# M.C. Beaton

## Agatha Raisin

# DEVIL'S DELIGHT

with
R. W. Green



CONSTABLE

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# Chapter One

He was naked.

Some people are easily shocked. Agatha Raisin would never count herself as one of those people. She was a private detective, after all – no wilting flower, no timid swooner, no feeble faint-heart. She was made of sterner stuff. Yet even she was a little taken aback. She blinked hard, but when she opened her eyes, he was still there, still naked, in the altogether, not a stitch on, in his birthday suit, in the buff – totally nude. It's not the sort of thing Agatha would normally have expected to see as her assistant was driving her along a quiet country lane and, while not admitting, even to herself, that she was shocked, she was certainly . . . perplexed.

'Agatha . . .' Toni said, slowing the car to a halt, 'are you seeing what I'm seeing?'

'If you're seeing a naked young man running down the middle of the road towards us,' Agatha replied, unable to tear her eyes away from the spectacle, 'then, yes – I'm seeing everything.'

The man ran to the driver's side of the car and squatted low, presenting his face, rather than anything

else, at the window while knocking urgently on the glass.

'What should I do?' Toni asked, turning to Agatha with a look of panic on her face. 'I mean, he could be a carjacker or something. There might be more of them.'

'A naked carjacking gang?' Agatha raised her eyebrows. 'I think that would be a first. Wind down the window, Toni. Let's hear what he has to say.'

'I know it looks a bit strange . . .' said the young man as the window slid down.

'Don't be too hard on yourself,' said Agatha. 'It all looked perfectly fine to me.'

'I mean me not having any clothes on,' the young man said quickly, still catching his breath from his dash down the road.

'Let me guess,' said Agatha. 'A bigger boy stole them and ran away?'

'Please let me explain,' he said. 'I need your help. I just found a dead body up in those woods!'

Agatha stared at him. His clear blue eyes were sharp with fear and the tremble in his voice came from more than just running.

'Get him something to cover himself up with, Toni,' said Agatha. 'We need to find out what this is all about.'

'Really?' said Toni. 'What if he's lying?'

'I've been lied to by many men,' Agatha said slowly, 'and I pride myself on having learned to tell precisely when a man is lying – especially the naked ones.'

'If you say so,' Toni said with a sigh, casting around the car for something the young man could use as a

cover-up. Her eyes settled on Agatha's hat in the back seat. They were on their way to a wedding – their friends Bill Wong and Alice Peters were tying the knot – and Agatha had agonised over her choice of hat, eventually settling on a deep blue silk skullcap adorned with delicate blue-and-silver silk flowers and surrounded by orbiting swirls of feather-like silk fronds. Toni had gone against Agatha's advice and chosen not to wear a hat.

'No,' Agatha said firmly when she saw where Toni was looking. 'He's not using my fascinator as some kind of codpiece.'

Toni reached under her seat to produce an old, oversized T-shirt that she used for wiping the windscreen.

'Here,' she said, passing it out of the window. 'Maybe you can put your legs through the arms and . . . no . . . everything would drop out of the neck . . .'

'Just cover yourself up,' Agatha said, a sharp note of impatience in her voice, 'and get in. I want to see where you found the body. You can tell us how you ended up in this state on the way.'

The young man wrapped, tied and held the T-shirt in place as a makeshift loincloth, then sat nervously in the back of the car. Toni drove on.

'Start from the beginning,' said Agatha. 'Tell us who you are and what's happened.'

'My name is Edward Carstairs,' the young man began. 'I'm the social convenor of the Mircester Naturist Society. Take the next turning on the right and you'll come to our clubhouse pavilion.'

Toni swung the car across the road and through a gate onto a gravel track that snaked through the dappled shade of tall oak and beech trees, opening out into an area that appeared to be a car park. A red hatchback was parked in front of a single-storey wooden building, which, apart from the red-tiled roof, looked like a giant log cabin.

'I came here earlier today to start preparing for our annual barbecue and put our emergency contingency plan in motion,' Edward explained.

'Your emergency what?' Toni asked. 'What were you all planning?'

'Today's going to be sunny,' said Edward. 'Tomorrow it's going to rain. I started a phone chain to let people know the barbecue's being brought forward from tomorrow afternoon to this afternoon. I phone two people, they phone two people and so on – all of our members then know within minutes.'

'Sounds very efficient,' Toni said, 'but why not just send an email or text?'

'It's Saturday, so not all of our members will look at an email, and not all of them are comfortable with messaging, but emails and texts were also sent.'

'Yes, yes, that all makes perfect sense,' Agatha said, turning to face Edward but finding the sight of him clutching a T-shirt around his groin so awkward that she immediately faced forwards again, 'but where does a dead body fit in? And where are your clothes?'

'My clothes are inside,' said Edward, 'in the male

changing room. I'll go grab my shorts and my phone. I need to call the police.'

'I think you should let us have a look . . .' Agatha began, but Edward was already out of the car, bounding bare-buttocked up the pavilion steps, having left Toni's T-shirt on the back seat.

'I take it that's not what you wanted us to have a look at,' said Toni, watching Edward's naked form disappearing into the building.

'No, I thought it would be a good idea to make sure that someone wasn't playing some kind of practical joke on him before we called the boys in blue.'

'Still, he's not difficult to look at, is he?' Toni commented, stepping out of the car, her eyes still on the front door of the building. 'I mean – he's fit, good muscle tone, nice tan. Funny little birthmark on his left hip.'

'You had a good look, didn't you?' Agatha commented, walking towards the pavilion with Toni.

'We're detectives,' Toni said in her defence. 'I was using my observational skills.'

'So what colour were his eyes?'

'Um . . .'

'Maybe you should have looked at his face, Toni. Then you'd recognise him with his clothes *on*.'

Agatha pushed open one of the large, glass-panelled oak doors and they entered a spacious, square vestibule. To their right was a door marked 'Witches', and to their left one marked 'Wizards'. Toni studied the signs with a puzzled expression but Agatha was more interested in the full-length mirror that took up all of the wall beyond

the 'Wizards' door. She smoothed her bob of glossy brown hair, checked her lipstick and admired the way that her dress was hanging wrinkle-free, even after sitting in the car.

She was extremely proud of the way her dress fitted, having dieted mercilessly and exercised furiously leading up to the wedding in order to achieve the flattest stomach she'd had in years – when she remembered to suck it in a bit. She did so, turning sideways to watch how the open frill that ran from the calf-length hem up to her hip tousled, then settled. Agatha was of the opinion that only women with a good, shapely figure could wear a dress like this. It was off the shoulder but not cut too low, with a tight bodice and a skirt that flared out from the waist.

She glanced at Toni, who was peeking through the door marked 'Witches'. She could never get away with this dress. She was beautiful, of course, in that blonde-haired, blue-eyed sort of way, but she was too straight-up-and-down – too skinny. This dress was definitely for the more chic, slightly more mature woman.

'It's off West Carsely Lane,' came Edward's voice as he appeared from the 'Wizards' door with his phone clamped to his ear and a pair of shorts now covering his magic wand. 'Yes, a dead body. I know what I saw! Please hurry!'

'I was hoping you would let us confirm what you'd found before you called the police,' Agatha said as Edward rang off. 'We have a great deal of experience in

these matters and we're on good terms with the local officers. We're actually on our way to the wedding of Detective Sergeant Bill Wong and Detective Constable Alice Peters. I'm Agatha Raisin, private detective and proprietor of Raisin Investigations. This my colleague, Toni Gilmour.'

'Agatha Raisin – yes, of course!' Edward said, recognition dawning on his face. 'I've seen you in the *Mircester Telegraph*. You're the one who caught the gang that was selling endangered animals.'

'If you know who I am,' Agatha said, 'then you know that it would be a good idea to let us take a look at the body. Lead on.'

They followed Edward through an archway opposite the main doors that led into a bar and function area, where there was a dancefloor around which were arranged tables and chairs. French windows then opened onto a patio, extending out to a well-tended lawn bordered by flowerbeds bursting with the varied, vibrant summer colours of roses, dahlias and geraniums. To one side of the lawn was a swimming pool and to the other a tennis court.

'I had some time to spare,' Edward explained, motioning them to follow him down onto the lawn. Agatha slipped off her high-heeled sandals. She was not fond of walking barefoot, but she knew how easily heels could dig into a lawn. The heels were elegant, but elegance evaporated along with dignity should a heel snap and send you sprawling on your face. 'I decided to take a closer look at the Lone Warrior.'

'What's the Lone Warrior?' asked Toni.

'It's a huge, ancient stone slab in a clearing in the woods at the far end of our grounds,' said Edward. 'They say it was once used for human sacrifices. That's where I saw the body. It was sitting on the stone.'

'Just sitting there?' said Agatha, wincing slightly when she stepped off the grass onto a vague path at the edge of the woods where pebbles, twigs, spiky leaves and other forest-floor debris alien to the tender soles of a city girl's feet lay in ambush. Toni was wearing flat shoes and a look of sympathy. Agatha gritted her teeth and marched on, sandals in one hand, clutch bag in the other.

'Not actually sitting,' said Edward, 'more sort of crouching, all hunched over with his face in his hands. It's just through here and . . .'

They walked into a clearing, the sun streaming down between the treetops to create a brightly lit patch on the forest floor. In the middle of the pool of sunlight stood a weathered grey stone. It was three feet tall and six feet long with a flat top wide enough to lie on . . . but nothing lay there. There was no crouched, hunched body on the stone. It sat empty and still in the glade with only the chattering of chaffinch and blackcap in the treetops subverting the silence.

'It's gone!' Edward gasped, looking around in desperation as he approached the stone. 'I swear it was here! You have to believe me!'

'I believe you saw something here,' said Agatha, studying the stone, 'but in my experience a dead body

does not get up and walk away. What exactly did you see here? How close did you get?'

'I saw a man's body, naked, crouching with his face in his hands,' Edward replied, continuing to look around as if the body might somehow appear at the base of a tree or in a stand of ferns. 'I knew he was dead because the back of his head was all bashed in. There was matted blood in his hair and when I reached out to touch his shoulder, he was stone cold.'

'Yet this stone is not cold,' Agatha said, laying her hand on the Lone Warrior, 'and there's a damp patch in the middle – a little puddle of water.'

'Where did that come from?' Toni asked. 'It hasn't rained for days.'

'It's difficult to make out any footprints among all the leaves and weeds,' Agatha noted, examining the area around the stone, 'but that looks like it might be a tyre track.'

'A single tyre track?' Toni said with a frown. 'Maybe a motorbike?'

'I didn't hear any motorbike,' Edward said. 'The thing that spooked me was when I heard a mobile phone ring just as I touched the body. Obviously it wasn't my own phone . . .'

'No pockets,' said Toni.

'No trousers,' said Agatha.

'. . . and I thought that the killers might be lurking in the trees, so I ran,' Edward went on. 'I ran in that direction.' He pointed. 'Through the trees, over a fence and out onto the road.'

'Are there any other ways out of here?' Agatha asked.

'I suppose there must be,' Edward replied, 'but I'm not really sure. I've only been down here a couple of times and I've always gone back to the pavilion from here.'

'There are various paths through the woods,' said Toni, studying her phone, on which she had called up an aerial view of the area. 'They appear to lead to tracks that run down to the road we were on as well as a couple of other minor roads heading in the direction of Mircester.'

'So, anyone hiding in the woods watching you,' Agatha pondered, scanning the treeline all around the clearing, 'could have made off without returning to the pavilion and without us seeing them.'

'But if someone had decided to dump a body here,' Toni said, frowning, 'why would they then take it away again?'

'Maybe they didn't want to dump it here,' said Agatha, still peering into the woods. 'Maybe they were disturbed by nudie Eddie and hid until he was gone. Then they moved the body to somewhere like . . . over there, where there are thick shrubs under the trees.' Agatha pointed to the spot. 'That looks like a—'

'Nice place to dump a body?' said Toni, then, returning Agatha and Edward's bemused stares with a shrug, added, 'She says it all the time.'

'I do *not* say it all the time,' argued Agatha.

'Yes, you do,' said Toni. 'Every time we pass a—'

'Just go take a look.' Agatha cut Toni short, then lifted one foot to display immaculately painted toenails. 'I had

a pedicure yesterday. It's survived this far, but I'm not ruining it scuffling around over there.'

Toni and Edward picked their way through the tangle of ferns and brambles to where a clutch of tall rhododendrons stood in the shade of the trees. Toni picked up a stick to prod around in the undergrowth, shining a light from her phone to illuminate the darkest recesses of the dense shrubbery.

'There's nothing there, Agatha,' she called, looking back towards the Lone Warrior, on which Agatha had now parked her sandals, then pointing beyond her boss, through the trees towards the swimming pool, 'but here comes trouble!'

Agatha turned, catching a glimpse of the unmistakable form of Detective Chief Inspector Wilkes marching down the lawn. He was wearing a suit that was somewhere between brown and grey, matching his greying hair and pallid complexion. It occurred to Agatha that, if he were to lie down on the forest floor, no one would ever notice him. He would merge right in to the decaying debris of sticks and fallen leaves and probably never be seen again. Unfortunately, however, she could see him quite clearly now. He was a tall, thin man and, even on this gloriously sunny day, appeared darkly miserable. His beady eyes glowered from beneath a furrowed brow when he spotted Agatha.

'What are you doing here?' he barked.

'Same as you,' said Agatha. 'Looking for a corpse.'

'This is a police matter,' he said, glancing over his shoulder to where two uniformed officers were jogging

past the swimming pool towards him. He waved at them to hurry. 'One of my officers will take a statement from you, then you can be on your way.'

'A statement about what?' Agatha asked. 'I can't see that any crime's been committed.'

'That's for me to decide, not you,' Wilkes said, curtly. 'Where is the person who reported finding a body?'

'The young man over there in the shorts,' Agatha said, pointing to Edward, who was picking his way back through the brambles with Toni, 'but the body he found seems to have gone missing.'

'What are you talking about, woman?' Wilkes snapped. 'How can a body disappear?'

'I understand it was sitting on this stone slab,' Agatha explained, stooping to examine the surface of the stone, 'but by the time we got here there was only a little puddle of water. Even that's dried up now.'

'Ridiculous!' Wilkes barked. 'Bodies do not simply evaporate like water!'

'I know what I saw,' said Edward. 'There was the body of a man with his head all bashed in. I was startled by a phone ringing in the bushes and ran off to find help.'

'You need to cordon off the area and get some forensics people out here,' said Agatha. 'There will have to be a fingertip search of the surrounding woodland and—'

'There will be no such thing!' Wilkes said, a sweep of his hand drawing a line under the idea. 'Do not try to tell me my job, Mrs Raisin.'

'As we've seen so often in the past, Chief Inspector,' Agatha said, setting her chin and folding her arms, 'apparently someone has to.'

'I don't have the manpower to waste on what is clearly some kind of practical joke,' Wilkes said, bluntly. 'Half the force seems to have taken leave in order to attend the wedding of DS Wong and DC Peters.'

'I take it you weren't invited?' Agatha gave Wilkes a transparently insincere smile and picked up her sandals. 'Toni and I are on our way there now.'

'It's a lovely day for a wedding,' came a low, powerful voice from the direction of the pavilion.

Agatha and Wilkes turned to see a dark-haired man approaching. Agatha judged him to be in his mid-to-late forties. He was not quite as tall as Wilkes but was more powerfully built, with broad shoulders and well-defined muscles. He had piercing blue eyes, tanned skin and a beard styled and clipped with bonsai precision. The hair on the rest of his body was equally well-groomed, artfully trimmed to show off his impressive physique to best advantage. Agatha was able to assess his physical attributes so thoroughly because, like Edward when he had come running down the lane, the newcomer was entirely naked. Unlike young Edward, the bearded man had an aura of calm maturity, radiating confidence in a way that Agatha found beguilingly attractive, despite his beard. Agatha had never liked beards. She had a sudden urge to check her lipstick but settled instead for a little extra abdominal squeeze to hold her tummy taut.

'What do you think you're playing at, man?' Wilkes bellowed. 'Put some clothes on at once!'

'I don't feel inclined to dress myself right now,' answered the man.

'You don't feel . . . ? Gittins!' Wilkes yelled at one of the uniformed constables, frantically beckoning him closer. 'Arrest that man!'

'Er . . . what am I nicking him for, sir?' asked the constable.

'He's to be charged under Section Sixty-six, Sexual Offences Act 2003 – exposing his genitals intending to cause alarm or distress,' Wilkes stiffly quoted the regulations.

'Are you going to arrest all of them, too?' asked Agatha, nodding towards the lawn where a small crowd of naked men and women of all ages, shapes and sizes was beginning to gather, standing and staring like a throng of fleshy statues. When he spotted the undressed horde, Wilkes's mouth dropped open.

'The thing is, sir,' said Constable Gittins, 'this here's a naturist club, so everyone's allowed to go around in the altogether.'

'Thanks for explaining, Ian,' said the bearded man, giving the constable a nod of gratitude.

'You know this man, Gittins?' Wilkes said, frowning at his junior officer.

'Oh yes, sir,' said Gittins. 'Everyone knows Jasper Crane. He's our chairman.'

'OUR chairman?' Wilkes was flabbergasted. 'You mean you're—'

'Exactly, Chief Inspector,' Jasper said with a smile. 'Ian is one of our members. Will we be seeing you for the barbecue later, Ian?'

'Me and the missus will be here soon as I finish me shift,' said Gittins, removing his cap to fan himself while tugging at his bulky, stab-proof utility vest to let some air circulate. 'Can't wait for a dip in the pool.'

'Well,' Wilkes muttered, 'I'm glad I won't be here to witness that.' Then he raised his voice to talk to Gittins. 'Disperse that crowd of ... your friends up there, Gittins, and you,' he pointed to the other constable, 'have a good look around for anything suspicious, then take a statement from the person who phoned this in. I'm going back to the office.'

'Is that it?' asked Agatha. 'You're not going to launch a proper enquiry?'

'Whatever your friend in the shorts saw,' said Wilkes, 'always assuming he hasn't completely lost his marbles and was hallucinating, was undoubtedly a prank played on him by his nudist chums. If I need any sort of statement from you, Mrs Raisin, I always know where to find you. I just have to look for trouble and you're never far away.'

'And you're even easier to find,' Agatha replied, fixing Wilkes with her bear-like eyes. 'All I have to do is turn over the nearest rock and out you crawl.'

Wilkes gave a 'harrumph' and marched off towards the pavilion, breezing past two petite, middle-aged women. Each of the women was wearing a loose-fitting kaftan embroidered with gold astrological symbols.

They made for Jasper, one of them offering him a black silk robe.

'We thought you might want this while you talked to the prudes,' she said.

'Thank you, ladies,' said Jasper, treating them to a warm smile and shrugging on the robe. It was decorated with golden images of fiery suns, glowing planets, twinkling stars and streaking comets. There were no fastenings but the edges met in the middle, covering his nakedness. The women bowed and walked back the way they had come, flinging off their kaftans when they reached the lawn.

'Prudes?' Agatha enquired with a raised eyebrow.

'It's just a little fun term we use when we have clothed visitors at the club.' Jasper laughed. 'We refer to ourselves as the "nudes" and clothed people as "prudes" – too prudish to disrobe, you see.'

'Yes, I do see,' said Agatha, bristling slightly. 'I don't think I've ever been called "prudish" before.'

'Please don't be insulted. You and your friend are more than welcome to join us here any time you like.' He swept his left arm towards the clubhouse. The robe had openings for his arms but no sleeves, the silk drifting up to his elbow and wafting open down the middle, allowing Agatha another glimpse of what had previously been covered. In an instant, she realised she was staring and averted her eyes.

'It's all right to look,' he said gently. 'We all look, we all compare – that's human nature and we are, after all, naturists. What we don't do is judge.'

'How very . . . reassuring,' Agatha said.

'Agatha, we really need to get going,' said Toni, looking at her watch.

'Ah, yes . . . the wedding,' Jasper said. 'Allow me to walk you to the pavilion.'

'I'd like to have a quick word with Edward first,' Agatha said, and joined him and Toni on the other side of the Lone Warrior.

'I'm really sorry about all of this, Mrs Raisin,' Edward said, 'but I honestly saw a body sitting right here on the stone. I wasn't making it up. Now I feel like I've wasted your time.'

'I don't like people playing tricks on me,' Agatha said, tersely, 'and if that's what you were doing, I'll make sure you regret it.'

Edward looked down at the ground, shuffling his feet like a naughty schoolboy in front of the headmistress.

'But I don't think that's what happened here,' Agatha went on. 'I think you were telling the truth, yet there doesn't appear to be any evidence of a crime – certainly not a brutal murder. It's a mystery and I hate leaving things unresolved.'

'We'll help you find out what it's all about, won't we, Agatha?' Toni offered, eagerly. 'We'll help you get to the bottom of it, Edward.'

'Well . . . yes, of course,' Agatha agreed, slightly taken aback by Toni's unbridled enthusiasm. 'When the officer takes your statement, be sure to ask for a copy. We can at least go over it all together at some point.'

Edward thanked them for being so understanding, then he and Toni followed as Jasper escorted Agatha back to the pavilion. Even more people had now arrived, turning the garden and pool area into a hive of activity. Keen gardeners wearing nothing more than sturdy gloves were dead-heading the roses, the perimeter hedge was being clipped, bugs and leaves were being fished out of the pool, and the patio was being swept. Agatha had never seen so many naked people. They smiled and waved as she walked by, making her feel completely welcome and yet utterly out of place at the same time.

'We do all of our own maintenance,' Jasper explained. 'We have people from all walks of life, from plumbers and accountants to doctors and, as you know, police officers.'

The two women who had brought Jasper his robe came towards them once more, this time without their kaftans. From their almost identical brown hair and similar figures, Agatha had no doubt that they were sisters.

'The ice cream is in the freezer, Jasper,' reported the first sister.

'And the bread is in the oven,' the other confirmed. Jasper thanked them both and they bowed once again before heading off to join the gardeners.

'Why do they bow to you like that?' Agatha asked. 'You may be the chairman, but bowing's a bit over the top. Quite demeaning, actually.'

'They're my handmaidens,' Jasper said, then burst out

laughing when he saw the scornful look on Agatha's face. 'Don't worry, Mrs Raisin, it's just our little joke – part of a game, in fact. Some of our members take part in a fantasy role-playing game on Wednesday evenings – angels and demons, witches and wizards on a grand quest.'

'That explains the signs on the changing-room doors,' Agatha said.

'Precisely,' Jasper agreed. 'I play a kind of demonic master-of-ceremonies and devise a storyline with clues to be solved to find various artefacts. It's all a power battle leading to a spectacular grand finale that promises to be quite an event – a buffet dinner, dancing, fireworks. The Lone Warrior will even play a part. You should come along.'

'I've always been the kind of girl who likes to dress up for a party rather than . . . well . . . not dressing at all.'

'Then you'll love it,' Jasper grinned. 'Everyone plays a character and some of the costumes are truly magnificent. Some,' he added, with a twinkle in his eye, 'are little more than body paint and glitter, but most put a lot of effort into creating outfits that are out of this world. It's a fun evening – why not join us?'

'I'll think about it,' Agatha said, reaching down to ease her right foot into its sandal. Jasper offered her his arm on which she rested the hand holding her clutch bag to help balance while pulling on her left sandal. His arm was strong and steady. She thanked him and offered him a business card from her bag. 'Let's keep in touch. Your grand finale evening sounds . . . different.'

Agatha waved to Toni, who was talking to Edward and two young women who were carrying tennis racquets and wearing only tennis shoes. Toni said her goodbyes and walked with Agatha to the car park, where most of the parking spaces were now occupied, one by a Ford in police livery.

'That,' said Agatha, snapping her seatbelt into place, 'was a strange experience.'

'A real eye-opener,' Toni agreed, manoeuvring the car out onto the road. 'Who knew there were naked people hidden away in the woods around here?'

'I was thinking more about the disappearing corpse,' Agatha mused. 'Something very suspicious was going on there. The Mircester Naturist Society, on the other hand, was . . . very revealing.'

'I thought Wilkes was going to burst a blood vessel!' Toni laughed. 'I've never seen anyone look so outraged!'

'And yet he doesn't seem to mind nudity,' Agatha pointed out. 'We caught him in a strip club not so long ago, remember?'

'Yeah, what a hypocrite! The creep was happy to pay to watch women take their clothes off, but when a man shows up naked, it's a different story . . . and Jasper,' she added, pointedly, 'was a fine example of a man.'

'I had noticed,' Agatha said, smiling.

'I know you noticed. I could see you noticing. I also saw you giving him your card. Are you planning on seeing more of Jasper?'

'I think I've seen pretty much all of him already,'

Agatha said, in a matter-of-fact voice, 'and you know I don't like beards. They always smell of—'

'Stale beer and last night's kebab,' Toni said, finishing off one of Agatha's more familiar mantras.

'I was going to say "curry",' Agatha lied, 'but I'm glad you pay attention to the things I say. You may yet learn something. Anyway, you seemed very taken with Edward. I thought you were getting ready to settle down with your policeman, Paul?'

'We're kind of . . . agreeing to stay friends,' Toni said with a sigh.

'Oh, dear,' Agatha said in a voice she hoped was laden with sympathy. In fact, she was hugely relieved that Toni was no longer in a serious relationship. She was young, but she was hard-working and trustworthy – the only one of her staff whom Agatha could comfortably rely on to run the business when she wasn't around. For purely selfish reasons, Agatha needed Toni available to work long hours and to have her mind focused on the job rather than domestic bliss at home. 'Such a shame it didn't work out with him. He seemed nice.'

'He was nice. I mean, he *is* nice, but he's got his whole life mapped out. He knows exactly where he is and where he wants to be at each stage. When he's not working, he's studying for his sergeant's exams and he wants to be an inspector within five years. He's running his life to a master plan. I was starting to get the feeling that I was a box to be ticked on his schedule. You know, "find girl, tick – get married, tick – have children, tick-tick-tick".'

'I thought that's what you wanted – a reliable husband, house, car, kids and two weeks' holiday in Mallorca every year.'

'What would be so wrong with that?' Toni asked, glancing sideways at Agatha, suspecting she was being teased, which she was. 'But it has to happen naturally, not as part of some sort of master plan. He also wants to transfer to the Met Police in London, where he can go for bigger and better jobs. He doesn't seem to see that my job is here – my life is here in the Cotswolds. This is my home.'

'Of course it is,' Agatha agreed. 'He'd have to be a fool not to see that. Take it from me – London's overrated.'

'And men,' Toni said with a firm nod. 'Men are also overrated.'

'A necessary evil,' Agatha concurred, 'and not always entirely necessary.'

'Ah . . . I take it you and James are—'

'I don't want to talk about whether James and I are or aren't. We'll see him at the wedding if he's managed to get back from his meeting in London in time but I'm not going to let trouble with men get in the way of enjoying myself today. I've been looking forward to this wedding for too long to let anything spoil it.'

'Even a murder? A body that goes missing?'

'That's a real puzzle,' Agatha admitted, 'but I don't believe that a sensible bloke like Edward was frightened out of his wits by some kind of prank. If he says he saw a dead body, then I believe him. So who was murdered,

where is the body now and who is the murderer? I intend to find out.'

'Good. I was hoping you'd say that.'

'Would that be because you're so keen on Edward by any chance? You were determined to let him know we would help him. I can't quite believe that, with a bunch of naked people milling around, you told a nudist that we would help him "get to the *bottom* of it".'

'I couldn't help it,' Toni said with an embarrassed laugh, a slight blush colouring her face. 'I've never seen so many bottoms!'

'Well get them out of your mind and concentrate on the driving,' Agatha said, flipping down the sun visor and using its mirror to reapply her lipstick. 'We've still got a wedding to get to, and we're going to be late.'