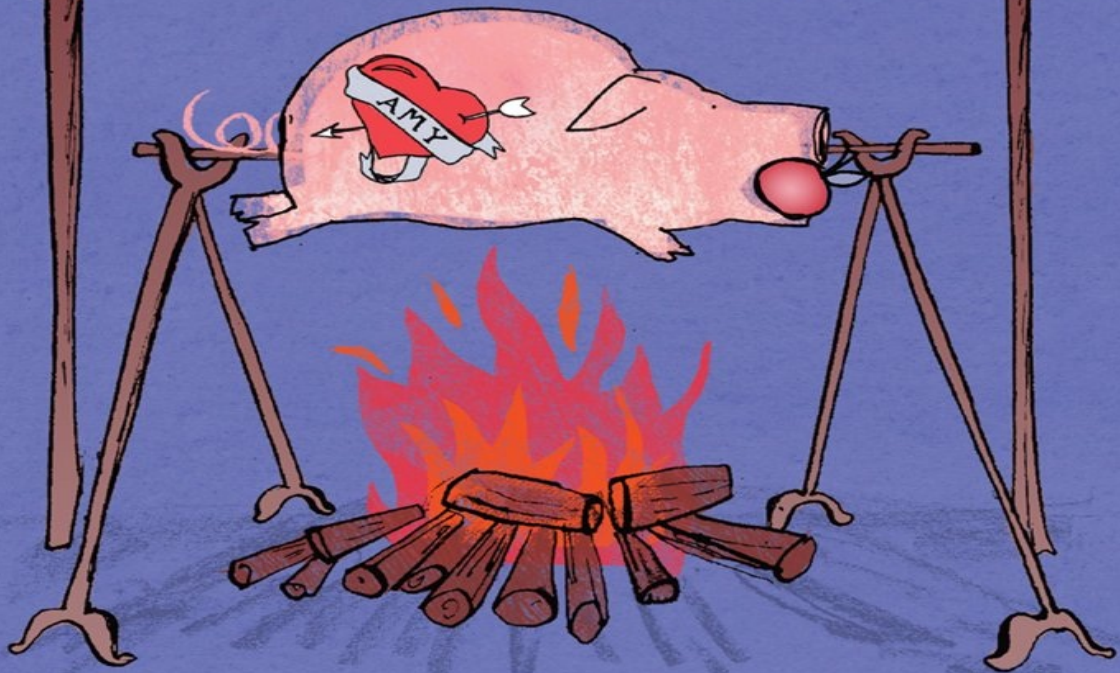


Agatha Raisin

As the Pig Turns

Someone's gone
the Whole Hog



M.C. Beaton

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

Agatha Raisin
As the Pig Turns

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Agatha Raisin

As the Pig Turns

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This book is dedicated to Sinead Goss, with many thanks for all her support for Target Ovarian Cancer.

CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Chapter One

Agatha Raisin wearily turned on to the road leading down into her home village of Carsely in the Cotswolds and then came to an abrupt halt. Cars stretched out in front of her. She pulled on the handbrake.

It was the end of January and a very cold month, unusually cold. The tall trees on either side of the country road raised bare branches to a leaden sky as if pleading for the return of spring. Agatha prayed it would not snow. It seemed as if two centimetres of snow were enough to close down the roads, because the council complained they had run out of salt and all roads leading out of Carsely were very steep, making driving hazardous.

What on earth was going on? She gave an impatient blast on her horn, and the young man in the battered Ford in front gave her the finger.

Cursing, Agatha got out of her car and marched up to the Ford and rapped on the window. The sallow-faced youth opened the window and demanded, 'Wot?'

'What the hell's going on?' demanded Agatha.

The youth eyed her up and down, noting the expensively tailored coat and the beady, accusing eyes and marking the 'posh' accent. He scowled. 'Pot'oles,' he said with a shrug. 'They're repairing pot'oles.'

'And how long will it take?'

'Blessed if I know,' he said, and rolled up the window.

Agatha returned to the warmth of her car, fuming. She herself had complained bitterly to the council about the state of the road. But there were two other roads into the village. They might at least have put up diversion notices until the road was repaired. She contemplated making a U-turn but knew, considering her lack of driving skills, it would take her an awful lot of manoeuvring on the narrow road to do so.

A drip began to appear on the end of her nose. She reached into the box of tissues on the seat beside her and blew her nose. Someone rapped at the window.

Agatha looked out. A policeman was bending down looking at her. He was squat and burly, with a squashed-looking nose in his open-pored face and piggy, accusing little eyes.

Lowering the window, Agatha asked, 'How long is this going to take, Officer?'

'It'll take as long as it takes, madam,' he said in a thick Gloucestershire accent. 'I am ticketing you for taking your hands off the wheel.'

'My, what? Are you mad? I was simply blowing my nose. The handbrake's on, I'm stuck here . . .'

'Sixty-pound fine.'

'I'll see you in hell first before I pay that,' howled Agatha.

He handed in a ticket. 'See you in court.'

Agatha sat for a moment, shaking with rage. Then she took a deep breath. She started to negotiate a U-turn, but cars piled up behind her had decided to do the same thing. At last she was clear, just in time to see in her rearview mirror that the line of cars she had just left had started to move.

By the time she reached her thatched cottage in Lilac Lane, it had begun to snow, fine little pellets of snow. ~~Damn all pundits and their moaning about global warming, thought Agatha.~~ As she opened the car door to get out, a gust of wind whipped the ticket the policeman had given her and sent it flying up over her cottage.

She let herself into her cottage. Her two cats, Hodge and Boswell, came running forward to give her the welcome they always gave her when they wanted something to eat.

Agatha fed them, poured herself a gin and tonic, and then phoned her friend Detective Sergeant Bill Wong. When he came on the phone, Agatha complained bitterly about the policeman who had given her a ticket for blowing her nose.

'That would be Gary Beech,' said Bill, 'the target fiend. You know we have to meet certain targets or we don't get promotion. He goes a bit mad. The other week, a nine-year-old's mother who lives in cul-de-sac in Mircester chalked squares on the pavement for her little boy to play hopscotch. Beech arrested the kid and charged him with the crime of graffiti. And he charged a toddler with carrying a dangerous weapon even though the kid was holding a water pistol. An old-age pensioner was arrested under the Terrorism Act for carrying a placard saying, 'Get our boys out of Afghanistan.'

'What should I do?'

'It'll probably be thrown out of court. Or you could just pay the fine.'

'Never!'

'How's business?'

'Not good. The recession is really biting. People just don't have the money.' Agatha looked out of her kitchen window. 'Blast! The snow's getting thicker. I wish I'd invested in snow tyres or a four-wheel drive. Roy Silver's coming down for the weekend. I hope the roads clear by then.'

Roy had worked for Agatha when she had run a successful public relations business in London. She had taken early retirement and had sold up to move to the Cotswolds. But after solving several murders, she had decided to set up her own detective agency.

Bill said he would try to get down to see her at the weekend and rang off.

Agatha then phoned her agency. She had a small staff: Patrick Mulligan, a retired policeman, Phil Marshall, an elderly man from Carsely, young Toni Gilmour and a secretary, Mrs Freedman. A shrewd businesswoman, Agatha had seen the recession coming long before most people and so had decided not to employ any more staff. But there was one absence from her staff jabbing at her conscience. A bright young detective, Simon Black, employed by Agatha until a few months earlier, had shown signs of falling in love with Toni. Persuading herself that she was acting in their best interests, Agatha had told Simon that Toni was too young and to wait three years. But Toni had turned against Simon, feeling he was snubbing her at every turn, and to Agatha's horror, Simon had gone off and enlisted in the army and was now fighting in Afghanistan.

Toni answered the phone and said that Mrs Freedman and Phil had gone home, not wanting to wait any longer in case the snow got thicker. Toni, young, blonde and beautiful, often gave Agatha pangs of envy, but she had to admit that the girl was a brilliant detective.

'What have we got outstanding?' asked Agatha.

'Two adulteries, four missing pets and two missing teenagers.'

Agatha sighed. 'It seems not so long ago that I swore I would never take on another missing pet. Now we need the money.'

'It's easy money,' said Toni. 'They hardly ever think of checking the animal shelter. I just go along there with the photos they've given me of Tiddles or whatever, collect the beasts and phone the happy owners and then say, "Pay up".'

'Roy's coming down for the weekend,' said Agatha, 'and maybe Bill will come over. Why don't you join us and maybe I'll find something interesting for us to do?'

‘I’ve got a date.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Paul Finlay.’

‘How did you meet him?’

Toni longed to tell the ever-curious Agatha to mind her own business, but she said reluctantly, ‘I’ve been taking French classes in the evenings, now that it’s quiet at work. He’s the lecturer.’

‘How old is he?’

‘I’ve got to go. The other phone’s ringing.’

After she had rung off, Agatha sat and worried. Toni had a weakness for older men and had run into trouble before.

Agatha’s cleaner, Doris Simpson, had left a local newspaper on the kitchen table. She began to search through it to see if there were any weekend amusements, and then her eye fell on an event in Winter Parva, a village some twenty miles away. Agatha had been to Winter Parva only once. It was a touristy Cotswold village with gift shops, a mediaeval market hall and thatched cottages. The article said that as the local shops had not fared as well as usual over the Christmas period, the parish council had planned to generate interest in the village with a special January event. There was to be a pig roast on Saturday on the village green. The villagers were urged to dress in old-fashioned costumes. The Winter Parva morris dancers would perform along with the local brass band and the village choir. Two busloads of Chinese tourists were expected to arrive for the event.

That’ll do, thought Agatha, as long as I’m not blocked in the village by the snow.

Feeling hungry, she rummaged in her deep freezer to find something to microwave. Suddenly all the lights went out. A power cut.

She remembered the pub, the Red Lion, had a generator. Agatha changed into trousers, boots and a hooded parka and set out in the hunt for dinner.

The pub was crowded with locals. Agatha went to the bar and ordered lasagne and chips and a half of lager and looked around for a vacant table. Then, to her amazement, she saw her friend the vicar’s wife, Mrs Bloxby, sitting by herself in a corner, looking down dismally at a small glass of sherry.

Agatha hurried to join her, wondering what could be wrong, because Mrs Bloxby never went to the pub unless it was some special fundraising occasion. The vicar’s wife had grey hair escaping from an old-fashioned bun. Her normally kind face looked tired. She was wearing a shabby tweed coat over a washed-out sweater, cardigan and tweed skirt. It didn’t matter what she wore, thought Agatha, not for the first time. Mrs Bloxby always had ‘lady’ stamped on her. Agatha and Mrs Bloxby always called each other by their second names, a tradition in the local Ladies’ Society, of which both were members.

‘How odd to see you here,’ said Agatha. ‘Where’s your husband?’

‘I neither know nor care,’ said Mrs Bloxby. ‘Do sit down, Mrs Raisin.’

Agatha sat down opposite her. ‘What is the matter?’

Mrs Bloxby seemed to rally. She gave a weak smile. ‘It’s nothing, really. Do you really mean to eat that?’

The waitress had placed a dish of lasagne and chips in front of Agatha. ‘Sure. What’s up with it?’ Agatha dug her fork in and took a mouthful.

Mrs Bloxby reflected that her friend had the taste buds of a vulture.

Yet Agatha sometimes managed to make her feel diminished. Although in her early fifties, Agatha glowed with health, and her glossy brown hair, although expertly dyed, gleamed like silk.

‘It can’t be nothing,’ said Agatha, reaching for the ketchup bottle, opening it and dousing her chips.

‘Probably my imagination,’ said Mrs Bloxby wearily.

‘You always did have good instincts. Out with it,’ commanded Agatha.

Mrs Bloxby gave a heart-wrenching dry sob, the kind a child gives after crying for a long time. 'It's just that I think Alf is having an affair. You're dribbling ketchup.'

'Oh, sorry.' Agatha put a chip, overloaded with ketchup, back on her plate. 'Your husband is having an affair? Rubbish!'

'You're right. I'm just being silly.'

'No, no, I shouldn't have said that. I mean, who would want him?' remarked Agatha with her usual lack of tact.

Her friend bristled. 'I will have you know that as vicar of this parish, Alf has often been the target of predatory ladies.'

'So what makes you think he's having an affair? Lipstick on his dog collar?'

'Nothing like that. It's just that he's taken to sneaking off without his dog collar on and he won't tell me where he's going.'

'Been buying any new underwear recently?'

'No, I buy his underwear.'

'Look, I'll find out for you and put your mind at rest. On the house.'

'Oh, don't do that. If he saw you tailing him, he would be furious.'

'He won't see me. I happen to be a very good detective.'

'You are to do nothing about it,' said Mrs Bloxby seriously. 'Promise?'

'Promise,' agreed Agatha, and surreptitiously and childishly crossed her fingers behind her back.

A warm wind from the west during the night melted the snow to slush, and then, when the wind changed round to the north, it froze the roads into skating rinks. Agatha awoke the next day in a bad temper. How on earth was she going to get out of the village? It seemed small consolation that the power was back on.

But as she was having her usual breakfast of black coffee and cigarettes, she faintly heard a sound from the end of the lane, a sound she had not heard for some time. She put on her boots and coat and ran to the end of the lane. A gritter was making its lumbering way down through the village, spraying the road with grit and salt.

Agatha hurried back to put on her make-up and get dressed for the office.

She was just driving out of Lilac Lane when she recognized the vicar's car on the road ahead of her. 'Just a little look wouldn't hurt,' she assured herself. She let the car behind her pass her and then followed, keeping the vicar's car in view. He drove to the nearby village of Ancombe and parked in the courtyard of St Mary's, a large Catholic church. The village of Ancombe had remained loyal to Charles I when, all about, the Puritans supported Cromwell.

Driven by curiosity, Agatha parked out on the road and went up the drive past the gravestones and into the church.

In the dimness of the church, she could just make out the thin figure of Mr Bloxby going into a confessional box and closing the door. She ducked down in a pew as a priest appeared and went into the confessional.

I must know what he is saying, fretted Agatha. She took off her shoes and tiptoed towards the confessional box into which the vicar had disappeared, put her ear against it and listened hard.

'*What do you think you are doing?*' roared a stentorian voice.

Agatha caught a frightened glimpse of a man who had just entered the church. She quickly closed her eyes and slumped to the floor. The confessional opened and Mr Bloxby and the priest came out.

'What is going on?' demanded the reedy voice of the priest.

Agatha opened her eyes. 'What happened?' she demanded weakly. 'I felt dizzy and saw Mr Bloxby coming in here and wanted to ask him for help.'

‘She was listening!’ said a thin, acidulous man.

‘I know this woman,’ said Mr Bloxby. ‘Mrs Raisin, step outside the church with me.’

Agatha got to her feet. No one helped her. She put on her shoes. Mr Bloxby marched ahead, and Agatha trailed after him, miserably.

Outside the church, Mr Bloxby snapped, ‘Get in my car, Mrs Raisin. You have some explaining to do.’

Agatha got into the passenger seat of the vicar’s car. It had begun to rain: soft, weeping rain.

‘Now,’ said Mr Bloxby, ‘explain yourself, you horrible woman.’ The vicar had never liked Agatha and could not understand his wife’s affection for her.

She’ll never speak to me again, thought Agatha sadly as she realized she would have to tell the truth.

‘It’s like this, Alf . . . may I call you Alf?’

‘No.’

‘Okay, what happened, I met your wife in the pub last night and she had been crying. She thinks you’re having an affair.’

‘How ridiculous . . . although come to think of it, I have had to ward off a few amorous parishioners over the years.’

‘I promised not to snoop,’ said Agatha.

‘Which in your case is like promising not to breathe.’

‘Right! I’m fed up feeling guilty,’ said Agatha. ‘What the hell were you doing in the confessional box of a Catholic church?’

‘I needed spiritual guidance.’

‘Don’t tell me you’ve lost your faith?’ demanded Agatha.

‘Nothing like that. You know that we use the old Book of Common Prayer and the King James Bible?’

Agatha hadn’t noticed, but she said, ‘Yes.’

‘It is the most beautiful writing, on a par with Shakespeare. The bishop has ordered me to change to modern translations of both. I can’t, I just can’t. I felt I had to unburden myself to a priest of a different faith.’

‘Why on earth didn’t you tell your wife?’

‘I had to wrestle with my conscience. I even thought of entering the Catholic Church.’

‘And taking a vow of celibacy?’

‘The Vatican is proposing making provisions for people like myself.’

‘Don’t you *talk* to your wife?’

‘I prefer to wrestle with spiritual matters on my own.’

Agatha saw a way out of her predicament. She threw him a cunning look out of her small, bearlike eyes. ‘I could fix it for you.’

‘You! Do me a favour.’

‘I will, if you’ll shut up and listen. The bishop will not go against the wishes of the parishioners. The whole village will sign a petition to keep things as they are and send it to the bishop. Easy. I’ll fix it for you if you promise not to tell Mrs Bloxby I had anything to do with it. I’ll fix it up with the local shop. Everyone shops there in the bad weather. I’ll get Mrs Tutchell, the new owner, to say it’s her idea. You start talking about it now, all round the village, starting with your wife. Of course, if I find you have breathed a word about my involvement in this, you’re on your own, mate. Of all the silly vicars . . .’

‘Why didn’t you tell me before?’ asked Mrs Bloxby plaintively half an hour later, after having heard

her husband's explanation.

'At first, I wanted to wrestle with the problem on my own, but I called in at the village store and happened to mention it on my way home. The villagers have been very supportive and are sending a petition to the bishop.'

'Did Mrs Raisin have anything to do with this?'

'Of course not,' said the vicar, addressing the sitting-room fire. Just a white lie, God, he assured his Maker. 'Can you imagine me asking her for help?'

Agatha busied herself for most of the rest of the day by going door-to-door in the village, raising support for the vicar and urging everyone to sign the petition at the village store. A good proportion of the villagers were incomers who only went to church at Easter and Christmas but were anxious to do the right 'village thingie', as one overweight matron put it. Agatha headed to the office in the late afternoon to find Toni just leaving on the arm of a tall, tweedy man who sported a beard.

'This is Paul Finlay,' said Toni.

'Ah, the great detective,' said Paul. He was in his late thirties, Agatha guessed, with an infuriatingly patronizing air. He had a craggy face and the sort of twinkling humorous eyes that belie the fact that the owner has no sense of humour whatsoever.

'We're off out for the evening,' said Toni quickly. 'Bye.'

'Wait a bit,' said Agatha. 'Roy's coming on Friday night, and on Saturday we're going to a pig roast in Winter Parva. Why don't you and Paul come along? Come to my cottage and I'll take you over because the parking's going to be awful.'

'A pig roast?' cackled Paul. 'How quaint. Of course we'll come.'

'Good. The pig roast starts at six, but I'd like to get there a bit earlier,' said Agatha. 'See you around four o'clock for drinks and then we'll all go.'

Agatha stood and watched them as they walked away. Toni's slim young figure looked dwarfed and vulnerable beside the tall figure of Paul.

'Not suitable at all. What a prick,' said Agatha, and a passing woman gave her a nervous look.

Agatha checked business in the office before heading home again. She was just approaching Lilac Lane when a police car swung in front of her, blocking her.

Agatha jammed on the brakes and looked in her rearview mirror. She saw the lumbering figure of the policeman who had ticketed her for blowing her nose. She rolled down the window as he approached. 'Now what?' she demanded.

'I had a speed camera in me 'and up in that there road,' he said, 'and you was doing thirty-two miles an hour. So that's three points off your licence and a speeding fine.'

Agatha opened her mouth to blast him but quickly realized he would probably fine her for abusing a police officer. He proceeded to give her a lecture on the dangers of speeding, and Agatha knew he was trying to get her to lose her temper, so she listened quietly until he gave up.

When he had finally gone, she swung the car round and went into the village store, where she informed an interested audience about the iniquities of the police in general and one policeman in particular. 'I'd like to kill him,' she shouted. 'May he roast slowly over a spit in hell.'

It was a frosty Friday evening when Agatha met Roy Silver at Moreton-in-Marsh station. He was dressed in black trousers and a black sweater, over which he was wearing a scarlet jacket with little flecks of gold in the weave. He had shaved his head bald, and Agatha thought dismally that her friend looked like a cross between a plucked chicken and someone auditioning for a job as a Red Coat entertainer at a Butlin's holiday camp.

‘Turn on the heater,’ said Roy as he got in the car. ‘I’m freezing.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Agatha. ‘What’s with the bald head?’

‘It’s fashionable,’ said Roy petulantly, ‘and it strengthens the hair. It’s only temporary.’

‘I’ll lend you some warm clothes,’ said Agatha.

‘Your clothes on me, babes?’ said Roy waspishly. ‘I’d look as if I were wearing a tent. I mean, you could put two of me inside one of you.’

‘I’m not fat,’ snarled Agatha. ‘You’re unhealthily thin. Charles has left some of his clothes in the spare room.’ Sir Charles Fraith, a friend of Agatha’s, often used her cottage as a hotel.

Roy said mutinously that his clothes were perfectly adequate, but when they got to Agatha’s cottage, they found there had been another power cut and the house was cold.

While Agatha lit the fire in her living room, Roy hung away his precious jacket in the wardrobe in the spare room, wondering how anyone could not love such a creation. He found one of Charles’s cashmere sweaters and put it on.

When he joined Agatha, the fire was blazing. ‘How long do these power cuts last?’ he asked.

‘Not long, usually,’ said Agatha. ‘There’s something up with the power station that serves this end of the village.’

‘Anything planned for the weekend?’

‘We’re going to a pig roast at Winter Parva tomorrow.’

‘No use. I’m vegetarian.’

‘Since when?’

Roy looked shifty. ‘A month ago.’

‘You haven’t been dieting. You’ve been starving yourself,’ accused Agatha. ‘I got steaks for dinner.’

‘Couldn’t touch one,’ said Roy. ‘A pig roast? Do you mean turned on a spit like in those historical films?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yuck, and double yucky, yucky yuck, Aggie. It’ll be disgusting.’

But the next day after Toni and Paul had arrived, and the erratic electricity had come on again, Roy decided that anything would be better than being left behind. Bill Wong had phoned to say he could not make it.

Just as they were having drinks, Charles Fraith arrived. He was as expensively dressed as usual in smart casual clothes. He had small, neat features and well-barbered hair. Agatha never really knew what he thought of her. He helped himself to a whisky and then proceeded to put his foot in it. He asked Roy sympathetically if he had cancer. When Roy denied it, Charles said, ‘I was about to forgive you for wearing one of my sweaters, but as you aren’t suffering, I do feel you might have asked me first.’

‘I told him he could borrow something,’ said Agatha. ‘I haven’t introduced you to Paul Finlay.’

‘Toni’s uncle?’

‘No, just a friend,’ said Agatha.

Paul bristled. Charles’s upper-class accent brought out the worst in him. His light Birmingham accent grew stronger as he suddenly treated them all to a rant about the unfairness of the British class system and about an aristocracy who lived on the backs of the poor.

Thank goodness for Charles, thought Agatha. Toni must see what a horror this man is.

But Toni was listening to Paul with shining eyes.

Charles waited until Paul had dried up, said calmly, ‘What a lot of old-fashioned bollocks. When are we going?’

‘Finish your drinks,’ said Agatha. ‘I want to be sure of getting a parking place. It’ll be a bit of a

crush in my car.'

'I'll take Roy,' said Charles.

'You'll need a coat,' said Agatha to Roy. 'You'll find my Barbour hanging in the hall. Use that.'

'I could wear my jacket,' said Roy.

'You'll freeze. Come along, everyone.'

Thin trails of fog wound their way through the trees as they drove to Winter Parva. They had to park outside the village because all the parking places in the village had been taken. Paul, anxious to get Toni to himself, said they would look at the shops and meet the others on the village green in time for the pig roast.

Agatha, Charles and Roy walked to the nearest pub and into the grateful warmth of the bar.

'Something will need to be done about Paul,' said Charles. 'I think Toni's still a virgin, and the thought of her losing it under the hairy thighs of that bore is horrible.'

'He might propose marriage,' said Roy.

'I think I'll do a bit of detective work,' said Agatha. 'I bet he's either married or been married. Why can't Toni see what a bore he is? How can she listen to that class nonsense?'

'Maybe it strikes a chord,' said Charles. 'You forget, she was brought up rough. Maybe she doesn't know where she belongs in the scheme of things. There can be something very seductive about that sort of propaganda. Where the hell did she meet him?'

'At evening classes in French,' said Agatha gloomily. 'He's the lecturer.'

Roy was looking round the bar at people dressed in mediaeval costume. 'We could have dressed up Aggie,' he said plaintively.

Agatha looked at her watch. 'I think we'd better make our way to the village green. I want to see how they prepare this pig.'

The fog had thickened. If it hadn't been for the parked cars, you might have thought the village had reverted to the Middle Ages as the costumed villagers appeared and then disappeared in the fog.

Two men were bathing a huge pig in oil as it hung on a spit over a bed of blazing charcoal.

Some villagers were carrying flaming torches. As the fog lifted slightly, Agatha saw clearly on the haunch of the pig a tattoo of a heart with an arrow through it and the curly lettering 'Amy'. Her eyes flew down the length of the carcass to the chubby legs cut off above the knees.

'Stop!' she screamed at the top of her lungs.

The two men stopped turning the spit and stared at her. 'Pigs don't have tattoos,' said Agatha.

They peered at it. 'Reckon someone's been 'aving a bit o' a joke,' said one.

But Agatha had taken a powerful little torch out of her handbag and was examining the head.

'The head's been stitched on,' she said. 'Oh, God, I think this is the carcass of a man. Get the police.'

Chapter Two

Toni was cold and worried. She had wanted to join the others, but Paul had said he had something important to ask her. They had survived their first quarrel. They had argued because Toni refused to hear any criticism of Charles. Charles had been kind to her, she had protested. Paul fished in his pocket for the ring he had bought.

Then through the fog came the scream of police sirens. She heard a woman sob, 'It's awful. Sick. Murder!'

She jumped to her feet. 'Something's wrong. I've got to get to Agatha.' Her slim figure in her bright red coat disappeared through the fog. Cursing under his breath, Paul got up and followed her.

Toni had to fight her way through a gathering crowd. Police were cordoning off the area around the pig roast. She elbowed her way to the front of the crowd. In the light of the fire and flaming torches held by some of the villagers, she saw Agatha, Charles and Roy being interviewed by Police Inspector Wilkes. Bill Wong stood beside him. Roy was standing behind them, busily telephoning.

Toni ducked under the tape. A policeman howled at her to get back, but Bill looked up and signalled it was all right to let her come through.

Paul tried to follow her, but a burly policeman barred his way. 'I've got to get through,' said Paul. 'That's my fiancée over there.'

'On the spit?' demanded the policeman.

'No, you idiot. The blonde girl, there!'

'Did you call me an idiot?'

'No, no,' said Paul weakly, backing off.

Agatha shivered as the questioning went on and on. She felt she was living in some Gothic horror movie. Her thoughts flew to her ex-husband. She hadn't seen him since the night he thought he had found Charles proposing to her. Actually, Charles *had* proposed to her until Agatha persuaded him that it wouldn't work, but Agatha, hearing James arriving, had quickly told Charles to get down on one knee and make it look real.

The macabre scene was suddenly lit up by white light. A television crew had arrived.

'Get a tent up round the body,' snarled Wilkes. 'Mrs Raisin, I want you and your friends to go to police headquarters to make official statements. And that means you, too,' he said, grabbing hold of Roy, who was about to duck under the tape and head for a television presenter.

Agatha said she would drive everybody there. She could just make out Paul shouting something from behind the tape but did not tell Toni.

After hours of further questioning at police headquarters, they all wearily signed their statements. Bill walked out with them to the reception.

Agatha drew him aside and whispered, 'Do something for me. Toni's got a new squeeze called Paul Finlay, a lecturer at Mircester College, gives evening classes in French. He's too old for her. Could

you look up the police files and see if there is anything on him?’

~~‘I’ll have my hands full with this case. Oh, don’t glare at me. If I get a spare moment, I’ll try.’~~

Through the glass doors, Toni could see Paul waiting. ‘Coming back to my cottage with us?’ asked Agatha.

Toni wanted to discuss the murder – if murder it should turn out to be. Maybe someone had stolen a body from a grave or from a mortuary – and suddenly she did not want to see any more of Paul that evening.

‘I’ll join you there,’ she said. ‘Tell Paul I’ve gone home.’

‘Great! I mean, all right,’ said Agatha hurriedly.

Toni, familiar with the layout of police headquarters, left by the back door. She made her way slowly around to the front of the police station. There was no sign of Paul. She had left her car at Agatha’s cottage, having driven Paul to Carsely. She assumed he had either got a lift in a police car or had taken a taxi to get to Mircester.

She saw a passing taxi and hailed it.

Agatha’s cottage was besieged by press and television, Roy having phoned every branch of the media he could think of. Roy stood, grinning, next to Agatha, occasionally forgetting he was bald and tossing his head like someone in a shampoo advertisement. When he later saw himself on television, he howled in dismay. He had a fatuous grin on his face, and his tossing head looked like a nervous twitch.

Agatha made a brief statement. Toni shoved her way through the reporters. ‘Toni, Toni!’ called several reporters, recognizing the girl. ‘Give us a statement.’ Swinging round, Agatha fixed Toni with a baleful stare. Her beautiful detective hadn’t even been there when the body was found, and she wasn’t going to let her steal the limelight.

Toni nipped into the cottage, Agatha followed her and slammed the door. Roy and Charles were already in the living room. Charles had switched on the television.

‘Turn that off!’ ordered Agatha.

‘But it’s a rerun of *CSI Miami* on Sky,’ protested Charles. ‘Oh, suit yourself.’

‘Right,’ said Agatha. ‘We’ve got to solve this one.’

‘Can’t do much until we know who the pig was,’ said Charles, stifling a yawn. ‘Bill interviewed you, Agatha. Did he tell you anything about what happened before we arrived on the scene?’

‘No, but I overheard Wilkes interviewing the two men who operated the spit. They said two men dressed as knights carried the pig to the spit in a canvas sack. One of the spit operators, forget his name, he said the local butcher was supposed to bring it along in his van, but the knights said the butcher had thought if they dressed up and took the pig along, it would be more colourful. Police were ordered to search for these knights, but I don’t know if they found anything.’

‘Whoever it was on that spit,’ said Toni, ‘it must be someone really deeply hated. To go to such trouble and risk being found out! If you hadn’t recognized it wasn’t a pig, Agatha, there would have been a lot of cannibals at Winter Parva.’

‘I’m tired,’ said Roy. ‘I bet I’m going to have nightmares. I’m off to bed.’

‘I think I’ll go home,’ said Charles. ‘Toni can sleep on the sofa.’

Toni smiled at him gratefully. She had switched off her mobile phone. She had mixed feelings. She felt she was being disloyal to Paul, and yet detective work was her life, and uneasily she remembered the times when Paul had laughed indulgently about her job.

Agatha’s phone rang. She answered it. ‘Oh, Paul, it’s you,’ Toni heard her say. ‘No, not here. She said something about going down to Southampton to see her mother . . . What? . . . Yes, I’ll tell her.’ She rang off. ‘I didn’t think you wanted to see him tonight.’

‘Not tonight,’ agreed Toni. ‘I’ll talk to him tomorrow.’

The next morning, after breakfast, they all waited eagerly for the news on television. The report was disappointingly short. Roy shrieked again with dismay over his appearance. 'I'm starting growing my hair today,' he said.

There came a ring at the doorbell. When Agatha answered it, she found Inspector Wilkes, Bill Wong, another detective she did not know and a policewoman standing on the doorstep.

'Come in,' said Agatha. 'Toni, Charles and Roy are all in the living room. Do you want to interview us all together?'

'We'll start with you, Mrs Raisin,' said Wilkes.

'Then come through to the kitchen,' said Agatha.

When they were all seated around the kitchen table, Agatha was taken over her statement again. When the questioning was over, she asked eagerly, 'What's the latest?'

Bill said, 'The butcher who was supposed to deliver the pig to the roast was found drugged and bound up in his shop. We still have not established the identity of the dead man. Now, we would like to speak to your assistant, Toni Gilmour.'

By the time the police left, they all felt shaky and very tired. Delayed shock was settling in. Roy said weakly that he would like to go back to bed, and Toni said she would go home. Charles decided to leave as well.

Agatha poured herself a hot-water bottle for comfort and retreated with her cats to her bed. As she drifted off into sleep, she remembered shouting about that awful policeman and wishing he would roast in hell on a spit. Her eyes flew open. Someone or some people had viciously hated whoever it was they had killed. People still shouted the epithet of 'pig' at policemen. Too farfetched, she told herself, go back to sleep. But sleep would not come.

She flicked open the address book she kept beside the bed and found Bill Wong's mobile number.

When he answered, Agatha asked, 'Any policemen missing?'

'What do you mean?'

'The dead man,' said Agatha. 'People call the police pigs. Just a thought.'

Bill laughed. 'You should write fiction, Agatha. Forget it. Leave it to the police. I don't want you meddling in this one. These killers will be highly dangerous.'

Feeling rather silly, Agatha said goodbye and fell into a deep sleep.

'What did the Raisin woman want?' asked Wilkes the following morning. He had overheard Bill's end of the conversation during the previous night.

Bill gave a reluctant laugh. 'Mrs Raisin has just suggested that the dead man might be a policeman.'

'And where did that flight of fancy come from?'

'Policemen are often called pigs, and so she has leapt to that conclusion.'

'Ridiculous. Now, pass me that roster. I want every man out on this case. Get Police Sergeant Tulloch in here.'

When Tulloch entered the room, Wilkes said, 'Are they all in the briefing room? I'll be along in a few moments.'

'All there,' said Tulloch, a burly Scot with a shock of fair hair. 'Oh, except Beech. I've phoned his home, but there's no reply.'

Wilkes and Bill looked at each other in sudden consternation. 'You don't think . . .' began Wilkes.

'He's never missed a day before,' said Bill uneasily.

'Get round there,' said Wilkes, 'and take Detective Peterson with you.'

Bill brightened. Alice Peterson had recently joined them from Gloucester CID to replace Detective Collins, an acidulous woman, who, to Bill's relief, had finally secured a transfer to London – not to Scotland Yard, her ambition, but to Brixton.

Alice was clever and almost pretty with her neat dark curls and blue eyes.

~~On the road to Beech's home, Bill told her about Agatha Raisin's odd idea. 'I've heard about Mrs Raisin,'~~ said Alice. 'She has had a lot of successes in the past. Everyone says she just blunders into things and gets lucky, but I think she must be clever.'

'In this case, I hope not. Here we are.'

Bill parked in front of a trim little cottage on the outskirts of Winter Parva.

'Why doesn't he live in Mircester?' asked Alice.

'It's cheaper here, he says. Let's go.'

There was no doorbell, but there was a large brass door-knocker in the shape of a lion's head. Bill performed an energetic rat-a-tat on it.

Silence.

Both detectives looked at each other. They knew from experience that empty houses have a particular silence.

Bill tried the door. 'It's locked,' he said, 'and the curtains at the front window are closed. I'll go round the back. You keep an eye on the front.'

The previous night's fog had thinned to a mist. Bill went along a path at the side of the house. There was a conservatory at the back of the house. Bill looked in.

It was a mess. Plants had been pulled out of their pots and lay on the floor. Bill called Alice, who came hurrying round to join him.

'We're going to have to break in,' said Bill.

'Try the conservatory door first,' urged Alice.

Bill turned the handle and the door opened. 'We'd better suit up,' said Bill. When they were covered in their blue plastic forensic suits, they stepped inside, calling, 'Beech!' in loud voices.

They entered the kitchen. Every canister, box of cereal and bag of flour had been emptied on to the floor. They then went to the living room, followed by a search of a small dining room, and then went upstairs to the bedrooms. Chaos was everywhere: drawers pulled out, clothes thrown around, mattresses slit open. Everywhere in the house appeared to have been frantically searched. Floorboards were torn up, curtains pulled down and carpets ripped up.

The sinister silence of the house and the outside village seemed to press on their ears. Bill opened the door to the bathroom and let out an exclamation of dismay.

There was blood everywhere. It was spattered up the walls and all over the bath.

They retreated outside and sat in their car with the engine running to keep warm. 'Agatha was right,' said Bill. 'How does she do it?'

'I noticed something odd,' said Alice.

'What's that?'

'I've a brother in the antiques business. Some of those pieces of furniture in the living room are very valuable. How could a mere constable afford, say, a Georgian bureau?'

'Beats me. I hear sirens. There's nothing we can do now until the Scenes of Crimes Operatives are finished. I hope they find the head.'

'What?'

'Gary Beech's head. I wonder what happened to that?'

Agatha and Roy went to the pub for dinner that evening. The pub was crowded, but Agatha managed to thrust her way through to the only vacant table, reaching it before a stocky villager, Mrs Benson, was about to claim it.

'I'll just need to join you,' said Mrs Benson.

'You can't,' said Agatha, still too upset by the horror of the murder to be polite. 'We want to talk i

private.'

'Well, I never did!' exclaimed Mrs Benson.

'Then start,' said Agatha, sitting down and turning her back on the woman.

Mrs Benson glared at her and then left the pub in a huff. She looked at her watch. It was coming up to seven o'clock. If she hurried, she could listen to *The Archers* on Radio 4 and make some toasted cheese.

Before *The Archers*, the news came on. She listened as the announcer said that the murdered man was a policeman named Gary Beech. All of a sudden, Mrs Benson remembered Agatha Raisin shouting threats against Beech in the village shop and saying he should be roasted on a spit. *The Archers* forgotten, she phoned police headquarters in Mircester.

The last train to London had left Moreton-in-Marsh, so Agatha drove Roy to Oxford and waved him goodbye.

As she drove back, snow was beginning to fall. She still felt very tired after a gruelling drive. Her car had skidded several times on the road down into Carsely.

Her heart sank as she saw a police Land Rover parked outside her cottage.

'Now what?' she demanded of the uncaring white wilderness outside.

As she got out of her car, a policeman approached her and said, 'You are to come with us to police headquarters.'

'Why?' demanded Agatha truculently.

'You'll find out when you get there,' said the policeman.

Mircester looked like a Christmas card with the tall towers of its snow-covered and floodlit abbey looming behind police headquarters.

Agatha was told to wait in the reception area. It had recently been redecorated in the hope that it might look more people-friendly, but the plastic palms were dusty and the walls painted sulphurous yellow. Agatha wondered if it had been painted on the cheap, because little patches of the former institutional green were showing through in places.

Detective Alice Peterson appeared and summoned Agatha, who followed her to an interview room. Agatha sat opposite Bill and Wilkes. Alice put a tape in the recording machine and the interview began.

'We are awaiting DNA results,' said Wilkes, 'but a search of policeman Gary Beech's house led us to believe he is the victim. Now, you were heard in the village shop in Carsely threatening Gary Beech's life and saying that you hoped he would roast on a spit in hell. What have you to say to that? And despite the thick fog at Winter Parva, you immediately identified the supposed pig as a man.'

Agatha briefly remembered when she had first moved to Carsely that it had been more of a close-knit village community. Now newcomers came and went. Who had reported her? Her thoughts flew to Mrs Ada Benson.

'We're waiting,' snapped Wilkes.

'It's like this,' said Agatha. 'Gary Beech gave me a ticket for blowing my nose while my car was parked in a queue of cars on the Carsely road because of roadworks. He then ticketed me for doing thirty-two miles an hour. I was very angry and let off steam in the shop. I had a guest for the weekend.'

'Name?'

'You know who.'

'Stop being obstructive and answer the question for the tape.'

Agatha heaved a weary sigh. 'Roy Silver.'

‘And?’

‘And I saw the pig roast advertised amongst local events. My detective, Toni Gilmour, was invited and she came with a friend, Paul Finlay. Charles Fraith opted to join us as well. When we got to the pig roast . . . I’ve told you all this already.’

‘Just go over it again.’

‘When I got to the pig roast, the fog shifted a bit and some of the villagers were holding flaming torches – flambeaux. I saw a tattoo on what I at first took to be the pig’s haunch. Then I realized it was a heart with an arrow through it and the name Amy.’

‘Other people,’ said Wilkes, ‘would have assumed someone had been having fun with the pig.’

‘I shone my torch on the pig’s head and saw it had been stitched on. In a flash, I realized it was the body of a naked man,’ said Agatha defiantly.

‘Had you ever come across Gary Beech before he charged you in those two incidents?’

‘No.’

‘And yet you suggested to Detective Sergeant Wong here that the body might be that of Gary Beech? That seems very suspicious.’

‘Oh, for goodness’ sakes,’ howled Agatha, ‘I didn’t mention his name. I suggested the victim might be a policeman. If I had anything to do with the pillock’s murder, would I have made such a suggestion?’

‘You may have done.’ And so the questioning went on and on until Agatha, warned not to leave the country, and with her eyes gritty with fatigue, was allowed to leave.

Alice ran her home. ‘I’ll be glad to get some sleep,’ she said. ‘And I hope I don’t get nightmares.’

‘What was at his house?’ asked Agatha.

Alice was sure Wilkes would be furious with her for discussing the murder, but Agatha was a friend of Bill’s and she liked Bill.

‘Blood everywhere in the bathroom, in the bath and up the walls. Why did you really think the dead man might be him?’

‘I didn’t. But he must have infuriated an awful lot of people apart from me,’ said Agatha. ‘You see I rely a lot on intuition, as I don’t have the resources of the police. Was he married?’

‘Divorced. The ex-wife is on holiday in Florida.’

‘Really? Does she have a lot of money of her own?’

‘Not unless she met a rich man we don’t know about. Before her marriage, she worked as a checkout girl at a supermarket. But Gary must have had some money because I spotted some good antiques in his living room. The place had been ransacked.’

When they arrived at Agatha’s cottage, Alice said hurriedly, ‘Please don’t tell anyone I discussed the case with you. I could get into the most awful trouble.’

‘Not a word,’ promised Agatha. ‘Thank goodness the snow’s stopped and they’ve gritted the road.’

Agatha tried to find out more about Gary Beech but was held back by having to attend to the cases where she was being paid for her detective work.

Some of the work involved a lot of standing around in the cold and watching houses for signs of erring spouses. Agatha hated divorce cases, but the country was in a deep recession and she just had to be grateful for any work.

The weather continued to be bitterly cold. People were beginning to wonder if all this global warming was some trick of the nanny state to bully them into fines for not separating their rubbish, for having to employ a chimney sweep every three months, and wondering how soon it would be before spy planes flew over their houses to check their carbon footprints.

The villagers of Carsely, united in misery, had marched on the Town Hall in Mircester to protest against the frequent power cuts.

Agatha decided to buy a generator, thinking it would be simple to install. The contractor was a lugubrious man who seemed to see fire and disaster all about.

Agatha's suggestion that he put the generator in the kitchen caused him to raise his red mottled hands in horror. 'Can't do that, love,' he said. 'The gases that come out o' that there petrol machine are lethal. Needs to be outside the house. But 'er can't be getting wet. You'll need a liddle hut for 'er.'

But at last a carpenter had finished building a little shed outside the kitchen door and the contractor had departed, after leaving Agatha with a handbook in six languages, the size of a Bible.

Returning home after a cold day's work two weeks after the murder of Gary Beech, Agatha found the electricity was off again. She carefully followed the instructions, the generator roared into life and the electricity came on.

She was relaxing in front of the television set with a large gin and tonic in one hand and a cigarette in the other when her doorbell rang.

When Agatha opened the door, she found the vicar's wife there, and behind her, two elderly couples.

'May we come in, Mrs Raisin?'

'Of course,' said Agatha. 'What's up?'

'This is Mr and Mrs Friend and Mr and Mrs Terence. They do not have money for fuel, and they are too old to cope with this biting cold. Could you possibly give them shelter until the power comes on?'

Agatha wanted to scream, 'No!' But the calm eyes of the vicar's wife were fastened on her face.

'All right,' she said reluctantly.

'I'll phone you as soon as the power comes on,' said Mrs Bloxby, 'and then I'll come and pick them up.'

When she had left, Agatha helped the elderly people out of their coats and wraps and settled them in the living room. She asked them if they had eaten, and they said yes, they had. She then asked them if they would like something to drink, and they all murmured in agreement. Being old, they all needed frequent trips upstairs to the bathroom. The Terences were all right, but the Friends needed assistance up the stairs. To exhausted Agatha, it seemed as if she had just got one of them settled when the other would pipe up that he or she had to go to the 'you-know-what'.

And as the hours passed, the generator continued to chug away. Agatha kept opening the front door and gazing anxiously down the street to see if the lights had come on again in the village. The contractor had warned her that the wiring could not take the load of both generator and restored power or 'the house will burn to ashes'.

Mrs Bloxby phoned. 'This is terrible,' she said. 'I keep phoning the electricity company and they say, "Power will be restored momentarily", but nothing happens. How are they?'

Agatha walked with her new cordless telephone to the living-room door. 'They've all fallen asleep. Look, I'll give it a little longer.' As she replaced the receiver, the lights came on. She rushed to switch off the generator.

Mrs Bloxby phoned back. 'I'm on my way.'

Agatha woke her sleeping guests. Mr Friend struggled to his feet. 'I hope you never find who murdered that copper,' he said.

'Why?' asked Agatha.

'He was going to get me up in the court and do me for flashing.'

'What! How did that happen?'

'I was out for a walk with the missus, and I had to pee. Went behind a bush. No one about, or so I thought. That damn Beech, he came out of nowhere and charged me with exposing myself. Me! I've

been a churchgoer all me life. The shame of it. I could ha' murdered the man meself.'

'Did you go to court?' asked Agatha.

'No, but it got in the local paper, and mud sticks. I'm telling you, missus, I don't know how the police are going to find the murderer because there's so many wanted him dead.'

Chapter Three

Agatha overslept. As soon as she poked her nose over the duvet, she felt the room was cold. She switched on the bedside lamp and nothing happened.

She struggled out of bed and picked out her warmest clothes. Clumping downstairs later in a pair of fleece-lined suede boots, she wondered if she would ever wear high heels again. Nothing more depressing than flat-heeled footwear.

She did not want to switch on the generator, for the thought of operating the machine gave her a stab of techno fear.

Agatha phoned the electricity company and gave them a blast of abuse that didn't bring the power on but made her feel much better.

The radio in the car informed her that salt was being imported from abroad. Agatha wondered how they could spare it, as the European continent was pretty much snowed up.

Her office was in an old building in a narrow winding street near the abbey. She pounded up the stairs to the first floor and swung open the frosted glass door of the office.

Toni, Patrick Mulligan and Phil Marshall were all talking excitedly as Agatha came in.

'What's up?' demanded Agatha, taking off her coat.

'We've got a client,' said Toni, 'and you'll never guess who it is.'

'Enlighten me,' said Agatha crossly, irritated with herself for being late.

'Gary Beech's ex-wife,' said Toni. 'She's employing us to find out who murdered her ex-husband.'

'And you didn't even phone me? You let her get out of the office before I arrived?'

Phil smoothed his silver hair and said quietly, 'She's waiting for you at her home address. We thought we'd wait until you arrived.'

'And why aren't you all out working?'

'It's such good news,' said Patrick, looking more like a tired bloodhound than ever. 'Toni wanted all to wait until we told you. Gary's wife is now a Mrs Richards, married to a supermarket owner. She's prepared to pay a lot.'

Agatha felt mean and petty. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'It was good of all of you to wait for me. Do you know why she wants to find the murderer of her ex? If she divorced him, she can't care that much about who killed him.'

'Get this,' said Toni excitedly. '*He* divorced her!'

'Give me the address and I'll get round there,' said Agatha, putting on her coat.

Mrs Richards lived in a large villa in the better part of town. Snow began to fall again in feathery flakes, swirling hypnotically in front of Agatha's eyes as she drove up the short drive and parked her car.

I should have asked how much she's paying, thought Agatha. She rang the bell and listened to the dulcet tones of the Westminster chimes.

The door opened. Agatha blinked. 'Is Mrs Richards at home?'

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