise anything. When is the fête?’

‘It is a week on Saturday.’

‘Only about a week away. You are not giving Mrs Raisin any time.’

‘God will help her,’ said Mr Chance.

Agatha Raisin, a middle-aged woman who had sold up her successful public relations business to take early retirement in a cottage in the Cotswolds, had found that inactivity did not suit her and so had started up her own private detective agency. Now that it was successful, however, she wished she had more time to relax. Also, the cases which poured into the detective agency all concerned messy divorces, missing children, missing cats and dogs, and only the occasional case of industrial espionage. She had begun to close the agency at weekends, feeling she was losing quality time, forgetting that when she had plenty of quality time, she didn’t know what to do with it.

For a woman in her early fifties, she still looked well. Her hair, although tinted, was glossy and her legs were good. Although she had small eyes, she had very few wrinkles. She had a generous bosom and a rather thick waist, which was her despair.

On Friday evening, when she arrived home, she fussed over her two cats, Hodge and Boswell, kicked off her shoes, mixed herself a generous gin and tonic, lit a cigarette, and lay back on the sofa

with a sigh of relief.

She wondered idly where her ex-husband, James Lacey, was. He lived next door to her but worked as a travel writer and was often abroad. She rummaged around in her brain as usual, searching for that old obsession, that old longing for him, but it seemed to have gone forever. Agatha, without an obsession, was left with herself; and she forgot about all the pain and misery that obsession for her ex had brought and remembered only the brief bursts of elation.

The doorbell shrilled. Agatha swung her legs off the sofa and went to answer the door. Her face lit up when she saw Mrs Bloxby standing there. 'Come in,' she cried. 'I'm just having a G and T. Want one?'

'No, but I'd like a sherry.'

Sometimes Agatha, often too aware of her slum upbringing, wondered what it would be like to be a lady inside and out like Mrs Bloxby. The vicar's wife was wearing a rather baggy tweed skirt and a rose-pink blouse which had seen better days. Her grey hair was escaping from a bun at the back of her neck, but she had her usual air of kindness and dignity.

The pair of them, as was the fashion in the Carsely Ladies' Society, always called each other by their second names.

Agatha poured Mrs Bloxby a sherry. 'I haven't seen you for a while,' said Agatha. 'It's been so busy.'

A brief flicker of guilt crossed Mrs Bloxby's grey eyes. 'Have you still got that young detective with you, Toni Gilmour?'

'Yes, thank goodness. Excellent worker. But I think we will need to start turning down cases. I really don't want to take on more staff.'

Mrs Bloxby took a sip of sherry and said distractedly, 'I knew you would be too busy. That's what I told him.'

'Told who?'

'Mr Arthur Chance. The vicar of Saint Odo The Severe.'

'The what?'

'An Anglo-Saxon saint. I forget what he did. There are so many of them.'

'So how did my name come up in your discussion with Mr Chance?'

'He lives in Comfrey Magna –'

'Never been there.'

'Few people have. It's off the tourist route. Anyway, they are having their annual village fête a week tomorrow and Mr Chance wanted me to beg you to publicize the event for them.'

'Is there anything special about this vicar? Any reason why I should?'

'Only because it's for charity. And he is rather pushy.'

Agatha smiled. 'You look like a woman who has just been bullied. Tell you what, we'll drive over there tomorrow morning and I will tell him one resounding no and he won't bother you again.'

'That is so good of you, Mrs Raisin. I am not very strong when it comes to saying no to good works.'

In the winter days, when the rain dripped down and thick wet fog covered the hills, Agatha sometimes wondered what she was doing buried under the thatch of her cottage in the Cotswolds.

But as she drove off with Mrs Bloxby the following morning, the countryside was enjoying a really warm spring. Blackthorn starred the hedgerows, wisteria and clematis hung on garden walls, bluebells shook in the lightest of breezes, and a large blue sky arched overhead.

Mrs Bloxby guided Agatha through a maze of country lanes. 'Here we are at last,' she said finally.

‘Just park in front of the church.’

Agatha thought Comfrey Magna was an odd, secretive-looking village. There were no new houses mar the straggling line of ancient cottages on either side of the road. She could see no one on the main street or in the gardens or even at the windows.

‘Awfully quiet,’ she commented.

‘Few young people, that’s the problem,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘No first-time buyers, only last-time buyers.’

‘Shouldn’t think houses would be all that expensive in a dead hole like this,’ said Agatha, parking the car.

‘Houses all over are dreadfully expensive.’

They got out of the car. ‘That’s the vicarage over there,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘We’ll cut through the churchyard.’

The vicarage was an old grey building with a sloping roof of old Cotswold tiles, the kind that cost fortune but that the local council would never allow anyone to sell, unless they were going to be replaced with exactly the same thing which, of course, defeated the purpose.

As they entered the churchyard, Agatha saw a man straightening up from one of the graves where he had been laying flowers. He turned and saw them and smiled.

Agatha blinked rapidly. He was tall, with fair hair, a lightly tanned handsome face, and green eyes. His eyes were really green, thought Agatha, not a fleck of brown in them. He was wearing a tweed sports jacket and cavalry-twill trousers.

‘Good morning,’ said Mrs Bloxby pleasantly, but giving Agatha’s arm a nudge because that lady seemed to have become rooted to the spot.

‘Good morning,’ he replied.

‘Who was that?’ whispered Agatha as they approached the door of the vicarage.

‘I don’t know.’

Mrs Bloxby rang the bell. The door was opened by a tall woman wearing a leotard and nothing else. Her hair was tinted aubergine and worn long and straight. She had rather mean features – a narrow, thin mouth and long narrow eyes. Her nose was thin with an odd bump in the middle, as if it had once been broken and then badly reset. Pushing forty, thought Agatha.

‘You’ve interrupted my Pilates exercises,’ she said.

‘We’ve come to see Mr Chance,’ said Mrs Bloxby.

‘You must be the PR people. You’ll find him in the study. I’m Trixie Chance.’

Oh dear, thought Mrs Bloxby. She often thought that trendy vicars’ wives did as much to reduce a church congregation as a trendy vicar. Mrs Chance was of a type familiar to her: always desperately trying to be ‘cool’, following the latest fads and quoting the names of the latest pop groups.

Trixie had disappeared. By pushing open a couple of doors off the hall, they found the study. Arthur Chance was sitting behind a large Victorian desk piled high with papers.

He rushed round the desk to meet them, his pale eyes shining behind thick glasses. He seized Agatha’s hands. ‘Dear lady, I knew you would come. How splendid of you to help us!’

Agatha disengaged her hands. ‘I have come here,’ she began, ‘to say –’

There was a trill of laughter from outside, and through the window Agatha could see Trixie talking to that handsome man.

‘Who is that man?’ she demanded, pointing at the window.

Arthur swung round in surprise. ‘Oh, that is one of my parishioners, Mr George Selby. So tragic, his wife dying like that! He has been a source of strength helping me with the organization of the fête, ordering the marquees in case it rains. So important in our fickle English climate, don’t you think, Mrs Raisin?’

‘Certainly,’ gushed Agatha. ‘Perhaps, if you could call Mr Selby in, we could discuss the publicity together?’

‘Certainly certainly.’ Arthur bustled off. Mrs Bloxby stifled a sigh. She knew her friend was now dead set on another romantic pursuit. She wished, not for the first time, that Agatha would grow up.

George Selby entered the study behind the vicar. He smiled at Agatha. ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ he asked. ‘Mr Chance can be very persuasive.’

‘It’s no trouble at all,’ said Agatha, thinking she should have worn a pair of heels instead of the dowdy flat sandals she was wearing.

But Agatha’s heart sank as the events were described to her. There was to be entertainment by the village band and dancing by a local group of morris men. The rest consisted of competitions to see who had created the best cake, bread, pickles and relishes. The main event was the home-made jam tasting.

She sat in silence after the vicar had finished outlining the events. She caught a sympathetic look from George’s beautiful green eyes and a great idea leaped into her mind.

‘Yes, I can do this,’ she said. ‘You haven’t given me much time. Leave it to me.’ She turned to George. ‘Perhaps we could have dinner sometime in the coming week to discuss progress?’

He hesitated slightly. ‘Splendid idea,’ said the vicar. ‘Plan of campaign. There is a very good restaurant at Mircester. Trixie, my wife, is particularly fond of it. La Belle Cuisine. Why don’t we all meet there for dinner on Wednesday? Eight o’clock.’

‘Fine,’ said Agatha gloomily.

‘I suppose so,’ said George with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Agatha’s staff, consisting of detectives Phil Marshall, Patrick Mulligan, young Toni Gilmour and secretary Mrs Freedman, found that the usual Monday morning conference was cancelled. ‘Just get on with whatever you’re on with,’ said Agatha. ‘I’ve got a church fête to sell.’

Toni felt low. She had been given another divorce case and she hated divorce cases. But she lingered in the office, fascinated to hear Agatha Raisin in full bullying mode on the phone. ‘Yes, I think you should send a reporter. We’re running a real food campaign here. Good local home-made produce and no supermarket rubbish. And I can promise you a surprise. Yes, it *is* Agatha Raisin here. No, no murder, hah, hah. Just send a reporter.’

Next call. ‘I want to speak to Betsy Wilson.’

Toni stood frozen. Betsy Wilson was a famous pop singer. ‘Tell her it’s Agatha Raisin. Hello, Betsy, dear, remember me? I want you to open a village fête next Saturday. I know you have a busy schedule, but I also happen to know you are between gigs. The press will all be there. Good for your image. Lady-of-the-manor bit. Large hat, floaty dress, gracious – come on, girl, by the time I’m finished with you I’ll have you engaged to Prince William. Yes, you come along and I’ll see if I can get the Prince.’ Agatha then charged on to tell Betsy to arrive at two o’clock and to give her directions to Comfrey Magna.

‘Thick as two planks,’ muttered Agatha, ‘but she’s coming.’

‘But she’s famous!’ gasped Toni. ‘Why should she come?’

‘Her career was sinking after that drugs bust,’ said Agatha. ‘I did a freelance job and got her going again.’

She picked up the phone again. ‘News desk? Forget about the healthy food. Better story. Fête is to be opened by Betsy Wilson. Yes. I thought that would make you sit up.’

Toni waited until Agatha had finished the call and asked, ‘Can you really get Prince William?’

‘Of course not, but that dumb cow thinks I’m capable of anything.’

At dinner on the Wednesday night, only Trixie Chance greeted Agatha's news that Betsy Wilson was to open the fête with delight. George Selby said anxiously, 'But the village will be overrun by teenagers and press. It'll be a disaster.'

Agatha felt panicky. She now had the nationals coming as well as the local newspapers.

'I've got it,' she said. 'Vicar, you open the fête with a prayer. Get yourself a good sound system. Think of the size of the congregation. I'll get Betsy to sing "Amazing Grace". Set the tone.'

The vicar's eyes shone. 'I can see it now,' he said, clasping his hands as though in prayer.

'Yes, so can I,' said George. 'Mess and rubbish everywhere.'

Trixie squeezed his arm. 'Oh, Georgy Porgy, don't be a great bear. Little Trixie is thrilled to bits.'

She's five feet eight inches, thought Agatha sourly, and people who refer to themselves in the third person are always crashing bores.

'It'll be marvellous,' said Agatha. 'It'll really put Comfrey Magna on the map!'

She wondered how she could manage to engineer an evening with George on his own. Mustn't seem too *needy*. Men could smell needy across two continents.

In vain during the meal did George try to protest against the visit of the pop star. The vicar and his wife were too excited to listen to him.

What was worse, George was beginning to look at her with something like dislike in those grass-green eyes of his.

He leaned across the table, interrupting the vicar's enthusiastic plans, and said coldly, 'I've decided I don't really want to be part of this.'

'But George,' wailed Trixie, 'we depend on you to organize the marquees and things.'

'I am sure the very efficient Mrs Raisin can take over from me. I only chipped in because Saint Odo's is a beautiful church and the fête was one way to raise funds towards the necessary repairs as well as sending some money to charity.'

'Listen,' said Agatha, panicking as gorgeous George seemed to be vanishing over the flat horizon of her present manless life, 'here's an idea which will get you so much money you could build a cathedral. It will only mean one day of chaos. You put up barricades at the two roads leading into the village. You charge five pounds a head for entry. You get a couple of farmers, say, to contribute fields for parking. Haven't you any Boy Scouts or Girl Guides?'

'Yes, we do,' said the vicar.

'Draft them in to park the cars and dib, dib whatever, you've got a fortune.'

There was a startled silence. The vicar looked as if someone had just presented him with the Holy Grail. George gave a reluctant smile.

'I suppose it could work. We don't have much time.'

'Call an emergency meeting in the village hall tomorrow,' said Agatha eagerly.

'There are only a few days left,' cautioned George.

'We can do it,' said Agatha. 'I know we can do it.'

'What about all these crowds that are going to come? We'll need to inform the police.'

Agatha quailed at the thought of her friend Detective Sergeant Bill Wong's reaction. 'I'll do that,' she said, 'and I'll hire a security firm to police the area.'

'You are an angel,' said the happy vicar.

But George looked uneasy. 'I feel no good will come of this,' he said.

The dinner party finished at eight because the vicar liked to eat early and get to bed early.

Agatha cast one longing look after George's retreating well-tailored back as he headed for his car. She must find out more about him. Surely Mrs Bloxby knew something.

Later that evening, Mrs Bloxby listened in alarm to Agatha's plans. She felt that, as Agatha had bulldozed ahead, there was now little point in making any protest. And when Agatha left, commenting

on the incredible beauty of the Cotswold spring, Mrs Bloxby repressed a sigh. Agatha's perception of beauty, she felt, was prompted by her hormones. If only Agatha hadn't seen that handsome man in the graveyard. She knew her friend of old. Agatha was heading for another obsession, and while it lasted, the Cotswolds would be beautiful and every pop tune would have a special meaning.

Agatha sustained a visit from a very angry Bill Wong on Friday evening. 'You might have told me first what your plans were,' he complained, 'and I would have done my best to stop you. Betsy Wilson! It's as bad as hiring Celine Dion for the occasion.'

He was only slightly mollified by the news that Agatha had engaged a security firm that had promised to put as many of their men as possible on the ground.

Bill was the product of a Chinese father and a Gloucestershire mother. He had inherited his father's almond-shaped eyes, those eyes which were looking suspiciously at Agatha. 'Who is he?' asked Bill.

'He? Who?'

'You've fallen for someone.'

'Bill, can you not for once believe something good about me? I'm doing this for charity.'

'So you say. I'll be there myself on Saturday.'

'How's your love life?' countered Agatha. 'Still dating my young detective, Toni Gilmour?'

'We go around together when we both get some free time, but . . .'

'But what?'

'Agatha, could you try to find out what she thinks of me? Toni is very affectionate and likes me, but there's no spark there, no hint of passion. Mother and Father like her a lot.'

Agatha eyed him shrewdly. 'You know, Bill, you can't go after a girl just because your mother and father like her. Do you *yearn* for her?'

'Don't be embarrassing.'

'All right. I'll find out what her intentions are.'

'I'd better go. See you tomorrow.'

Agatha, who had been sitting on a kitchen chair, rose with one fluid movement to show him out.

'You've had a hip replacement!' exclaimed Bill.

'Nonsense. It wasn't arthritis after all. A pulled muscle.'

Agatha had no intention of telling Bill or anybody else that she had paid one thousand pounds at the Nuffield Hospital in Cheltenham for a hip injection. The surgeon had warned her that she would soon have to have a hip replacement, but now, free of pain, Agatha forgot his words. Arthritis was so ageing. She was sure it had been a pulled muscle.

George Selby had to admit to himself that it looked as if the day was going to be a success. Betsy Wilson was a rare pop singer in that she appealed to families as well as teenagers. He also had to admit that had she not arrived to open the fête, only a few people would have attended. What was considered the height of the fête was the tasting to find the best homemade jam. Little dishes of jam were laid out, and people tasted each and then dropped a note of their favourite in a ballot box.

The sun shone from a cloudless sky on the beauty of spring. It had been a cold, damp early spring, and now, with the sudden heat and good weather, it seemed as if everything had blossomed at once: cherry and lilac, wisteria and hawthorn and all the glory of the fruit trees in the orchards around the village.

Betsy Wilson, in a gauzy dress decorated with roses, made a short speech, clasped her hands and sang her latest hit, 'Every Other Sunday'. It was a haunting ballad. Her clear young voice floated up to

the Cotswold hills. Even the hardened pressmen stood silently.

~~She sang two more ballads, finished by singing 'Amazing Grace', and then was hustled into a stretch limo by her personal security guard. The band which had accompanied her packed up and left to be replaced by the village band.~~

Then Toni, who was with Agatha, tugged her sleeve and said, 'That's odd.'

'What's odd?' asked Agatha.

'Look at all those teenagers queuing outside the jam tent.'

'Really? If I thought it was going to be such a popular event, I'd have charged an extra admission fee.'

'Could someone be peddling drugs inside that tent?' asked Toni.

'Why?'

'Some of the people coming out look stoned.'

Agatha was about to walk towards the tent when she heard screams and commotion coming from over by the church. People were pointing upwards. A woman was standing at the top of the square Norman tower, her arms outstretched. As Agatha ran over to the church, followed by Toni, she heard someone say, 'It's old Mrs Andrews. Her said something about how her could fly.'

Agatha saw George running into the church and ran after him, with Toni pounding after her. George was disappearing through a door at the back of the church where stairs led to the tower. Agatha ran up the stairs, panting and gasping as she neared the top. She staggered out on to the roof.

Mrs Andrews was standing up on the parapet. 'I can fly,' she said dreamily. 'Just like Superman.'

George made a lunge for her – but too late.

With an odd little laugh, Mrs Andrews sailed straight off into space. George, Agatha and Toni craned their heads over the parapet. Mrs Andrews lay smashed on a table tombstone, a pool of dark blood spreading from her head.

George was white-faced. 'What on earth came over her? She was a perfectly sane woman.'

'The jam,' said Toni suddenly. 'I think someone's put something in the jam.'

'Get down there,' said Agatha, 'and tell the security guards to seal off that damned tent.'

She was about to run after Toni when George caught her arm. 'What's this about the jam?'

'Toni noticed that an awful lot of teenagers were queuing up outside the jam tent and coming out looking stoned. I've got to get down there.'

When they arrived outside the church, a woman came up to them looking distraught. 'Get an ambulance. Old Mrs Jessop's jumped into the river.'

Police were beginning to shout through loudhailers that everyone was to stay exactly where they were until interviewed.

'Thousands of them,' gasped Toni. 'I told Bill there was something wrong with the jam.'

Chapter Two

Sir Charles Fraith, a friend of Agatha's, placed his slippers on a footstool in his drawing room and switched on the television to BBC news.

Agatha's frantic face seemed to leap at him out of the screen. 'I don't know what happened,' she was saying to the interviewer. 'I think some maniac put something in the jam.'

The interviewer went on to describe the events at Agatha's disastrous church fête. Apart from Mrs Andrews and Mrs Jessop, two villagers had suffered heart attacks.

The camera panned out over the village. It looked as if the whole of the county's police force were on the scene, busy taking down names and addresses. They'll never forgive Agatha for the expense of all this manpower, thought Charles. I'll get over there this evening and pick up the pieces.

As dusk settled down over the Cotswolds and blossoms glimmered whitely in the fading light, all was peace and quiet except at Comfrey Magna.

Inside the tent, lit by the harsh glare of halogen lights, the two organizers of the jam tasting, a Mrs Glarely and a Mrs Cranton, sat weeping quietly.

Agatha and Toni were being interviewed inside the tent for what seemed to her like the hundredth time. Facing her was Detective Inspector Wilkes, flanked by Detective Sergeant Collins. Bill Wong had been sidelined by Collins, a nasty, pushy woman, who had pointed out to Wilkes that Bill was tainted by his friendship with Agatha and should be kept out of the interview. Collins had said she was transferring to the Metropolitan Police, but Bill had a sinking feeling that she'd been turned down. Behind Agatha, waiting to be interviewed again, were the vicar, his wife and George.

'Now this Betsy Wilson,' said Wilkes, 'she was involved in some drug scandal a few years ago.'

'She's clean,' said Agatha, 'and she didn't go near the jam tent. Betsy went straight to the platform. Her band had arrived earlier and set up. She sang her songs and left.'

'What about the members of the band?' rasped Collins. Her hair was pulled back so severely that Agatha was amazed her eyes didn't water. 'That lot are always into drugs. Assuming it was drugs and not some nasty local herb in the preserves.'

'I think it was LSD,' said Toni suddenly. 'I've been thinking about it. It's a hallucinogen.'

'And how come you know about it, young lady?' demanded Wilkes.

'It was a case we turned over to Worcester CID earlier this year,' said Toni. 'Do you remember, Agatha? A mother thought her son was on drugs. I followed him to that club in Evesham and found they were giving out tabs quite openly. So I informed the police and the club was raided.'

'What are tabs?'

‘LSD is usually found on little squares of blotting paper called tabs,’ said Toni. ‘It’s also a clear liquid. All someone had to do was tip a few drops into each of the jam-testing dishes. I gather the show was set up early in the morning and then the organizers went home for breakfast. It might be an idea to trace the source of the drug. LSD isn’t all that common in the clubs these days. It’s all Ecstasy or crack cocaine or heroin.’

Toni was a pretty young girl aged eighteen. She had naturally fair hair. Collins threw her a look of dislike. ‘You seem to know a lot about drugs.’

‘It’s my job,’ said Toni. ‘I’m a detective. You see, that’s how I found out our two organizers had left the tent empty. Before the tent was opened to the public, the various jam dishes were covered with white cloths fastened with drawing pins. The tent was only opened to the public after Betsy had finished singing.’

‘It wasn’t us,’ wailed Mrs Glarely.

‘We’ll need the names of all the women who contributed jam,’ said Wilkes. He sighed. ‘Are there many?’

‘Only six,’ said Toni, pulling out a notebook. ‘I have their names and addresses here.’

‘Good girl,’ said Wilkes, and Agatha felt a little stab of jealousy. She felt tired and jaded, and there was Toni looking as fresh as a daisy. Had George noticed Toni? That was the trouble with middle-aged men. They were allowed to fancy young girls. Middle-aged women fancying young men were called cradle snatchers.

‘And,’ went on Toni, ‘Mrs Cranton said, apart from these ladies, the only people who came into the tent before it was officially opened were Mr George Selby, the vicar and his wife, and a pig farmer called Hal Bassett –’

‘What was a pig farmer doing in the jam tent before it was opened?’ interrupted Wilkes.

‘He was trying to get an advance taste. He eats home-made jam by the spoonful. Then there was Miss Triast-Perkins from the manor. She claimed that she wanted to be sure of decorum at all the events. She said that Mrs Raisin was out to ruin the village by running the fête like a three-ringed circus.’

Agatha hated being left out. ‘Could we continue all this in the morning?’ she pleaded.

‘And I need to let the marquee people come and collect the tents tomorrow,’ said George.

‘Just a few more questions,’ snapped Collins.

And so it went on until nearly midnight, when they were all told they could go but to report to a mobile police unit which would be in place in the village in the morning.

As they all walked outside the tent, Agatha asked George, ‘Do you know how much we made?’

‘The vicar is going to count the money. There must be thousands. Of course, any relatives of Mrs Andrews and Mrs Jessop must be compensated, not to mention any people who suffered ill health.’

Agatha had been about to suggest she should be compensated for hiring the security firm, but decided it might sound callous. She was desperately wondering how to set up a date with George when she heard the vicar calling her.

Reluctantly she turned back as George hurried away. ‘Mrs Raisin,’ said Arthur Chance, ‘this is a terrible business. I would like to hire your agency to find out who did this dreadful thing.’

Trixie protested. ‘There are police all over the place.’

‘Mrs Raisin’s agency has a good reputation,’ said the vicar firmly.

‘I’ll do it,’ said Agatha. ‘I feel responsible.’

‘So you should,’ said Trixie, tossing her long hair. ‘Where’s George?’

‘I think he’s gone home,’ said Agatha. ‘I’ll be back first thing in the morning.’

She headed to where she had parked her car to find Toni waiting for her. ‘We’ve been employed,’ said Agatha. ‘I think you and I should concentrate on this case and leave Phil and Patrick to cope with

the rest.’ Agatha suddenly remembered Bill’s request. ‘How are you and Bill getting along?’ she asked.

‘Fine.’

‘Madly in love?’

‘We’re just friends. No fire lit. Not for me, not for him, but poor Bill thinks there should be something just because his mum and dad want it.’ Toni had wanted to leave the agency and join the police force, but she owed Agatha a great deal. Agatha had rescued her from a brutal home. Perhaps when this case was over, she might find the courage to leave.

‘See you at the office,’ said Agatha, stifling a yawn. ‘Make it eight o’clock. I’ll phone Phil and Patrick and get them there early as well.’

As Agatha drove up to her cottage, she saw Charles’s car parked outside. She frowned in irritation. She didn’t feel like coping with Charles and she resented the way he used her cottage like a hotel.

She let herself in. Charles was asleep on the sofa, with the television still on. Agatha switched it off and went upstairs to bed without waking Charles. Sleep did not come easily. She tossed and turned, remembering the events of the catastrophic day. It had all started so well, good-natured crowds flooding into the village and over to a field where a stage had been set up for Betsy. How pretty she had looked with her filmy dress floating in the slightest of breezes. After Betsy had driven off, a great number of people had started to head away. Then the disaster of poor Mrs Andrews’s flight from the tower. Who had put LSD, if that’s what it was, in the jam? She remembered Toni’s concise report. Her young detective had really shown her up. But she, Agatha, had been running here and there, trying to get the security guards to contain the scene. She fell down at last into a nightmare where Trixie and George were laughing at her because she had turned up at the fête without a stitch on.

In the morning she stumbled out of bed, feeling immeasurably tired. She showered and dressed and hurried downstairs. Charles was still asleep on the sofa, the cats beside him. She scribbled a note, telling him to feed the cats and let them out into the garden, and then drove off to Mircester where she had her office.

Phil Marshall and Patrick Mulligan, who had been called in by Agatha that Sunday for an emergency meeting, groaned when Agatha said that she and Toni were going to handle the Comfrey Magna case. Phil Marshall was in his seventies and Patrick was a retired police detective.

‘You’ll need to hire someone else,’ said Patrick. ‘Phil and I can’t cope on our own with the workload. I know a retired detective.’

‘This is getting like the geriatric employment agency,’ snapped Agatha, and then, seeing the look of hurt on Phil’s face, said quickly, ‘Sorry about that. Yes. Hire him. Mrs Freedman will set up a contract for him.’ Mrs Freedman, the secretary, gave a little smile. They had already discussed the idea of hiring someone extra before Agatha arrived, and the retired detective was one of her cousins. Agatha went through the files and allocated work for Monday morning and then turned to Toni. ‘We’d better be off to the scene of the crime. It’ll be crawling with press, although a lot of them will be doorstepping Betsy in London.’ She bit her lip in vexation. She hadn’t had time to look at the Sunday morning papers, but she was sure they would have raked up all that old drug scandal about Betsy. Must get the vicar to say something about Betsy being a saint, she thought.

When Toni and Agatha arrived back at Comfrey Magna, they avoided the mobile police unit and went straight to the vicarage, battling their way through the press.

To Agatha’s delight, George answered the door.

‘Mr Chance is in the study with my accountant. We’re counting up the money.’

~~Agatha followed George into the study, looking dreamily at his back. He was wearing a shirt as blue as the sky above, chinos and shoes which looked as if they had been handmade.~~

‘Ah, Mrs Raisin!’ cried the vicar, running around his desk to take Agatha’s hands in his. ‘We have a fortune here. Various charities will get a generous sum, the church roof will be repaired, and then we will compensate the families of the bereaved.’

‘How much?’ asked Agatha.

‘Oh, let me introduce our accountant. Mrs Raisin, or may I call you Agatha?’

‘Please do.’

‘Agatha, I would like to introduce Mr Arnold Birntweather. He lives in our village and has kindly offered his services. Tell her how much we have.’

‘We have thirty thousand pounds,’ said Arnold.

He was a very small man, with a dowager’s hump, and small eyes magnified by thick glasses. His hair was an improbable brown.

Again, Agatha was tempted to suggest that they pay her for the services of the security firm and then again decided it would look too mean. Also any builder these days with the expertise to repair the church roof would take most if not all of the money.

‘Where is Trixie?’ asked Agatha, looking around for what she had privately damned as the ‘competition’.

‘My poor wife has gone to the hairdresser. She has been so shocked by the events of yesterday. She felt like some type of beauty treatment to calm her nerves. Now I must get to the church for morning service.’

‘Could you please say a few words to the press outside after the service about Betsy?’ asked Agatha. ‘Something nice about such a famous pop star giving up her time?’

‘Of course,’ said Arthur.

‘I’ll come with you,’ said George.

‘Good idea,’ said Agatha brightly.

‘Shouldn’t we be out there interviewing people?’ whispered Toni.

‘They’ll all be in church,’ muttered Agatha as the vicar rushed off, clutching his sermon.

The church of Saint Odo The Severe had not escaped the attentions of Cromwell’s troops. There was no stained glass in the windows and bright shafts of sunlight shone through mullioned panes of clear glass. The church was full. Toni fretted. Instead of getting on with the job, they were now trapped inside for a full morning service.

Agatha wondered where the vicar’s wife had managed to find a hairdresser on a Sunday.

As the service dragged on, Agatha’s conscience began to get the better of her. George was in the pew in front and all she could do was stare at the back of his head.

She pinched Toni’s arm in the middle of a rendering of ‘Abide with Me’ and jerked her head to indicate they should leave.

They both emerged, blinking in the sunlight. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides – or did they call them Girl Scouts these days? – were moving about the village, filling up plastic bags with rubbish. Either they had drafted in troops from surrounding villages, thought Agatha, or this was a very fecund village. ‘We’ll start with Hal Bassett, the pig farmer,’ said Agatha.

She stopped one of the Scouts and asked the boy if he knew where Bassett’s pig farm was. ‘I don’t come from here,’ said the boy, moodily poking a plastic bag with a pointed stick. ‘Ask her over there the girl with the carrot hair. She’s from here.’

The girl when questioned said that Hal Bassett's farm was outside the village up on the hill to the left.

'Is it far?' asked Agatha. She was wearing high-heeled sandals. 'No,' said the girl, pointing to the left. 'You go along to the end of the village and walk straight up the hill. You'll see a sign to the farm. It's called Bassett's Piggery. You can't miss it. It smells.'

'What if he's in church?' asked Toni as they set off.

'Don't think so.' Agatha had convinced herself that a jam-loving pig farmer would not be religious.

It was a long straggling village, possibly built along one of the old drove roads. The church was at one end and the road leading to the farm at the other. The small cottages on both sides of the road did not have any gardens at the front. They seemed to crouch beside the road, small, old and secretive. Nobody moved on the deserted main street. Unlike Carsely, there were no streets leading off the main one. One main street was all there was to Comfrey Magna. In a few gaps between the houses, Agatha could see gardens at the back full of spring blossom, but no one had thought to plant anything in the little bit of earth between the houses and the road in the front. The place was deserted.

The street was cobbled. A heel of Agatha's sandal got stuck between the cobbles and was wrenched off.

'You wait here,' said Toni. 'I'll run back and get the car.'

Agatha enviously watched her flying figure as Toni raced off down the street. Toni's fair hair gleamed in the sunlight. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt and flat sandals. Why did I get all dressed up? mourned Agatha in all the glory of a mustard-coloured linen suit with a short skirt. Because you wanted to get Gorgeous George's attention, said the inner governess. Agatha was not plagued by any inner child but by this governess, who yakked on, 'Why were you so stupid? What do you know of George? Has he shown any wit, humour, charm or anything? No. So here you are, all dressed up like a dog's dinner.'

Agatha began to wish Toni would hurry up. It was as if there was a feeling of dislike emanating from the very stones of the old cottages. She kept feeling there was a face at one of the windows, just seen out of the corner of her eye, but when she whipped round, the window was empty and blank.

She heaved a sigh of relief when she saw Toni arriving with her car at last. Agatha climbed in. 'I've got a pair of flat shoes in the back,' she said. 'I'll put them on when we get to the farm.'

The farm turned out to be nearly at the top of a very steep hill leading out of the village. 'I bet he looks like one of his pigs,' said Agatha. 'All that jam. He's probably round and pink like a porker.'

'It does pong something awful,' said Toni when she drove into the farmyard.

'I hope he's at home after all this.' Agatha put on a pair of flat sandals and flexed her toes with relief.

'It was a funny time of year for a jam tasting,' said Toni. 'I mean, you would think maybe after the strawberries came out.'

'In this backward dump, they probably make jam out of weeds,' said Agatha. 'The farm door's open. Hello! Anybody at home?'

A thin, commanding-looking woman dressed in jeans and a washed-out cotton blouse appeared in the doorway. She had thick grey hair, grey eyes and a thin mouth.

She looked Agatha up and down and sighed. 'You Jehovahs,' she said in an upper-class accent. 'Dragging your poor children from door to door.'

'I am not a Jehovah,' snapped Agatha. 'My name is Agatha Raisin and this is one of my detectives Miss Toni Gilmour.'

'Oh, so you're the female responsible for the deaths yesterday.'

'Look,' said Agatha, 'I would like to speak to Mr Bassett.'

'I am Mrs Bassett.' Her eyes raked Agatha up and down. You could leave the Birmingham slum,

thought Agatha, but it was always there, deep inside, waiting to make you feel inferior.

~~'It's Mr Bassett I want to speak to.'~~ Agatha's small eyes bored truculently into Mrs Bassett's face.

'Come in,' she said abruptly.

They followed her into a kitchen which was like something out of the pages of *Cotswold Life* magazine. It shone and gleamed in the sunlight, from the latest utensils to the copper pots hanging on hooks above a granite counter.

'Wait there,' commanded Mrs Bassett, pointing towards a kitchen table surrounded by Windsor chairs.

She strode out the back door and called in stentorian tones, 'Hal!'

There was a faint answering cry.

'He's coming,' said Mrs Bassett, striding back into the kitchen.

As usual, Agatha's eyes ranged around the room, looking for an ashtray, but she could not see a single one.

Mrs Bassett began to grind coffee beans. She had her back to them and seemed unaware of their very existence.

Hal Bassett came into the kitchen. Mrs Bassett swung round. 'Boots!' she said.

Hal retreated to the doorway, sat down on a small stool at the entrance and tugged off his green wellies.

'Who are they?' he asked.

'It's that Agatha Raisin woman and her sidekick,' said Mrs Bassett.

Hal walked up to the kitchen table, twisted a chair round and straddled it. I hate men who do that, thought Agatha.

He was a tall brown-haired man dressed in a checked shirt and cords. He smelt strongly of pig. 'So you're the female responsible for the mayhem yesterday,' he remarked. His voice was light and pleasant. He had a square regular face. He did not look at all like the kind of person to haunt a jam-tasting exhibition.

'I'm not responsible for the LSD in the jam – if that is what the drug was,' said Agatha.

'What did you expect, encouraging a load of riff-raff to come here?' said Hal.

'It seems as if it had nothing to do with the visitors,' said Agatha. 'The exhibition was set up in the marquee early in the morning by the organizers, Mrs Glarely and Mrs Cranton. The only people to visit the tent before the opening were yourself, Miss Triast-Perkins, the vicar and his wife and Mr Selby. Did you taste any of the jam?'

'No,' said Hal. 'I tried to buy a pot of plum jam from the ones on sale, but I was told I'd have to wait. Mrs Cranton wouldn't let me try any of the samples until the place was open to the public. Fair carried away with all this pop-singer nonsense.'

'Did you go back?'

'Couldn't. Got a sow in farrow. I had to get back here.'

Toni smiled at him. 'We aren't suggesting you had anything to do with it. Of course not. But we wondered whether you might have seen anything when you were in the marquee.'

Hal smiled back. 'What's a pretty thing like you doing being a detective? No, I didn't see anything out of the way. But if I remember something, I'll phone you. Got a card?'

Toni took out one of her business cards, but before he could take it, it was snatched by Mrs Bassett who said icily, 'Hal has work to do. If you've finished, we'd like to get on.'

They were just getting into the car in the farmyard when Hal came hurrying out. He thrust a packet of sausages at Toni. 'Here you are,' he said. 'Prime pork. My own pigs.'

'That's very kind of you,' said Toni. 'Does it always pong like this round here?'

He laughed. 'I've got a load of pig muck stacked up to sell to the farmers for fertilizer. It'll be

cleared out tomorrow. My pigs don't smell. Come back sometime and I'll give you a tour.'

'Hal!' called Mrs Bassett from the doorway.

'Coming.'

'You've made a conquest there,' said Agatha, feeling low. How great it would be to be young and pretty like Toni. George would surely pay attention to her.

'George was in the tent as well,' said Toni. 'I forgot about that. Do you know anything about him?'

'No, only that his wife died.'

'Maybe he poisoned her.'

'Just drive,' said Agatha sourly. 'And find the manor house. We'd better have a word with Miss Triast-Perkins.'

Toni drove back down into the village. 'Aren't we supposed to be reporting to the police?'

'Later.'

People were returning from the church service. Toni lowered the window and asked for directions to the manor, and was told it was at the other end of the village, just beyond the church. 'Did you see the way they were all looking at us?' asked Toni. 'They're all in their Sunday best, but if you put them in a medieval dress, their faces would fit. They looked as if they would really like to lynch us. I bet there's a lot of nasty things go on behind closed doors here – wife beating, incest and drunkenness.'

'Or maybe they're too God-fearing to get up to anything nasty. Anyway, I could imagine one of them poisoning the jam with some nasty poisonous plant. But LSD? I don't think any of them would even know where to get it.'

'Oh, oh.' Toni braked suddenly.

'What is it?'

'Bill's waving us over to the mobile police unit.'

Another hour and a half of rigorous questioning by Collins and Wilkes left Agatha beginning to feel as if she had put the LSD in the jam herself.

When she and Toni were finally allowed to go Agatha looked around, hoping to see a sign of George, but he was nowhere to be seen.

They got in the car and drove to the manor house. The large iron gates were propped open. Beside the gates was a lodge house, fallen into disrepair. 'I wonder why the lodge was left like that,' said Agatha. 'With the clamour for housing these days, you'd think she'd have sold it off.'

The manor house was a square Georgian building, the front of which was covered by the twisting branches of an old wisteria just coming into flower. Like the village, it had a blank, secretive air. Several of the windows had been blocked up from the days when owners tried to avoid the window tax.

They got out of the car and Agatha rang the bell. They waited patiently. Turning round, Toni noticed that the garden was unkempt – just a weedy lawn and several bushes planted around it.

The door opened. 'Are you Miss Triast-Perkins?' asked Agatha.

She was a small thin woman with grey hair worn straight from a centre parting. Her face was thin and her large eyes were pale blue. She was wearing a faded print summer dress.

'You are that woman who organized the fête,' she said. 'You'd better come in.'

They followed her into a gloomy sitting room where nothing seemed to have been changed since Victorian times: heavy furniture, stuffed birds in glass cases, framed photographs, and a grand piano covered by a fringed shawl.

‘You were in the jam-tasting exhibition before it opened,’ began Agatha. ‘I wonder if you noticed anyone lifting the covers over the jam.’

‘No. I asked Mrs Glarely if I could see that my marmalade was in a prominent position, but she went all bossy and refused to let me see. Those normally quiet sheepish women can turn quite bullying when they are put in charge of anything. Mr Bassett came in to see if he could get a taste, but she refused him as well. Mr Bassett and I talked to the vicar and that silly wife of his, who had just turned up. Oh, and dear Mr George Selby. Poor man. He does mourn for his wife. She was such a pretty woman and did a lot of work for the parish.’

‘How did she die?’ asked Agatha.

‘The poor thing fell downstairs. She was carrying a breakfast tray and missed her footing. George is an architect and I’d warned him about those stairs. He has an old cottage near the church. Very old staircase, stone, you know, with deep steps.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘Last year, in June. I don’t think he’ll ever marry again. No one could match up to Sarah.’

‘Sarah being his late wife?’

‘Yes.’

‘And she was pretty?’

What on earth was Agatha doing? wondered Toni.

‘Oh, so dainty. A little slip of a thing.’

Agatha began to feel large and lumpy.

Toni said, ‘The problem is this. We believe that someone put LSD into the jam-tasting dishes. But the young people at the fête did not begin to queue up, having heard there was some drug available, until after the damage had been done. So it could very well have happened at the beginning, when the jam tasting was open to the public.’

‘You’ll need to ask the organizers who was there. I went off to walk round the other displays.’

‘Where do Mrs Cranton and Mrs Glarely live?’

‘On either side of the pub in the main street. Mrs Glarely on the near side and Mrs Cranton on the far side.’

‘If you can think of anything at all that might help, please phone me,’ said Agatha, handing over her card.

Outside, Toni asked, ‘Why all the questions about George?’

‘He was in the tent at the beginning,’ said Agatha defensively.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ said Toni, ‘it wouldn’t take much effort to slide some LSD into the jam. It’s a clear liquid. Instead of tabs of the stuff, someone could have had a small flask concealed in the palm of their hand. There are too many suspects. How are we ever going to find out who did it?’

‘We’ll just need to push on.’ Agatha took the wheel this time, but as they were approaching the vicarage, she saw George going in and slammed on the brakes.

Toni, I think it would be a good idea if you could go ahead and interview these ladies on your own. I want to check something with the vicar.’

And she’s just seen George going into the vicarage, thought Toni. She really is in pursuit of that man. Aloud, she said cheerfully, ‘Just park the car. I’ll walk.’

When Toni had left, Agatha got a bag of make-up out of the glove compartment and repaired her face and brushed her hair.

The vicarage door was open. She walked in, hearing the sound of voices coming from the back of the house. Through the kitchen window she saw, to her dismay, not only George and the vicar and his

wife, but Charles Fraith. They were sitting round a garden table under the shade of a cedar tree, chatting animatedly. ~~Trixie Chance had turned into a blonde. Her long hair fell in golden waves to her shoulders. Where the hell did she get a dye job like that done on a Sunday? wondered Agatha. And blast and damn Charles.~~

As she approached the group, Charles called out, 'Hi, Aggie. Why didn't you wake me up when you got home last night?'

Trixie looked amused. As Agatha sat down in a chair at the table, Trixie asked, 'Are you two an item?'

'Just friends,' snapped Agatha.

'Thought so. Bit young for you.'

Agatha was in her early fifties and Charles in his forties. She decided she actually hated Trixie. A breeze blew across the garden, sending a shower of petals from a fruit tree swirling across the grass. It blew a strand of Trixie's golden hair on to George's shoulder. He was sitting very close to her.

'How have you been getting on with the investigation?' asked Charles.

'Not very far. The list of suspects gets longer and longer.'

'I wonder if it was simply one kind of jam that had the LSD in it,' said Charles. 'If they could find that out at the autopsy, we could focus on the person who made that jam.'

'Won't work,' said Agatha. 'Too many people were getting stoned. Toni says someone could have had a small flask of the stuff. Maybe the police should try to trace where that came from. Can't see the drug dealers selling flasks of the stuff.'

'It also comes in gelatine squares,' said Charles.

'How do you know that?'

'Googled it on your computer this morning,' said Charles.

Charles looked as lazy and relaxed as always. He was wearing a short-sleeved checked shirt and jeans of that soft expensive blue look which cost a fortune. His fair hair was barbered and his neat features looked amused as he glanced from Agatha around the group.

'I came to help you,' he said to Agatha. 'Perhaps we should start with the jam makers.'

Toni's talking to two of them, so that leaves four.' Agatha took out her notebook. 'No, it leaves two. Mrs Andrews and Mrs Jessop were jam makers. The two remaining ones are Miss Tubby and Miss Tolling. Was there a lot of competition amongst the jam makers?'

'I don't think so,' said the vicar. 'Mrs Andrews usually won. Her chunky marmalade was superb.'

'But there's another one,' exclaimed Agatha. 'Miss Triast-Perkins up at the manor. She said she had marmalade in the tasting.'

'I forgot about her,' said Trixie. 'It's the first year she's entered anything.'

'So where can we find Miss Tubby and Miss Tolling?' asked Charles.

'They live together,' said the vicar.

'Lesbians,' said Trixie, twisting a long strand of golden hair between beringed fingers.

'Now, dear,' admonished Arthur. 'I am sure it is all very innocent. They live in Rose Cottage, opposite the pub.'

'I never saw a pub,' said Agatha.

'It used to be a shop. It's set a little back from the road. Called the Grunty Man.'

'Odd name.'

'Probably was the Green Man at one time.'

'Where have all the press gone?' asked Agatha.

'The police decided they were interfering with the investigation and banished them from the village and they have stopped any more entering.'

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